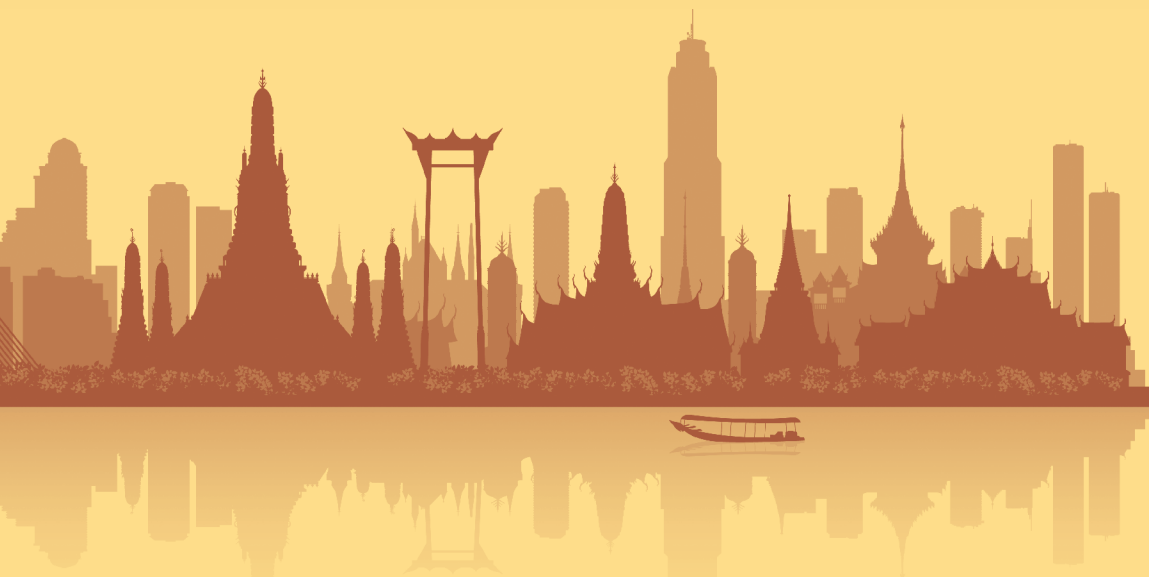




# *A Meeting of Masks*

**Status, Power and Hierarchy  
in Bangkok**



Sophorntavy Vorng



# A MEETING OF MASKS

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# A MEETING OF MASKS

Status, Power and  
Hierarchy in Bangkok

SOPHORN TAVY VORNG

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by Sophorntavy Vorng  
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1. Please note that earlier versions of parts of this book have been published as the following articles: 'Bangkok's two centres: Status, space, and consumption in a millennial Southeast Asian city', in *City and Society*, Vol. 23(S1); 'Beyond the urban-rural divide: Complexities of class, status and hierarchy in Bangkok', in *The Asian Journal of Social Sciences*, Vol. 39; and, 'Incendiary central: The spatial politics of the May 2010 street demonstrations in Bangkok', in *Urbanities*, Vol. 2(1).

## *A Note on the Text*

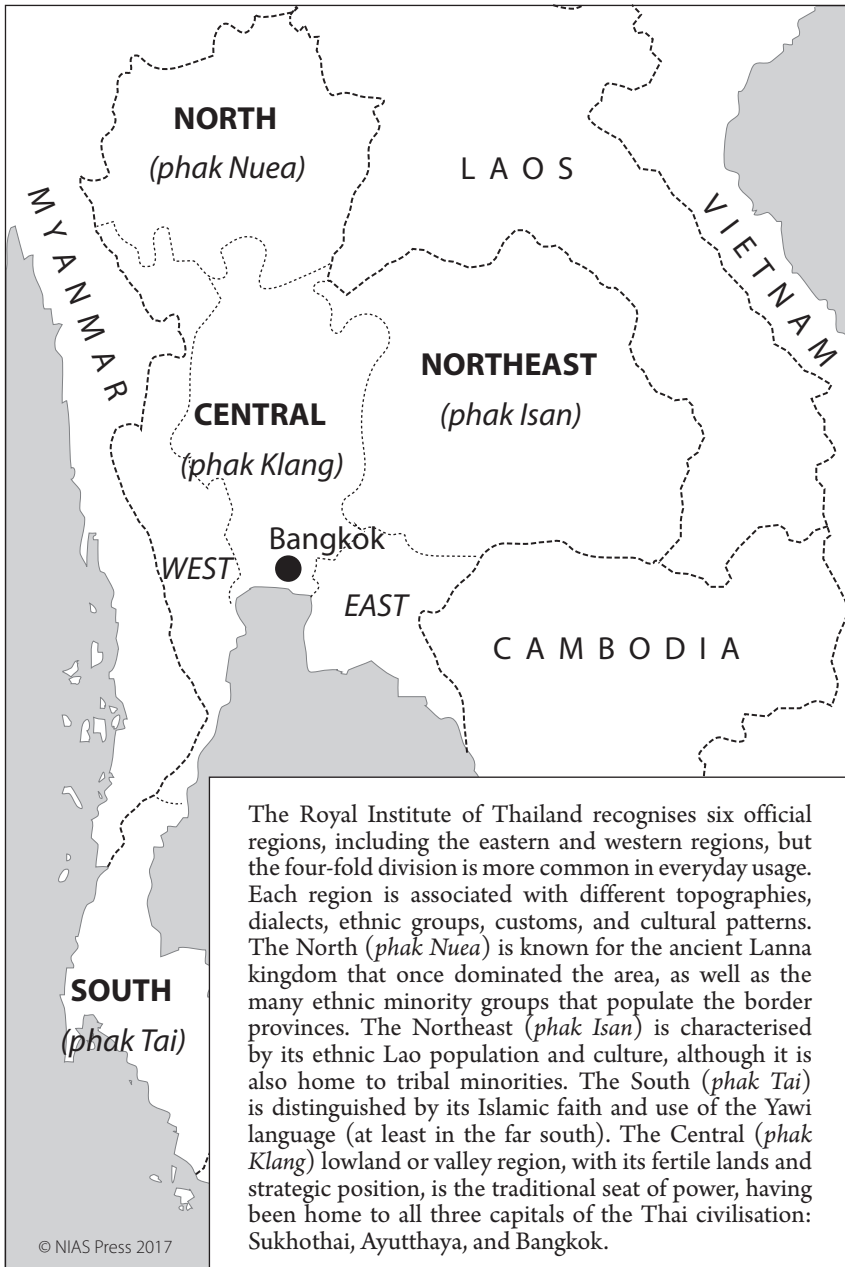
Thai words have been transcribed in accordance with the revised rules of the Royal Institute of Thailand's 'Royal Thai General System of Transcription' (RTGS). In direct quotations I keep to the author's system of transliteration but employ the RTGS system where I paraphrase. I have adhered to widely known English transliterations of common Thai phrases and proper nouns and to individuals' and organisations' own preferences for transcribing their names. UK spelling conventions are used throughout the text with the exception of bibliographical references, which adhere to original spellings of article, book, and journal titles. Thai authors are referred to in the text and in the bibliography by their first names. Direct quotes from informants have been edited only for length and grammatical correctness. Most translations of interview data and Thai language material are my own, although some are those of my research assistant. All personal names are pseudonyms. In order to protect informants' identities, possible identifying markers have been omitted or changed. All photographs were taken by the author.

## *Glossary of Thai Terms*

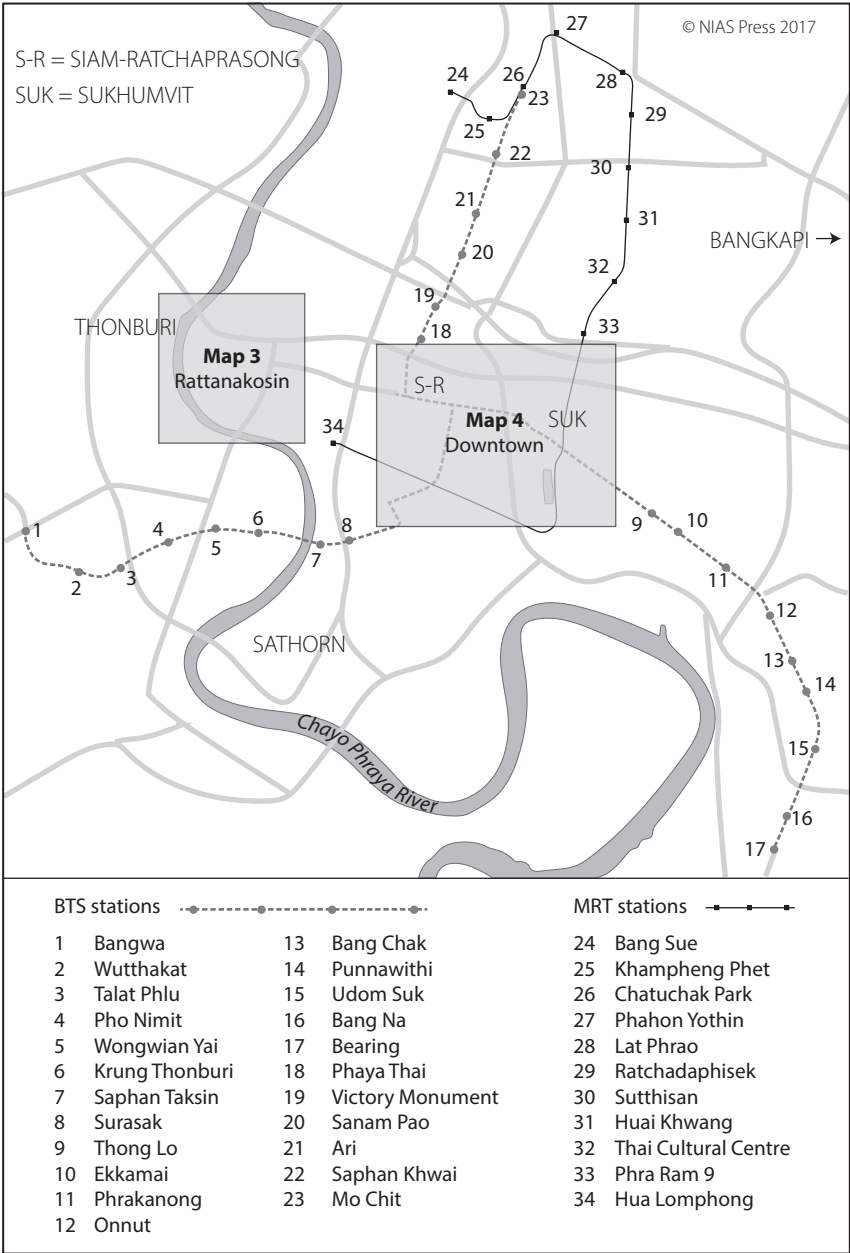
|                            |                                                                                                 |
|----------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <i>Ammat</i>               | Government officials or bureaucrats; ruling elite                                               |
| <i>Amnat</i>               | Power; influence                                                                                |
| <i>Bannok</i>              | Countryside; rural                                                                              |
| <i>Chan</i>                | Layer; level; stage                                                                             |
| <i>Chan sung/klang/tam</i> | High class/middle class/lower class                                                             |
| <i>Chao</i>                | Lord; prince; princess                                                                          |
| <i>Chon chan</i>           | Social class                                                                                    |
| <i>Chue siang</i>          | Reputation                                                                                      |
| <i>Doen len</i>            | To go for a leisurely walk/stroll                                                               |
| <i>Farang</i>              | Western; Westerner                                                                              |
| <i>Furniture</i>           | Slang referring to status symbols or status markers, both material and otherwise                |
| <i>Hi-so</i>               | Slang meaning ‘high society’                                                                    |
| <i>Inter</i>               | Slang meaning ‘international’                                                                   |
| <i>Isan</i>                | Northeastern region of Thailand composed of 20 provinces with an ethnic Lao majority population |
| <i>Kalathesa</i>           | Time and space/place; context                                                                   |
| <i>Ketayot</i>             | Reputation; prestige                                                                            |
| <i>Khaorop sathan thi</i>  | Expression meaning ‘to respect the place’                                                       |
| <i>Khunnang</i>            | Nobility                                                                                        |
| <i>Lo-so</i>               | Slang meaning ‘low society’                                                                     |

## A MEETING OF MASKS

|                               |                                                                           |
|-------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <i>Mueang</i>                 | City; town; state                                                         |
| <i>Na ta</i>                  | Expression meaning ‘face’ or ‘social reputation’                          |
| <i>Phrai</i>                  | Bonded commoner; common people; subjects                                  |
| <i>Phu di</i>                 | Lady or gentleman; aristocrat                                             |
| <i>Radap</i>                  | Level; rank                                                               |
| <i>Ruchak kalathesa</i>       | Expression meaning ‘to know the time and place/to understand the context’ |
| <i>Ru thi sung thi tam</i>    | Expression meaning ‘to know the high and the low’                         |
| <i>Sakdina</i>                | A premodern system of status ranking                                      |
| <i>Sangkhom</i>               | Society; social circle                                                    |
| <i>Sathana thang sangkhom</i> | Social status                                                             |
| <i>Sen; Sen sai</i>           | Connections                                                               |
| <i>Thana</i>                  | Wealth; financial status                                                  |
| <i>That</i>                   | Slave                                                                     |
| <i>Thi sung</i>               | Denotes that which is ‘high’                                              |
| <i>Thi tam</i>                | Denotes that which is ‘low’                                               |
| <i>Wai</i>                    | Prayer-like gesture of respect, greeting, apology, or thanks              |



**Map 1:** Thailand and its regions



**Map 2:** Greater Bangkok

## INTRODUCTION

# *Division and Discontent*

### **Thailand's Crisis**

A sea of yellow heavens and pulses through Lumpini Park. Normally, it is an oasis of green in Bangkok's vast concrete cityscape. The demonstrators shout, '*Thaksin, ok pai!*' in unison, calling for the resignation of then-incumbent Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra. An ex-policeman and telecommunications mogul from Chiang Mai, Thaksin had previously enjoyed unprecedented popularity at the helm of his Thai Rak Thai ('Thais Love Thais' or TRT) Party, which burst onto the political scene in 1998 and went on to win landslide elections in 2001 and again in 2005. The protests began in late 2005 and were led by Sondhi Limthongkul, a former friend and business partner of Thaksin's. They were significantly intensified by the tax-free sale in January 2006 of the Shinawatra family's remaining 49.6 per cent stake in the telecommunications giant Shin Corporation to Temasek Holdings, an investment arm of the Singaporean government.

The deal, which enriched Thaksin's family by 73 billion baht (approximately USD 1.88 billion), infuriated urban middle-class voters in Bangkok. They mobilised against his government, becoming core supporters of the yellow-shirted 'People's Alliance for Democracy' (PAD or *Panthamit*). In addition to anger over the Shin–Temasek deal, the PAD demonstrators accused Thaksin of abuse of power, graft and corruption, media control and intimidation, and the undermining of the system of checks-and-balances through subversion of such key bodies as the Election Commission, the National Counter Corruption Commission, and the Constitutional Court. The rallies initially began after Sondhi's 'Thailand Weekly' (*Mueang Thai Rai Sapda*) political talk show was cancelled by its broadcaster, MCOT, as a result of allegedly disrespectful comments made by Sondhi against King Bhumiphol Adulyadej. Sondhi subsequently began broadcasting the show from public meetings, which





Figure 1: PAD rally on 26 March 2006 along Rama I Road.

developed into mass anti-government demonstrations at Lumpini Park, Sanam Luang, Democracy Monument, Rama I and Sukhumvit roads, and the Siam Paragon and Emporium shopping malls.

Meanwhile, discontented voters from the northern and northeastern provinces, as well as lower-class workers in Bangkok, welcomed the long



overdue attention the Thaksin regime paid to their economic marginalisation and lent him their support, becoming a near-unstoppable electoral force. This group of protestors joined with some academics and other activists to become a political movement called the ‘United Front for Democracy Against Dictatorship’ (UDD), or, as they are popularly known, the ‘Red Shirts’ or *Suea Daeng*, for the crimson hues that have come to represent the group. During the height of the PAD protests, buses, pickups, and tractor-loads of red-clad farmers and labourers rumbled into the Thai capital *en masse* from the rural provinces to stage their own large rallies in support of Thaksin. The UDD saw Thaksin as their political champion for policies such as low-cost universal healthcare and village loans. For the first time in history, these policies directed a share of Bangkok’s prosperity to the impoverished, predominantly ethnically Lao, northeastern provinces of Isan.

On 29 September 2006, after persistent pressure on Thaksin as a result of the continuing PAD rallies and a snap election boycotted by opposing political parties, army tanks rolled along deserted Bangkok roads previously famous for their intractable traffic congestion. The tanks heralded what became depicted as ‘The People’s Coup’ and the end of Thaksin’s term as Thailand’s twenty-third Prime Minister. Yet, despite being toppled by the coup, Thaksin’s involvement in the fray of Thai politics continued in the form of a number of proxies, including close ally Samak Sundaravej and later on Thaksin’s brother-in-law, Somchai Wongsawat, and his sister, Yingluck Shinawatra. Buoyed by the electoral clout of millions of voters in the northern and northeastern regions of the country, all won successive landslide elections against the establishment-backed Democrat Party in the past decade.

The 2006 coup led the way to more conflict – memorably, the violence of the 2008 PAD airport sieges and the May 2010 UDD protests against the establishment-backed government of Democrat leader Abhisit Vejjajiva. The PAD airport sieges took place in November 2008 and aimed to bring down the Somchai government and end Thaksin’s influence in politics. The standoff made worldwide headlines. All flights were suspended, and thousands of travellers were stranded for days. The sieges sparked a wave of condemnation against the PAD and its increasingly lawless tactics, as Thailand’s international reputation as a peaceful, democratic nation took a severe blow due to the ongoing, intractable

political unrest. The stalemate only ended after the Constitutional Court ruled that the People's Power Party (PPP), and coalition parties Chart Thai and Matchimathipataya, were guilty of electoral fraud. All parties involved were dissolved and Somchai lost power to Abhisit Vejjajiva and a coalition-backed Democrat Party, which slid into government on a parliamentary vote. The UDD demonstrations from March to May 2010 paralysed Bangkok's major downtown shopping strips and culminated in the razing of a major Bangkok shopping mall, CentralWorld Plaza, which went up in flames from an arson attack following a brutal government crackdown aimed at dispelling Red Shirt protesters. In all, over 90 people were killed in the violence of those dark, restive days in Thai history.

An uneasy peace held for almost three years under the administration of Yingluck Shinawatra, Thaksin's sister, who led the Pheu Thai Party to a landslide election victory for pro-Thaksin forces over Abhisit and the Democrats in July 2011. Yet, in November 2013, Bangkok exploded in mass protests once again. The demonstrations were catalysed by the passing of the highly controversial Amnesty Bill in parliament. The Amnesty Bill would have paved the way for Thaksin's return to Thailand by dismissing his corruption convictions, cleared Abhisit and Suthep of murder charges relating to the brutal May 2010 crackdown on Red Shirt protestors, and pardoned all actors involved in incidents of political unrest since 2004. The terms were so sweeping that the bill angered even Yingluck's own supporters, the latter of whom staged their own protests against the bill. The rallies were led by former Democrat deputy PM Suthep Thaugsuban, helming the People's Democratic Reform Committee (PDRC) movement. The PDRC shared many of the same urban, middle-class supporters as the PAD. The centrepiece of the PDRC campaign was the 'Bangkok Shutdown' demonstrations of January and February 2014, which were yet another 'final' attempt to purge the Shinawatra family's influence from Thai politics. During the unrest, the PDRC entered and seized government offices and ministries and blocked major roads and intersections, including Pathumwan, Asok, Silom, Ratchaprasong, Lat Phrao, and Chaeng Wattana.

Amidst the controversy caused by the Amnesty Bill, Yingluck's dismissal from office by the Constitutional Court as a result of her

administration's failed rice-pledging scheme,<sup>1</sup> and the instability caused by the PDRC demonstrations, General Prayuth Chan-ocha and the National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO) seized power on 22 May 2014. Many proponents of the coup were royalist PDRC supporters. In August that year, Prayuth Chan-ocha was installed as Prime Minister by a handpicked legislature. After taking control of government, the NCPO implemented harsh media censorship strategies and a crackdown on dissidents, in which students, journalists, activists, politicians, and academics opposed to the coup were arrested, interrogated or detained by the military. Furthermore, the junta selected a 250-member council to draft reforms and write a brand new constitution in the hopes of achieving 'national reconciliation'. In practice, the emphasis appeared to be less on bridging the political schism, and more on formalising the limitations on electoral politics needed for entrenching the military's control and preventing Thaksin and his allies from regaining power in the future. In August 2016, amidst a repressive climate, this draft constitution was subjected to a public referendum and approved by an overwhelming majority.

At the time of writing, Thaksin is said to be living in self-imposed exile in order to avoid a 2008 corruption conviction. Sondhi Limthongkul, one of Thaksin's most vocal critics and one of the core leaders of the PAD, survived an assassination attempt and has avoided the spotlight ever since. Suthep Thaugsuban, who led the most recent protest movements against Yingluck's regime, was ordained as a monk after the coup d'état, seeking the safety of the sangha. The PDRC has since established itself as a non-profit organisation for advocating reform. Following his election loss to Yingluck, Abhisit has continued as Democrat Party leader after stepping down for a short period. As a result of the charges laid against her in the rice-pledging scheme, Yingluck was eventually impeached and banned from politics for five years. Additionally, a panel

- 
1. The scheme was aimed to boost the incomes of Thai rice farmers by buying rice from producers at a price hundreds of times higher than the market rate. However, the government's inability to resell the rice severely affected Thailand's rice exports, causing the nation to lose its position as the world's top rice exporter to India and Vietnam. The government cited a US 4.4 billion dollar loss as a result of the flawed scheme (*Asian Correspondent*, 2013). In October 2016, Yingluck was presented with an assets seizure order and a fine amounting to almost one billion US dollars. She is set to appeal against the ruling (*Asian Correspondent*, 2016).

found her negligent in failing to stop corruption and losses in the rice scheme. Another committee was assigned the task of deciding the amount of compensation to be paid by Yingluck and other alleged offenders (*Bangkok Post*, 2016).

After a 70-year reign, the death of King Bhumipol Adulyadej in October 2016 plunged the nation into further deep uncertainty. He has been succeeded by the crown prince, Maha Vajiralongkorn. Thailand remains bitterly divided, however, and many questions arise. How can we make sense of the social, cultural, and historical forces that have driven the political conflict of the past decade, and shaped the protest movements that emerged? What are the implications of this struggle for Thailand's people and democracy? What impetus does the country need to move forward from its political deadlock?

### Everyday Inequalities

The political conflict that began in late 2005 has evolved into something far more complex than the original public outcry over an allegedly corrupt politician. In particular, it exposed what appeared to be deep political fault lines between the urban middle classes residing predominantly in Bangkok, and the urban and rural working class, many of them from the impoverished northeastern provinces of Isan. This political, economic, and social rift has been depicted as a 'class war'<sup>2</sup> or as an 'urban-rural divide' separating the privileged and underprivileged segments of Thai society. The notion of a deep fracture between rural and urban segments of Thai society has major implications for how Thais think about inequality, politics, tradition, modernity, and regional identity. Yet, although such understandings are certainly significant in everyday life and have an important role to play in the political conflict, as I will argue in this book, they do not capture the entire picture.

In between the explosive tension of mass demonstrations and military coups, life in Bangkok has gone on. After being renovated and re-opened

- 
2. Throughout the years, but especially early on, media reports characterising the conflict as a class war between the educated urban middle class and the rural working class have been numerous. Just a few examples include 'Thailand's spreading yellow tide' (*Asia Times*, 7 February 2006); 'One killed in Thai protests; emergency is declared' (*The New York Times*, 1 September 2008); 'PM's future trivial given huge philosophical differences' (*The Nation*; 5 September 2008); 'Thailand faces threat of yellow-shirt counter-protest' (*BBC News*, 18 April 2010).

after the 2010 arson attacks, CentralWorld Plaza welcomed bustling crowds and offered few signs of the destruction that occurred there not that long before. Within the glossy halls of the mall, fashionable office workers and trendy university students now stroll past brightly lit aisles of luxury goods on their way to lunch meetings in chic eateries. Many of the cosmetic shelves are lined with whitening products, indicating the widespread preoccupation with pale skin, and the devaluing of darker complexions that can suggest countryside origins.

The shoppers pay scant attention to the guards in ill-fitting suits that stand sentry at the entrance of the prestigious centre. They pay equally little notice to the uniformed janitors, pushing garbage carts or mopping floors, who must lower their heads and shoulders in the presence of mall clientele. Outside of their duties, these workers are unwelcome inside the exclusive shopping centres they play such a crucial role in maintaining. Instead, they are relegated to the spaces of open-air markets and street stalls, lower-tier malls, hypermarkets, and crowded slums, most of which are far from the city centre. In contrast, many patrons of luxury malls retire to imposing mansions situated in Bangkok's prosperous districts that are staffed by deferential domestic employees. However, not all the clientele are as wealthy as they might appear. Some return to cramped apartments whose modesty is concealed by the outwardly affluent lifestyles their occupants feel they have no choice but to present for fear of losing 'face'.

Both in earlier, more turbulent times and today, these divisions are played out in the streets. After ending their shifts, many of the service staff from the mall, along with motorcycle taxi drivers, cooks, stall vendors, construction workers, and other migrant labourers, swapped their uniforms for red-coloured shirts and joined the ranks of UDD protestors who demonstrated at Sanam Luang in 2006 and again in 2008, at Government House and the Royal Plaza in 2009, or along Rama I Road and Ratchaprasong intersection in 2010, to name but a few major rallies out of many that have occurred over the course of the past decade. All poorly paid, frequently poorly treated, and subjected to daily discrimination as 'uneducated', 'ignorant', and 'backward' villagers, they are advocating not only for a respected political voice, but also for the chance for better prospects in life for themselves and their children.

Meanwhile, amidst a yellow- or black-clad crowd at a PAD or PDRC demonstration may sit a bright, young graduate grappling with the knowledge that an equally skilled candidate with better connections was chosen instead of her for a coveted position in a prestigious company. Also part of the gathering may be a family who must find a way to come up with hundreds of thousands of baht in ‘tea money’ in order to secure their child a place in a respected Bangkok school. Alongside them is a man who must find a way to support himself and his elderly parents on his meagre civil servant’s income. He resorts to accepting unofficial cash payments to expedite procedures, but finds that he must do the same when he needs to get something important done.

The anxiety of having to negotiate the maze of rewards and benefits reserved for those who are wealthy or who belong to exclusive social circles is not the burden of Bangkok’s middle classes alone. Across the battle lines, the UDD protestors face the same, or worse. At the extreme, a wealthy and influential individual may flout the law at will, while double standards mean that the empty-handed and powerless face harsh prosecution for minor infractions. Each person – each protestor – has his or her own, unique stories of injustice to contend with. However, they all share the struggle to turn limited economic resources and social networks into opportunities and advantages, or risk being pushed even further down the ladder.

Beneath the marches, rallies, and sieges are more subtle pressures that emerge from everyday encounters involving cultural notions of rank and hierarchy. These are the focus of this study. Drawing on an ethnographic approach that explores the connections between inequality, space, and social life in Bangkok, I argue that the notion of the urban–rural divide obscures a far more complex reality linking city and countryside in reciprocal relations within both urban and national systems of status and class. These tensions are clearly discernible in the nature of everyday status relations in Bangkok, which feature remnants of a premodern system of status ranking called *sakdina* that continues to inform many aspects of inequality in Thailand today. While structural disparities undoubtedly underpin urban–rural differences, I argue that global market forces have exacerbated and intensified pre-existing status relations, including concepts of urban dominance, progress, and superiority, in opposition to rural marginalisation, backwardness, and inferiority. It is

an incendiary dynamic that has been exploited to tremendous effect in the political power struggle.

### **Where in the Middle?**

The research for this book began in early 2005, just before the mass protests against Thaksin Shinawatra marked the beginning of the political conflict that has endured for over a decade. At the time, my main objective was to investigate Thailand's 'new' urban middle classes. Among my many questions was that of how middle-class identity is shaped, specifically in relation to middle-class consumption and lifestyle practices in Bangkok. Another of my objectives was to explore the political, economic, and social significance of Thailand's urban middle classes. Yet, as the political developments unfolded and rhetoric of a 'class war' and an 'urban-rural divide' became increasingly prominent, as middle-class groups became increasingly implicated in the current political turmoil as supporters of, first, the PAD movement, and later on, the PDRC movement, and as Bangkok's central business and entertainment district with its concentration of upmarket malls were drawn into the conflict as the site of mass demonstrations and as the symbols of capitalist privilege, it became more imperative than ever to address the issue of urban Thai middle-class culture and identity. However, the study was now, inescapably, situated within the narrative of this crisis.

It is with this political backdrop in mind that I extended the scope of my analysis beyond an 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. Furthermore, although the study focuses principally on Bangkok's middle classes, I also aim to highlight the major socioeconomic diversity to be found in the field, rather than convey the sense that Bangkok is uniformly populated by a homogenous, affluent, educated, and upwardly mobile middle class. Despite the original objectives of the research, the context of the political crisis did not render irrelevant to the research the emergence of the Thai middle classes as a group, or Bangkok middle-class consumption and lifestyle patterns and practices. In fact, I found rather the opposite to be the case.



Historically, a 'middle-class' group first emerged during the late nineteenth century, and comprised merchants and traders, independent farmers, bureaucrats and civil servants, and intellectuals. This middle class grew rapidly at the turn of the century and after the 1932 revolution, with the expansion of the bureaucratic and militaristic elite (Thawatt, 1979; Ockey, 1999: 231). However, the policies of intense national, social and economic development promulgated during the era of the authoritarian Sarit regime from 1958 onwards transformed Thailand even more dramatically. The policies not only led to the dramatic widening of socio-economic inequalities, but were also the catalysts for the creation of a 'new' middle class concentrated in the services, sales, education, and media sectors (ibid.: 234).

This group had previously made its political presence felt back during the events of 1973, 1976, and 1992 – all critical moments in modern Thai history. Amidst a growing educated urban middle class and increasing dissatisfaction with the country's economic progress and its ruling military junta, a popular uprising by student activists on 14 October 1973 resulted in a violent crackdown on demonstrators by the army, and ended the dictatorship of Thanom Kittikachorn. The return from exile of Thanom and other members of his regime in August and September of 1976 catalysed more mass protests. On 4 October, a play staged by student protestors – a dramatisation of the beating and execution of two student activists by police – featured the mock hanging of a figure reported in the media to bear a likeness to Thailand's crown prince Vajiralongkorn. Accusing the students of *lèse majesté*, the military, police, and right-wing groups carried out a shocking massacre of demonstrators on 6 October, which left dozens dead or injured. In May 1992, rallies by mostly middle-class pro-democracy protestors called for the resignation of military dictator Suchinda Kraprayoon. The army responded again with a brutal crackdown on demonstrators. The standoff ended with a royal intervention between Suchinda and protest leader Chamlong Srimuang, and Suchinda's subsequent resignation as Prime Minister.

Yet, as Ockey argues, 'there has been surprisingly little debate on just what constitutes the middle class in Thailand. Rather, the middle class is left undefined, as if somehow everyone knows just what it is and all that is left is to determine its functions' (Ockey, 1999: 230). Pinches



similarly points out that ‘while much discursive energy has been devoted to the cultural construction of a Thai middle class, it has not produced nor converged around a clearly delineated social entity’ (Pinches, 1999: xv). Hewison suggests that the new Thai middle class ‘remains notoriously difficult to define and disaggregate, encompassing a range of professionals, public and private bureaucrats and the self-employed’ (Hewison, 1996: 143). The problem is succinctly captured in the following statement from one of my informants in Bangkok named Ae, who is a Sino-Thai Thammasat University graduate and English teacher. Ae responded to my probing on the subject with his own enquiry: ‘There are many different levels to the middle class. It’s so very broad. Almost everyone will tell you that they are in the middle class. But where in the middle? What kind of middle-class person are they?’

The emergence of new middle-class formations has been noted in other parts of a rapidly modernising Asia,<sup>3</sup> where decades of unprecedented economic growth greatly improved incomes and lifted a significant proportion of the population into lifestyles characterised by intense consumerism (Young, 1999: 56; Chua, 2000: xi). In Bangkok, the dramatic proliferation of shopping malls and other urban consumption spaces accompanied the rise of the middle class (Hewison, 1996; Young, 1999; Gerke, 2000; Abaza, 2001). Previous research suggests that consumption plays a central role in the construction of modern identities and social differentiation through the negotiation of class, ethnic, and status relations (Pinches, 1999: 26; Young, 1999: 56). Within this context, consumption practices represent ‘concrete manifestations of people’s visions of modernity and of their own place in the social order’ (ibid.: 71).

An example specific to Thailand is Ara Wilson’s (2004) study of various commercial markets in Bangkok, including the department store, the tourist sex trade, and pyramidal direct sales schemes, in which she interrogates how folk, kin, and moral economies ‘have transformed alongside and informed modernisation in Thailand’ (A. Wilson, 2004: 189). In particular, she suggests that ‘malls underwrite the construction of a vari-

3. Middle-class formations have been observed in contexts as disparate as Vietnam (Earl, 2014), Nepal (Liechty, 2003), Papua New Guinea (Gewertz and Errington, 1999), Malaysia (Sloane, 1999; Talib, 2000), India (Mankekar, 1999; Van Wessel, 2004), and Singapore (PuruShotam, 1998). For more on consumption and the new middle classes in Asia, see also Van der Veer and Jaffrelot (2008), and Chua (2000).

ety of personae ... through the democracy of consumption' (ibid.: 132). Other authors have also argued that consumption gives material form to 'particular narratives of self-identity' (Giddens 1991: 81, as cited by Young 1999: 56), 'an aesthetics of self' that has the effect of establishing one's 'social being' (Shields 1992: 15, as cited by Young, 1999: 71).

Although the world of shopping malls may seem rather distant from the gravity of the Thai political conflict, I argue that the identity-constitutive practices of consumption that occur predominantly inside malls and similar urban spaces of consumption have an important role to play in explaining some of the pressures and resentments which drive the conflict. In Bangkok, middle-class culture and identity is drawn in large part from understandings of status practices of elites. Much of this revolves around status display and lifestyle practices which take place in the urban space of shopping malls, which represent the concrete manifestation of new modes of spatialising inequality that provide important insights into both old and new symbolic and material divisions in Thai society.

As I will elaborate in the course of this work, traditional concepts of space and hierarchy as encapsulated in theories of 'indigenous urbanism', 'mandala', and the 'galactic polity' emphasised the city as the dominant social, economic, and political centre – as well as the superiority of city dwellers in relation to those from the countryside. In addition to the existence of dominant centres in the form of ruling cities, within cities, towns, and villages themselves existed significant social centres around which social life revolved. In the past, these social centres tended to be such places as temples and markets. In the present, they have become displaced by shopping malls as the most important social hubs. Alongside these transformations, the inequalities produced by neoliberal capitalist accumulation have mapped onto pre-existing contours of social differentiation privileging city over countryside, to create a multitude of divisions far more intricate than any notion of an urban–rural divide is able to account for.

### **Beyond the Urban–Rural Divide**

A classic account of the 'urban–rural' divide thesis is found in the paper 'A Tale of Two Democracies' by Anek Laothamatas (1996), an exegesis of the conflicting conceptions of democracy favoured by the rural working classes and the urban middle classes. Anek describes the urban middle

classes as having the influence – disproportionate to their relatively small numbers – to topple regimes elected by the rural masses. At the crux of his argument is the premise that the urban middle class and the rural electorate each have valid, yet incompatible, conceptions of democracy. According to Anek, the rural electorate chooses patron-candidates to see to its welfare and represent its communities, while the educated middle class votes for politicians on the bases of political principles, policy platforms, and the national interest. This leads to the paradox of contemporary Thai politics, whereby regimes elected by the rural majority fail to gain legitimacy amongst the middle classes due to discontent concerning corruption and vote buying in rural areas, leading to the ultimate ousting, usually via military coup, of democratically elected governments.

Although he was referring to events from the 1970s, 80s, and 90s, Anek's argument has been applied to analyses of the current political turmoil, even though he himself has since acknowledged that the distinction is overly crude (Anek, 2010, cited by Naruemon and McCargo, 2011: 1007). Connors and Hewison point out that: 'a major reason for the popularity of the ['two democracies'] explanation of Thailand's politics is to be found in its reductionism and crude instrumentalism' (Connors and Hewison, 2010: 4). Pasuk and Baker acknowledge that the conflict is more complex than a 'minority urban middle class' threatened by the 'provincial and largely rural masses' (Pasuk and Baker, 2008: 21). Connors and Hewison additionally suggest that 'important class structures and struggles, complex regional-business-ideological networks, intra-elite conflict and ongoing grassroots struggles cannot be reduced to a simplistic dichotomy' (Connors and Hewison, 2010: 4). The notion of the urban-rural divide is also problematic because it approaches the city and country as autonomous spaces, rather than as relations in tension (Williams, 1973: 1, as cited by Callahan, 2005: 107).

A study by Miller suggests that the popularisation of Isan music, theatre, and food in contemporary Thailand means that the image of the Isan region and people has become considerably more positive and even 'hip', and that Isan people 'no longer need feel embarrassed about their origin' (T. Miller, 2005: 106). However, my own data suggest that prejudices against Isan people are still highly prevalent, at least amongst people in Bangkok. In contemporary Thailand, the heavily increased

emphasis on consumption and material wealth in Bangkok, juxtaposed against the striking poverty of the northeast provinces, has further exacerbated this dynamic, which is expressed in the pervasive and frequently pejorative discourse of *bannok*. *Bannok*, to be distinguished from more neutral terms used to describe rural people and places (for instance, the word *chonabot*), is a combination of the Thai word for 'house' or 'village' and the word for 'outside'. This is not just a spatial description of rural remoteness. Rather, *bannok* is everything stereotypically negative that derives from undistinguished origins, including being poor, backward, slow, naïve, rough and unrefined. In this light, instead of viewing the relationship between Bangkok and rural Thai society *only* as a structural divide, we might consider it within the framework of indigenous concepts of the spatialisation of power relations.

The historian Thongchai Winichakul has suggested that in pre-modern Siam indigenous concepts of power and space are expressed in words like *khet*, *khopkhet*, and *khetkhanthasima*, which mean 'limits', 'limits all around', and 'boundary of the kingdom', respectively. These are different from Western notions of boundaries, and 'tend to signify areas, districts, or frontiers, not boundary lines. They mean a limit – an extremity without a clear-cut edge and without the sense of division between two powers'. In sum, 'the political sphere could be mapped only by power relationships, not by territorial integrity' (Thongchai, 1994: 79).

In a discussion of *Muang* (Northern Thai) indigenous space, Davis elucidates that 'political space ... is classified according to distance from the centres of culture and political power, along a continuum from the towns, through the villages, and into the forested wilderness' (Davis, 1984: 81).<sup>4</sup> Within this system of social differentiation, townspeople enjoyed more prestige than country people, the latter being expected by law to give way to the former when the two crossed paths (ibid.: 82). With the construction of roads in the countryside by development agencies, living next to a road came to take on the meaning of being 'civilised':

By living next to a road people are brought closer to 'the glory of the *muang*' ... like all Thai peoples, the *Muang* are obsessed with the appearance of being 'civilised' (*jaloen*) ... villagers welcoming Siamese

4. *Muang* means 'city', 'town', or 'state' and is an alternative transliteration of *mueang* as well as the name by which the northern Thai in Davis' (1984) study refer to themselves.

and foreign visitors invariably make an embarrassed and self-conscious reference to their village as not being civilised. This attitude has doubtless been exacerbated through Westernisation, but its roots are ancient and traditional (ibid.: 84).

Furthermore, as O'Connor argues, concepts of indigenous urbanisation prevalent in Southeast Asian cities, which are characterised by an emphasis on urban rule and foreign idioms, elaborate the status distinctions that presume a centre and organise society hierarchically:

It is these distinctions that explain urban dominance and build the city into society. They establish an urban autocracy – meaning not 'absolute power' but rather more literally 'self empowered' – wherein urban life generates the status distinctions that govern the city and the larger society. Once this closure comes, the city rules a countryside it need never know. Urbane yet insular, elites can imagine peasantries and nations to suit themselves (O'Connor 1995: 38).

From such a perspective, I argue that the urban–rural divide is better characterised not as a 'diametric opposition' (Brody, 2006: 552), but rather, an explicitly hierarchical relation (see also Jones, 1971).

Additionally, observers of each of the protest movements embroiled in the Thai conflict have pointed out that the respective composition of their supporters is far more complex and heterogeneous than is captured by the notion of the urban–rural divide. Pye and Schaffer note that the PAD was an alliance of various diverse sections of Thai society with different agendas, including conservative and business elite factions, grassroots organisations, social movements, and NGOs which emerged out of their opposition to the contradictory nature of Thaksin's pro-poor, populist policies, his pursuit of a capitalistic neoliberal agenda, as well as opposition to his dictatorial style of governance (Pye and Schaffer, 2008: 39). Aim (2013) points out that the PDRC anti-government protests of 2013 and 2014 were actually composed of an alliance of three key groups: the former PAD, the Democrat Party, and university and vocational school students from a variety of different networks including Ramkhamhaeng and Rangsit universities.

Similarly, Naruemon and McCargo (2011) argue that in addition to academics, professional politicians, and activists of various leanings from liberal to leftist to rightist hardliners, many members of the Red Shirt movement may be considered 'urbanised villagers' with lower

middle-class income levels and aspirations who joined together in an extremely pragmatic alliance. While many protestors did engage in seasonal farming, many were also small business entrepreneurs and engaged in various other sources of income, straddling boundaries between urban and rural locations and farming and non-farming activities. Sopranzetti (2016) highlights the results of an Asia Foundation (2013) survey which found that 68% of PDRC supporters held a bachelor's degree in comparison to 37% of Red Shirt sympathisers, thereby corroborating notions of the PDRC as a more heavily middle-class movement. Nonetheless, his research on frustrated capitalist desires and frequent movements between city and countryside of motorcycle taxi drivers who are supporters of the UDD also points to a complex form of labour mobility that subverts stereotypes of Red Shirt supporters as an undifferentiated rural peasantry situated in a self-sufficient agrarian past (Sopranzetti 2012, 2016).

Clearly, the UDD, PAD, and PDRC movements are driven by actors from diverse backgrounds and with a number of varying competing and overlapping agendas that defy any kind of easy categorisation. Their complex configuration requires a great deal of future investigation and analysis. However, the scope of the current study is not to compile a comprehensive catalogue of the constituents of these political movements. Neither is it intended to be an exhaustive analysis of Thai politics, *per se*. Rather, my central aim is to contribute to understandings of the political struggle by examining some of the bases for the deep social discontent driving the political tensions. What I will show is that emic understandings of an urban–rural divide are significant in everyday life and have an important role to play in the political conflict. Nevertheless, they only offer a partial understanding of the situation. In particular, the urban–rural class ‘divide’ becomes considerably more ambiguous when taking into account the fact that many ‘urban middle-class’ people are actually white-collar rural migrants. Many other residents of Bangkok are working-class labour migrants from the provinces. The individuals who make up the various groups embroiled in the conflict therefore come from a wide variety of diverse backgrounds and might have common, as well as competing, interests.

Another of the main objectives of this book is to demonstrate that one of the major difficulties with urban–rural divide analysis is that

it does not always take into account the challenges facing supposedly comfortable middle-class Thais in Bangkok. As I will highlight, the experience of being middle class in Bangkok is characterised by various pressures of status insecurity and constant challenges to middle-class aspirations for upward mobility. I argue that this intense struggle over opportunities, divisions of urban space which magnify class tensions, and a profoundly entrenched culture of patronage and abuse of power, frame many of the resentments that drive the political unrest. Exploring these issues requires unravelling the many ways that Thais today think of inequality, hierarchy, and social divisions.

## **Methodology**

The research in this book is based on approximately eighteen months of fieldwork in Bangkok between July 2005 and September 2007, and a combined three months of follow-up fieldwork from December 2009 to January 2010 and again in January 2011. I have also made numerous, shorter, follow-up visits to Bangkok since this time. In addition, I have closely observed the events of Thai politics from late 2005 until the present. My analysis of the political crisis is based on academic sources, media reports, attending rallies, and discussions with informants (some of whom themselves had also attended protests).

Fieldwork involved participant-observation as well as interviews with more than one hundred informants of varying ages, genders, occupations, incomes, and backgrounds, including successful entrepreneurs, professionals, foreign-educated students, office workers, and rural migrants. Not all were born and raised in Bangkok, but had spent enough time there studying or working to know the city fairly well, and considered themselves residents, if not natives, of Bangkok. As I became acquainted with my informants and their everyday lives, I participated in many kinds of interactions and attended many kinds of events, from shopping trips and casual meals with informants, to political demonstrations, engagements, weddings, graduations, concerts, festivals, fairs, conventions, and fashion parades.

Interviews were conducted individually or in groups of up to four people. A foreign-educated research assistant aided me with translating interview questions and responses, especially at the beginning of my fieldwork, when my command of Thai was still shaky. By the end of the



research, I was able to conduct interviews alone and translate the majority of the responses by myself. As the research progressed, I conducted repeat interviews with informants whose insights were beneficial to the research, or whom I felt to be representative of a certain segment of the middle classes. I also aimed to find informants who would rectify any gaps I found in my data – for instance, when I felt there was a need to garner more perspectives from a traditionally distinct middle-class occupation I may have selected people who worked as civil servants, or, in another example, when I thought it was necessary to explore in further detail the experiences of newly middle-class, upwardly-mobile rural–urban migrants.

Conclusions regarding class and status identity were ultimately based on people's own self-assessments, as well as my research assistant's and my own evaluations, observations, and discussions. The interview data I present are somewhat skewed in favour of those who were able to articulate themselves best in interviews. For the most part, these were educated middle-class individuals who had often spent time studying or working abroad. However, by cross-referencing with participant-observation data and informal discussions, I have worked to ensure that the examples included are reasonably representative.

## Overview

In chapter one, I present my approach to analysing social differentiation in Thailand. I outline the historical *sakdina* system and describe the most important contemporary divisions. Here, I introduce some of the basic defining markers of middle-class membership while at the same time highlighting that middle-class identity is complicated by many factors that I investigate further in the course of this work. In chapter two, I further build upon the theoretical framework that underlies this book. This revolves around what I suggest to be the tension between Bangkok's two centres: the politico-religious old city centre located on Rattanakosin Island (which I refer to henceforth as Rattanakosin), and the modern downtown consumption hub which emerged around the modern locales of Siam and Ratchaprasong (which I refer to henceforth as Siam-Ratchaprasong). This discussion lays the groundwork in subsequent chapters for an exploration of changing social relations and status display practices in everyday life in Bangkok.



In chapter three I provide evidence for the emergence of Siam-Ratchaprasong as a dominant centre in Bangkok. Additionally, I argue that the cosmopolitan, consumer-oriented milieu expressed in material-symbolic form by Siam-Ratchaprasong is also embodied in those perceived as the *hi-so* elite. Positioning the concept of *hi-so* as a subjectively defined discourse and group, I suggest that the middle-class fascination with *hi-so* culture underscores the construction of middle-class identity in Bangkok to a major degree. I also show how the intense contemporary emphasis on wealth as an indicator of power is expressed in a pervasive preoccupation with status display, 'face', prestige, and reputation in Bangkok.

In chapter four, I suggest that the notion of an urban-rural divide is more complex than it is usually portrayed, arguing that the relationship between Bangkok and Isan is best characterised as a hierarchical one, rather than one of dichotomy or difference. In particular, I explore the nature of interclass relations and the often openly prejudiced attitudes of many in Bangkok toward lower-class and rural Thais. I then go on to present the May 2010 Red Shirt protests and the arson attack on CentralWorld Plaza shopping mall in Siam-Ratchaprasong as a striking example of the working-class response to their disenfranchisement from Thailand's economic progress.

Chapter five explores some of the discourses that stem from the challenges of life in Bangkok, including resentment concerning the extreme social competitiveness of urban society, and frustrations stemming from the intense struggle over opportunities for education and employment. I elaborate further on how the emphasis on 'face', reputation, prestige, and material wealth translates into access to the networks and social circles that lead to opportunities for success, upward mobility, and economic and political power. In the book's conclusion, I suggest that this striking discourse of middle-class resentment, along with the discontent of the marginalised rural and working class segments of Thai society, has been instrumental to mobilising popular support and legitimacy in the political turmoil. Additionally, I reflect on the implications of the ethnographic material I have explored throughout the book for our understandings of contemporary Bangkok and the Thai political crisis.



## *Class and Status in Thailand*

### **An Emic Model of Class and Status**

Premodern Thailand was a rigidly hierarchical society of royals and princes (*chao*), aristocrats and nobles (*khunnang*), commoners (*phrai*), and slaves (*that*) organised into a system of status ranking called *sakdina* established by King Trailok of Ayutthaya in the fifteenth century.<sup>1</sup> In essence, *sakdina* 'served as a technique to evaluate the relative legal privilege and political power of individuals' (Loos, 2006: 37). Within the *sakdina* system, society was divided into four main categories of people, in descending order of status. The ruling elite, comprising *chao* at the top followed by *khunnang*, wielded absolute power over the *phrai* and *that* who were their social inferiors. Individuals were assigned a numerical ranking according to their social worth, called *sakdina* marks. Privileges increased in correlation with an individual's *sakdina* marks. These rankings determined everything from the nature of social interaction, to livelihood and occupation, and severity of punishment meted out by the courts for wrongdoing (see Griswold and Prasert, 1969; Akin, 1979: 28–29; Hewison, 1989: 134–135; Likhit, 1990: 192; Jit, 1997; Loos, 2006: 35).

Under *sakdina* laws, all *phrai* were required to be registered. Those who were not, so-called *phrai luang*, 'belonged' to the king and were required to perform corvée for six months a year. The *phrai som* were registered and assigned to *nai* ('leaders' or 'masters'), according to the latter's *sakdina* rankings, although the king could redistribute *phrai som* after they had been assigned. The *phrai som* were clients of the nobles who controlled them, and could expect the protection of the *nai* as their

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1. The literal translation of *sakdina* is, 'power over fields', although it is also translated as 'dignity marks'. In the decade or so following World War II, the translation of *sakdina* as 'feudal' became established, although it has been argued that this is not an accurate rendering of the term (Reynolds, 1994: 153).

patrons. On the other hand, the political strength and wealth of the nobles was bolstered by the material support, and labour and services of their *phrai* (Akin, 1979: 35, 39).

Much of the legitimation for this hierarchical social structure came from a text authored by King Lithai of the Sukhothai era (approximately 1238–1428 CE) called the *Traiphum Phra Ruang*, or ‘Three Worlds of Phra Ruang’. The *Traiphum Phra Ruang* was essentially a description of the structure of the universe, the relationship between merit and power (which placed the king at the apex of the social hierarchy), and the cyclical processes of death and rebirth for sentient beings. It depicts a system in which the result of accumulation of *bun* (Buddhist merit) accumulated from past existences led all sentient beings, from heavenly deities to humans to the lowliest insect, to occupy varying positions in an enormous cosmic hierarchy. The cosmo-ideological underpinnings of *Traiphum* discouraged social and political protest and encouraged people to accept their present status by justifying an individual’s social position as a consequence of his or her past karma (Somboon, 1977: 114). It is an ideology that has been deployed by the ruling elite to great effect, inseparably linking power, social status and religious virtue and leading – theoretically at least – to the ‘magico-religious view that right is might’ (D. Wilson, 1979: 282; see also D. Wilson, 1962 and Hanks, 1962, 1975).

The *sakdina* system of status ranking lasted from the early Ayutthaya era (1350–1767 CE) until its abolition after the 1932 revolution and the accompanying shift from absolute to constitutional monarchy. Yet, it continues to have a lasting effect on perceptions and practices of status and hierarchy to this day. Where older scholarly uses of the term focused on its older, technical meaning as ‘rank quantified in terms of land or labour’, after the mid-1940s *sakdina* took on a negative, pejorative connotation variously associated with old-fashioned thinking, archaic institutions, patron–clientalism, bureaucratic corruption, and class difference (i.e. the wealthy and powerful *sakdina* class vs. the poor, powerless, and low-status classes) (Reynolds, 1994: 151–152). More recently, certain elements of the *sakdina* system have developed into a discourse of oppression instrumentalised by leaders of the Red Shirt movement in their anti-establishment rhetoric. This includes referring to the members of the Red Shirt movement as the *phrai*, or ‘commoners’, who are challenging the oppression of the *ammat* class (Hewison

2015). The word *ammat* is typically used to refer to government officials, bureaucrats, or aristocrats. However, the Red Shirt movement uses the word to refer to the socially and politically privileged Bangkok elite. The symbolic language of the *phrai-ammat* discourse taps into and evokes historical understandings of superiority and inferiority to powerful effect because, despite the official abolition of *sakdina*, Thailand is, still, an extremely unequal society in which elements of *sakdina* continue to persist.

However, rather than being limited to a division between aristocrats, nobility, or royalty (*phu di/chao*), government officials or bureaucrats (*ammat*), and commoners (*phrai*) or slaves (*that*) which was dominant in the *sakdina* era, the wide range of ways that people relate to one another in Thailand has expanded. It now includes a large range of concepts such as wealth (*thana*), social status (*sathana thang sangkhom*), levels (*radap*), hierarchy (*radap chan*), *hi-so* (slang abbreviation of the English phrase ‘high society’) and *lo-so* (slang for ‘low society’), high/middle/ low society (*sangkhom sung/klang/tam* or *lang*), poor people (*khon chon*) and rich people (*khon ruay*), country people (*bannok*) and city people (*khon/chao krung* or *mueang*). It is important to emphasise that these terms don’t necessarily refer to objectively existing social structures or class-based groupings, and have variable connotations depending on context and subjective individual understanding.

The complexity of status differentiation in Bangkok points to the usefulness of employing an emic model of class and status. W. Lloyd Warner’s *Yankee City* studies (encapsulated in his 1963 volume) utilised a wide variety of status criteria in the assessment of class groupings, and placed an emphasis on allowing the people of Yankee City to define class on their own terms. According to Warner,

With the use of all structural participation, and with the aid of such additional testimony as the area lived in, the type of house, kind of education, manners, and other symbols of class, it was possible to determine very quickly the approximate place of any individual in society. In the final analysis, however, individuals were placed by the evaluations of the members of Yankee City itself, e.g., by such explicit statements as ‘she does not belong’, or ‘they belong to our club’ (Warner, 1963: 45).

In other words, Yankee City’s classes were constituted through members’ participation in class-specific activities and groups and their

validation through acceptance as ‘members’ by others of the same class. An emic approach shows that individuals’ understandings of class and status divisions can be highly subjective and is often best based on self-definition. This is ultimately the approach that I have taken throughout this research.

One example of an emic approach in the Thai context is Juree’s study of two middle-class groups in Bangkok: Chinese shopkeepers in a major market area of Bangkok and Thai employees of a state-owned enterprise. Drawing on a ‘Thai model’ of class, based on the meanings and implications of social classes as they are experienced and used in the Thai context, Juree argues that there is an implicit sense amongst Thai people that Thai society is stratified into three broad strata (upper, middle, and lower), and suggests that the urban Thai middle class is a complex conglomeration of various sub-groups more akin to Weber’s status groups (Juree, 1979: 4, 12). According to her findings, one’s economic situation is important, but other variables also contribute to determining the class position of an individual, including occupational prestige (white-collar vs. physical labour), educational prestige, family prestige, and the amount of security and control one has over one’s social environment (e.g. security from hunger and loss of shelter). Moreover, there also exists internal stratification within each class, with the most important criteria being wealth, prestige, and ethnicity (*ibid.*: 4–8).<sup>2</sup>

Thus, as Basham points out, ‘the major problem with class models ... is that no randomly selected sample of individuals is likely to adhere to any single model’ (Basham, 1978: 227). Similarly, Juree indicates that in an urban setting and within the middle and upper classes, Thai status differentiation can become highly complex, and a person can simultaneously possess both higher and lower status in comparison to another person, based on variables such as age, education, occupation, wealth, and family of birth (Juree, 1979: 157–158). Additionally, as Jackson observes:

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2. Terms and categories that Juree found are used in daily life to refer to and describe differences in social status and economic situation include *chon chan* (social class; literally, human being, *chon*, and level, *chan*), *radap* (literally, level; used to refer to social differentiations – people are of high or low *radap*, or it can also be used in the sense of educational *radap* or economic *radap*), and *thana* (which literally translates as status, but, according to Juree, it is taken for granted that it means ‘economic status’) (Juree, 1979: 4).

Anthropological, sociological and cultural studies research [on Thailand] has often drawn upon notions such as ‘ambiguous’, ‘fluid’, ‘shifting’, ‘loosely structured’, ‘paradoxical’, and ‘contradictory’ in describing Thai gender, sexuality, identity, aesthetics, and social relations. All these terms reflect the sense of a society that confounds neat analysis within the parameters of established theory (Jackson, 2010: 49).

Ockey further argues that if one were to use objective structural criteria, such as occupation, political ideology, education, and patterns of consumption, then there exists not just one middle class but several. There exist overlaps as well as significant variation between each of these middle-class ‘groups’ (Ockey, 1999: 237–242). In relation to this problematic, Bourdieu advocates breaking away from a linear model of class, and, in Weberian fashion, taking into account the network of secondary characteristics and factors which also contribute to class (Bourdieu, 1984: 106–107). I also found the Weberian notion of the mutually influential nature of class situation and status situation to be useful in my investigations. Such emic categories of self-identification and differentiation inform my navigation of the myriad of social divisions that pervade everyday life in Thailand throughout the rest of this book. This complexity requires a clarification of the many meanings, definitions, and categories in use.

### Categories of Social Differentiation

At the beginning of my fieldwork, when I first began my explorations of status, hierarchy, and middle-class identity in Bangkok, I was often confronted by the experience of informants who would tell me that there was no such thing as ‘social class’ in Thai society (*‘Sangkhom Thai mai mi chon chan’*). Needless to say, this information was quite bewildering in the light of the obviously hierarchical nature of social life in Bangkok. Eventually, however, I learned that social differentiation was simply thought of and spoken about in a variety of ways other than the more ‘scientific’ *chon chan*. I also noticed that upper- and upper-middle class people, especially those who had been educated in foreign universities, were more likely to discuss their opinions and understandings of Thai social differentiation using such terminology as *chon chan* (social class) and *sathana thang sangkhom* (social status), while those who might be considered to be of lower status – such as domestic workers or vendors

– were more likely to express the opinion that there was no such thing as the concept of *chon chan*, although they did speak in terms of differentiation by *thana*, *chon* (poor), and *ruay* (rich), or, alternatively, people who ‘have money’ (*mi ngen*) or ‘don’t have money’ (*mai mi ngen*).

In general, my discussions with informants support Juree’s (1979) finding that the word *chon chan*, or ‘social class’, is more academic, and more likely to be used by educated people, while *thana* is used most often in everyday life. As well, my own research strongly supports Juree’s suggestion that:

Perhaps because adjectives like high and low connote the presence or absence of desirable and even moral qualities, one finds a resistance and a reluctance among Thais, especially those from the lower classes, to use these terms. They would rather focus on simple economic variables which differentiate them from others in society, and call themselves ‘poor’ people as opposed to ‘rich’ and ‘richer’ people’ (ibid.: 4).

The simplest translation for *thana* is ‘wealth’, but it can also denote ‘status’, ‘position’, or ‘condition’, suggesting that the best all-encompassing translation for *thana* is ‘financial status’. As such, *thana* corresponds somewhat to ‘class’ in both Marxian and Weberian senses, especially as it relates to economic power. *Thana* should be distinguished from the everyday Thai word for ‘money’ (*ngen*), which has a more straightforward meaning. For instance, if a person is wealthy he or she can be said to *mi* (‘have’) either *thana*, or *ngen*. However, people can *mi thana sung* (‘have high status’) while they cannot be said to *mi ngen sung*, as the latter doesn’t make sense. Conversely, a person can *mi ngen ye* (‘have lots of money’), but they cannot normally *mi thana ye* (‘have lots of status’). In addition, family wealth appears to be the more consistent gauge of *thana*, and hence, class position. Consequently, *thana* is perhaps more accurately conceived of as incorporating both individual income and family prosperity.

As an example, Phueng is a civil servant with an individual income of around 10,000 baht per month. However, her income is not indicative of her class situation. She is employed at a government ministry known to require excellent connections. And, although her father’s family is from Isan, they own a stud ranch and a mining business and are very wealthy. Her mother’s family is prominently involved in politics and business in a central province. Phueng also attended both Chulalongkorn and Thammasat universities. In other words, even though her income is low



and her family is from a rural province, a complete assessment of her class situation in Warnerian terms of participation and acceptance would place her in the upper middle class. The prestige, social status, and community standing of her family are not only incidental to her class situation, but are examples of some of the most important things which separate Bangkok's elite from the rest of society.

Some informants simply preferred to use the term *thana* rather than *chon chan* because they felt the latter to be too discriminatory or too rigid and/or caste-like to suit the more fluid Thai context. Additionally, as I mentioned earlier, explicit acknowledgment of *chon chan* carries with it implications of inferior status for many individuals – particularly for those who would be considered to be members of the lower classes. As such, to speak in terms of disparity in *thana* seems to be the more acceptable way to approach such a sensitive issue. Furthermore, some of my informants seemed to think I was enquiring as to whether they believed *personally* in differentiation by social class. On clarification that I was interested in their assessment of Thai attitudes, in general, they would affirm that Thai society is indeed highly unequal, but assert that they didn't believe this was a good thing.

I also found 'social status', or *sathana thang sangkhom* (which may be abbreviated to *sathana*, or just 'status') to be an important concept. Semantically, it has less of a *direct* connotation of wealth than does *thana*, and is more closely connected with prestige. The terms *radap*, and *chan* – both of which possess connotations of 'class', 'grade', 'level', and 'rank' – are also commonly used. The two words together in a single phrase – *radap chan* – translate as 'class', or, in some contexts, 'hierarchy'. Additionally, a person who is 'classy' might be described as *mi radap*. The concepts of *thana* and *sathana* are not reducible to one another, although in practice they do share a great degree of overlap and are sometimes interchangeable. This is because, these days, many things that bring social status can be purchased (e.g. a high position in the community as a politician or in some other occupational field, a prestigious education, a house in a good neighbourhood, a luxurious car, expensive jewellery, designer garments and accessories, or an extravagant lifestyle).

Examining exceptions to the correlation between a high level of *thana* and high *sathana thang sangkhom* reveals the distinction between the two. An example could be someone who was not particularly wealthy

or who had lost much of their wealth, but who was perceived as wealthy in the eyes of others, either intentionally or by virtue of others' assumptions. Likewise, aspiring middle-class individuals may cultivate the appearance of high status despite their true economic position. Another example could be that of someone with a royal lineage or a prestigious family name who had not managed to retain their family wealth. In that case, the individual possesses *sathana thang sangkhom*, but has experienced a drop in economic position as denoted by *thana*. Nevertheless, the majority of my informants suggested that, these days, it is atypical for a person to have high societal status if they are not wealthy.

The need to consider *both* class and status in the Thai context, as well as take into account the mutually influential relationship between the two, can and does lead to an ambiguity which makes it exceedingly difficult to separate all the different terms and categories of class and status, and their uses and implications in Thai social life.<sup>3</sup> As mentioned earlier, Bourdieu suggests that this overlap may be explained in terms of 'secondary properties' or characteristics that are implicated by the use of particular class variables in any given model of class:

The individuals grouped in a class that is constructed in a particular respect ... always bring with them, in addition to the pertinent properties by which they are classified, secondary properties which are thus smuggled into the explanatory model. This means that class or class fraction is defined not only by its position in the relations of production, as identified through indices such as occupation, income or even educational level, but also by a certain sex-ratio, a certain distribution in geographical space (which is never socially neutral) and by a whole set of subsidiary requirements as real principles of selection or exclusion, without ever formally being stated (this is the case with ethnic origin and sex) (Bourdieu, 1984: 102).

References to *thana* and *sathana thang sangkhom* – or even other ways to describe social differentiation, such as the distinction between, say,

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3. The complex relationship between class and status is captured to an extent by Weber's following assertion: 'Status situation may depend on class situation, either directly or in a roundabout way. But it is not determined by it alone: possession of money and the position of an entrepreneur are not, in themselves alone, qualifications for status, although they may tend in that direction; conversely, lack of wealth is not in itself a disqualification from status, although it may tend in that direction' (Weber, 1983: 60).

Bangkok people and Isan people, or aristocrats and commoners – might be viewed as incorporating such ‘subsidiary’ or ‘secondary’ properties, which draw on categories and variables of differentiation *other* than the one explicitly referenced. Interestingly, in the hierarchical distinction between city and rural people, the ‘secondary’ property of being from outside of Bangkok seems to have taken on a greater cultural salience than the actual primary variables of class difference. Such categories may also function as ‘umbrella’ concepts in order to conveniently sum up the wide ranging and complex social and economic disparities that serve to socially differentiate individuals. For instance, a person who is considered by others to have high status is also generally assumed to belong to the upper class, and possess everything that comes with being in the upper class, including an exclusive education, excellent taste, refined manners, and of course, a high degree of wealth.

Within this framework, any *one* variable is not necessarily indicative of class situation. Often, but not always, several subsidiary variables need to be considered before an accurate assessment of class situation can be made. Ultimately, however, I found that educational prestige appeared to have a relatively strong connection to class situation. By extension, educational prestige can also be indicative of other aspects of class situation. It also provides further evidence to show that *thana* is best considered in terms of incorporating both family wealth, and individual salary. In sum, it is clear that status groups and social class fractions need to be considered in terms of more than a select few ‘primary’ variables, such as educational level, income, or occupation. When an employer interacts with a domestic employee, or a patron of a restaurant with service staff, there may be only one variable taken into account – that of occupational status. However, in addition to such clear cut status differentials, there can also exist a great deal of ambiguity, which is why a non-linear model incorporating multiple variables of class and status is useful. Arguably, such a model also comes closer to how Thais incorporate emic categories of status differentiation – including that of social class – into the practice of relative status appraisal in everyday life.

### **Defining Middle-Class Membership**

The opportunities opened up by increased access to tertiary education have played an important role in the expansion of the urban middle

classes in Thailand. Furthermore, as a national hub for education and work, a large number of long-time Bangkok's residents are migrants of varying backgrounds from provinces all over Thailand. Many individuals from this same group could be considered 'middle class' alongside those with tertiary education and white-collar employment whose families have been based in Bangkok for longer, or individuals who may have once been considered upper class but who have experienced downward mobility into the middle class. At the same time, the opening up of channels of upward mobility has resulted in more intense social competition, more elaborate divisions, and shifts in the identifying markers of middle-class membership. Such factors make the 'Bangkok middle class' an exceedingly complex category. Consequently, rather than being an attempt to exhaustively delineate all categories that constitute Thai middle-class identity, this book aims to highlight some of the parameters and defining features of the middle class in Bangkok.

Unsurprisingly, among my informants, I found that there are a staggeringly diverse range of opinions on how exactly 'middle class' should be defined. In terms of income, for example, some informants stated that being middle class merely requires one 'to have enough to eat and enough to spend' (*'mi pho kin pho chai'*). While the statement *'mi pho kin pho chai'* is certainly accurate – insofar as the middle classes enjoy a degree of financial ease, particularly in comparison to the lower classes, who must constantly struggle – exactly what is considered 'enough' is another question altogether. As Tee, an accountant, pointed out: 'Some people have two cars, and live in a nice house, with three bedrooms, and call themselves middle class. And there are some people who don't have any cars, but have a house in the city – not a nice house, but an old house. And they still call themselves "middle class"'. In other words, wide income disparities within the middle classes seem to require a more meaningful index of middle-class wealth than merely being 'comfortable' or having 'enough'.

White-collar workers in Bangkok earn a monthly salary that may range from seven or eight thousand baht to thirty thousand or more, depending on seniority, skill level, and the organisation for which they work. In general, low-level office workers earn twelve to thirteen thousand baht or less per month (with fifteen thousand baht or more per month considered a very reasonable salary). Teachers, university

lecturers, and civil servants earn similar monthly salaries. The lower end of this salary spectrum is comparable to the income common to such 'non-middle class' occupations as vendor/hawker, domestic worker, and factory worker. Wholesale traders in markets may earn significantly more than the average white-collar worker, as may some sex industry workers and bar girls. Clearly, income alone is not sufficient to qualify one as middle class, as these occupations are considered lower-class employment, while in contrast, office workers and teachers would be considered 'middle class', regardless of how little money they make.

This leads to the question: 'what kinds of occupations are "middle class"'? During the course of my fieldwork, I often came across the 'common-sense' notion of a middle-class person as 'not rich, but not a labourer'. In the words of one person, they are people who: 'don't have to spend hours tilling the farm, or doing things like plumbing, or opening doors ... anything that requires labour'. On the other hand, 'rich' people are those who do not need to work in order to support themselves. This definition encompasses an extremely wide range of occupations and livelihoods which can one way or another be categorised as 'middle class'. Level of education attained is another, widely popular, way to define the middle classes. I found that even individuals who operate lucrative businesses and have relatively high incomes (for instance, wholesale traders at markets or shop owners) still identified themselves as lower class if they lacked sufficient formal education to provide them with a sense of middle-class identity. Of a group of twenty or so vendors at Chatuchak market who I interviewed, a few had bachelor's degrees, but the majority had never attained a tertiary education; primary school education was the norm. Another example is that of May, a hairdresser from a poor rural family who ran a successful salon in the Silom district, one of Bangkok's more affluent areas, where she counted a former Prime Minister amongst her customers for many years. As well, she often worked with her team doing hair and makeup for socialites and for actors and actresses on movie sets. As such, her monthly income might exceed a hundred thousand baht per month. Yet, when I asked what class she felt she belonged to, she responded that she was in the 'lower class'. Her reasoning for this was that she had never finished high school.

Consequently, although exceptions do exist and not everyone would concur, most informants agreed that migrants from the provinces who

hold white-collar positions and have a tertiary education from a non-prestigious university could be considered members of the lower middle class.<sup>4</sup> University education and non-manual labour distinguishes such individuals from the hundreds of thousands of migrant labourers in Bangkok who are domestic employees, cleaners, taxi drivers, and factory and construction workers. Most of the informants with whom I spoke who were engaged in occupations involving domestic work or manual labour had only completed their educations up until primary school, if that, although a few had finished high school. As such, a tertiary degree, regardless of the institution, appears to be the watershed between lower-class and middle-class membership.

Yet, with a bachelor's degree now being commonplace (at least in Bangkok), distinguishing oneself from the more marginal middle class requires at least a master's or, even better, a doctorate degree. The latter shows that one's family has the considerable resources to invest in lengthy years of an offspring's education. Many of my upper-middle class informants had attained master's degrees, either from abroad or from good universities in Bangkok. Although a foreign education was previously the exclusive domain of the most affluent families, some middle-class students were able to win scholarships for education

4. The most prominent example in Bangkok is Ramkhamhaeng University, which opened in 1969. Although the university is well known, it is not considered prestigious. This is due in part to its high proportion of students from provincial areas and working class backgrounds. Many are also attracted by Ramkhamhaeng University's affordable tuition fees and low admission standards – being an 'open' university, the university lacks entrance exams and anyone with a high school diploma can enrol. Similarly ranked are the *ratchaphat* universities, which are common both in the provinces and in Bangkok. Once royally patronised teaching colleges, they also lack exclusivity as a result of low admission standards, and hence do not confer very much status to the degree holder. Private universities lacking entrance exams are similarly associated with modest academic performance and hence low prestige. That being said, even a university degree from one of these universities is more prestigious than having no degree at all, and I encountered many Thais who were Ram or *ratchaphat* alumni. A good proportion of these were individuals from outside of Bangkok who were now working in office or teaching jobs after completing degrees ranging from Law to English Studies. My investigations also showed that informants who were graduates of inexpensive, accessible universities are often the first generation of their families to attain tertiary-level education. This represents inter-generational mobility, whereby the individual is born within a working class family but attains a sufficiently good education to attain a white-collar job and hence marginal entrance into the middle class, while the parents are still working in manual labour roles.

abroad. This was the case for the informants Sai and Daeng, both of whom were employees at a national government ministry, suggesting that their families had good social contacts. Yet, Sai and Daeng had to 'repay' their scholarships by working at the ministry for three times the period they spent abroad for their education. I also met many individuals whose European, American, or Australian education was paid for not by their parents but by wealthier relatives.

Essentially, I found the engagement of an informant's parents in non-manual, white-collar occupations to be particularly indicative of a more established middle-class membership, somewhere in between lower middle and upper middle class. The children of civil servants, for instance, fit into this category. An illustrative example was Mot, a yoga teacher and self-development workshop facilitator who previously worked at Thai Airways. Both of her parents were from Petchabun. Her mother worked as a pharmacist in state hospitals and her father was a local politician. Both were educated at Chulalongkorn University and Mot herself earned her bachelor's degree and master's degree from Chiang Mai and Mahidol University, respectively. Although her income was uncertain and she struggled financially at times, Mot's own and her parents' educations and occupations meant that Mot self-identified with being in the middle-middle class. In her perspective:

The lower class is probably manual labourers. They labour for work, or if they are working for hire (*luk chang*), they could be subcontractors, or are lower-level manual labourers, in a job that doesn't require much skill. The middle class is a level that probably has somewhat more knowledge; they may have a bachelor's degree, working in a job that doesn't require labour. They are able to meet their own needs. They can go shopping a little bit, depending on their circumstances. But the lower class, they're more like, *ha chao kin kham*, they live day-by-day, they're on a level that is concerned only with everyday survival ... in the middle, you have the lower middle, middle middle, and upper middle class too. Right? So at the moment, the Thai middle class is actually very broad. I think, the lower [middle] class is probably, for example, civil servants. Their salary is sufficient, but it's not much. And they have the potential to become middle middle class. The middle middle class is probably something like the people who work in businesses, or in international companies; they probably have enough to live a little more frivolously. But the upper middle class are yet another level in



terms of their responsibilities at work, and the amount of their salary, their reputation and prestige. But the difference is not that great.

As these remarks indicate, perhaps the clearest distinction between middle-middle and upper-middle class individuals is not always educational prestige (especially as each of these two middle-class fractions can have similar levels of education), but extra measures of occupational success and family prestige. Using an income-based assessment of class position, another informant, Dao, cited the example of an accountant and a chief accountant in a firm:

It's the same job, but it's not quite the same, it's that little bit extra success. The middle class is white-collar salary workers, right? Upper-middle is sort of the same, but just that they're successful, and they make more money. A normal salaried person would get maybe around twenty thousand, but a director would get two hundred thousand up ... ten times the earnings in one month, it's quite a lot. But, it's a thin line. In five years the salary man can be a manager or a director ... to move from middle class to upper middle class is not that difficult ... but to go from upper-middle to upper [class], then you need fame, connections, and power.

Mot additionally reiterated: 'Before it was divided along the lines of *sakdina*, there were *Mom Ratchawong*, *Mom Luang* (aristocrats), *chao ban thamada* (normal people), there were *phrai* (commoners)... but in the present, for social status, people look at material things, people look at reputation/prestige (*ketayot*), power (*amnat*).'

What can be seen so far is that although the basic parameters of middle-class membership may begin with a tertiary education and white-collar, non-manual labour employment, many other features – including reputation, family background, social circles, consumption patterns, and lifestyle – are open to definition. I elaborate in further detail on these characteristics in subsequent chapters. What is clear is that a concept of the 'urban middle classes' needs to be heterogeneous enough to include individuals who have recently migrated from the provinces to Bangkok for education and employment, as well as individuals who have been established in Bangkok for longer periods of time. It also needs to include varying degrees of financial success and societal position distinguishing between an upper-middle class individual – such as a person with a foreign education, from a prominent family, and with an



upper-management position in an organisation – and a middle-middle class individual, such as a provincial migrant who has attained a tertiary education from a prestigious Bangkok university who is employed within the same organisation.

My objective is thus not to argue conclusively concerning class and status differentiation in Bangkok, but rather, to problematise taken-for-granted categories such as ‘urban elite’ or ‘urban middle class’ and to shift understandings of the way people view society as being divided. Not least, the many complex divisions within the middle classes alone show how a preoccupation with status, power and prestige pervades much of everyday life in Bangkok. As I have alluded to in this chapter and will illustrate throughout the rest of this book, this preoccupation finds expression in intense social competition and hierarchical divisions that in turn underlie prevailing norms of societal injustice and widespread discontent. I found these to be issues of common interest for Thais of all social classes that lend a great deal of force and meaning to the social movements that have emerged in the past decade. They form the core of ethnographic investigations presented in this study.



## *Indigenous Space, Hierarchy, and Kalathesa*

### **Two Centres**

Bangkok is many cities in one. It is a place where majestic stupas and glittering air-conditioned shopping malls are interspersed by multi-lane highways and meandering, pungent canals. Rickety shophouses and street vendors jostle for space in between skyscrapers, wine bars, and dance clubs. Ornate temples of worship are surrounded by hawkers offering anything from bundled vegetables to Buddhist amulets to smartphone chargers, while the gargantuan hypermarket down the road does a roaring trade in plastic-packaged groceries and discount clothing. Amidst it all, hurried office workers step gingerly over the cracked pavement and around the cooks sweating over steaming noodle stalls. Beggars crouch at the bottom of staircases connecting sidewalks to futuristic BTS skytrain stations, begging for coins from executives totting Prada and iPhones. Meanwhile, wet markets serve as signposts of old and significant neighbourhoods and social centres before a different kind of market swept in, bringing with it scores of 7-Eleven convenience stores and the quintessentially consumeristic capitalist emblems of supermarkets and high-street fashion brands like Zara and H&M, and tech juggernauts like Apple and Samsung.

What can these contrasts and divisions tell us about the particular historical trajectory of that city over time? How have economic transformation, urban restructuring, and shifts in political structure in turn come to constitute the social fabric of urban life? I suggest that, in Bangkok, changing configurations of urban space shows us much more than the tensions between a fading monarchic, bureaucratic ‘old order’ in the process of being eclipsed by a modern, neoliberal ‘new order’. They also shed light on new modes of spatialising inequality that

provide important insights into both old and new symbolic and material divisions in Thai society.

Established as a Buddhist and Indic-Khmer ruling city, Thai monarchical and state power is concentrated in Bangkok's original ruling centre, Rattanakosin, situated on a man-made island in the district of Phra Nakhon. Yet, although there is now a scattering of development in Rattanakosin, this pales in comparison to the large number of shopping malls, department stores, and hypermarkets in the remainder of Bangkok, particularly in its downtown business, tourist and residential areas. They are especially concentrated in, and radiate outward from, the adjacent Siam and Ratchaprasong locales in Pathumwan district.

While a discussion of the historical city centre may seem out of place in a study of contemporary Bangkok, I contend that it is essential for contextualising many of the arguments made in this book. The vibrant chaos of Rattanakosin and its old markets and shophouses shows what Bangkok was like before the current onslaught of shopping malls. A comparison of the traditional and modern city centres evokes a physical and symbolic sense of the shift from old monarchic power to contemporary political regime. As Thailand transitioned from an absolute to a constitutional monarchy and began to take on the features of a modern democracy, these changes were reflected in the physical and symbolic refashioning of Rattanakosin from cosmological sacred centre to modern administrative hub.

After the vast transformations produced by the economic development policies of the Sarit era in the 1960s and 70s, the Thai class structure expanded to include a powerful business elite and a 'new' middle class. These changes also heralded the emergence of new segments of the ruling elite, including the civilian and military bureaucracy and ethnic Chinese business people, and the expansion of the middle class to include state employees and small entrepreneurs. Consequently, I suggest that, rather than being a territorial division based upon modern geographical concepts of space, the tension between the two centres of Rattanakosin and Siam-Ratchaprasong represents a shift in the axis of the city, and in the idiom of power and status in Thai society, which has accompanied the social changes wrought by the neoliberal urban restructuring.

I argue that practices of what I term ‘status-appropriate behaviour’, which continue to inform Thai social life and on which I elaborate in this chapter, are modelled on forms of court etiquette that were established in the old ruling centre of power. These status practices are encapsulated in discourses such as *kalathesa* (‘time and place’), *khaorop sathan thi* (‘to respect the place’), and *ru thi sung thi tam* (‘to know the high and the low’). Such notions were brought up frequently by my informants in Bangkok during our discussions. An analysis of these concepts lays the groundwork in subsequent chapters for an exploration of the meanings attached to urban transformations as manifested in status display practices, which have been pervaded by the symbols and discourses of material wealth, consumerism, and cosmopolitanism. These spatial-symbolic relations constitute, and are constituted by, dynamics of power, class, and status. They provide an understanding of how local frameworks of space interface with global processes which offers analytical power beyond that of merely an ‘articulation’ between the local and the global, to show how the inequalities engendered by neoliberal capitalist accumulation have mapped onto pre-existing contours of social differentiation while simultaneously creating new modes of spatialising inequality in urban Thailand.

In order to illustrate my arguments, I draw on notions of the city that underscore how ‘space is a construct of power relations’ (Askew, 2002: 6). Such an approach illuminates the ways in which urban space configurations highlight social and physical boundaries:

Cities are ... material spaces with relative stability and rigidity that shape and bound people’s lives ... in the materiality of segregated spaces, in people’s everyday trajectories, in their uses of public transportation, in their appropriations of streets and parks, and in their construction of walls and defensive facades, social boundaries are rigidly constructed (Caldeira, 1999: 102).

Low extends this idea of boundaries into a metaphor of the ‘the divided city’, in which barriers of race and class are encoded in everyday narratives of ‘uptown’ and ‘downtown’, ‘upscale’ and ‘ghetto’ (Low, 1999: 7).<sup>1</sup> In a deeply unequal society like Thailand, it is not entirely unexpected that the configuration of space follows the contours of a heavily uneven

1. See also Falzon (2004), Pow (2007), and Leisch (2002) for studies of gated communities in Bombay, Shanghai, and Indonesia, respectively.

distribution of power. City centre and outskirts, mall and market, condominium and slum, are each axes reflecting a trend of separation of space and locality along the lines of wealth, status, and power.

In São Paulo, Pardue suggests that the notion of *periferia*, or ‘periphery’, comprises both a ‘material space’ and ‘contested ideology’ in Brazilian hip hop for expressing marginality and exclusion from the benefits of global capitalism (Pardue, 2010: 53). In a similar – albeit, reversed – sense, the culture of materialistic status display in the malls, restaurants, and other exclusive spaces in downtown Bangkok speaks towards a desire for inclusion into the new physical and ideological centre of Thailand’s neoliberal modernity, enacted through the conformative and performative expression of its symbolic language of consumerism. As middle- and upper-class enclaves, they function as status symbols and instruments of social separation – something which is not unique to Bangkok and which appears to be an emergent model of organising social differences in urban space in metropolises all over the world.

### **Articulation, Power, and Hierarchy**

The processes that contributed to the formation of Bangkok’s new ‘downtown’ were paralleled in other cities in the 1980s and 90s such as São Paulo, Buenos Aires, Taipei, and Mexico City, where economic globalisation and the intensification of the service industries became concentrated in key urban locales (Sassen, 1996: 64–65) in what has been called the ‘urbanisation of neoliberalism’ (Brenner and Theodore, 2002: 375). From 1985 until the financial crisis in 1997, Thailand’s economic growth averaged over nine per cent per year. In Bangkok, the result of the accompanying retail boom was the inexorable replacement of neighbourhood ‘mom-and-pop’ shophouses (*ran cho huay*) by large-scale national and transnational retailers such as Central Department Store, The Mall, Siam Paragon, Carrefour, and Tesco-Lotus. In addition to a host of malls, there seems to be a convenience store on virtually every corner, a supermarket or hypermarket in almost every neighbourhood.

The elegant condominiums along Sukhumvit Road, the looming office buildings in Sathorn, and not least, the teeming scores of beckoning air-conditioned malls, make it tempting to categorise Bangkok as another homogenous ‘world city’, a field of ‘non-places’ (Augé, 1995) produced

by forces of globalisation and resulting in a kind of 'recursive' and 'serial' monotony and spaces that are 'almost identical in ambience from city to city' (Boyer, 1988, cited in Harvey, 1990: 295). Compounding this is the fact that in globalisation discourse, shopping malls are frequently 'elevated to the status of bridgeheads of an all-conquering capitalism' (D. Miller et al., 1998: 24). How then, can we reconcile these macro-processual, abstract, 'global forces', and the grounded, 'localised' experiential realities of social life within today's late capitalist societies?

One response has been to approach the study of globalisation through 'articulation' models which may subsume anything from Marxist structuralism to moral economy frameworks, the aim of which is to dialectically connect the local to larger spatial contexts (Gupta and Ferguson, 1992: 8). Some observers have suggested that the spread of 'mall culture' the world over represents processes of 'glocalisation', rather than cultural homogenisation:

Malls are geographically bound expressions of a negotiation between mall developers as representatives of a global capitalist accumulation, on the one hand, and local characteristics, on the other ... they are the outcome of 'glocalisation' processes that combine post-Fordist capitalist logic of mass consumption with local political, social, and cultural influences that produce significant variation (Salcedo, 2003: 1084–1085).

However, while articulation models of globalisation represent an improvement upon preceding frameworks which assume blanket socio-cultural homogenisation with the advance of (a predominantly 'Western') global capitalism (Inda and Rosaldo, 2002; see also Robertson, 1995), a major limitation of articulation approaches is their frequent failure to explore the processes which contribute to the social construction of a space or locality (Gupta and Ferguson, 1992: 8), wherein which the politics of inclusion and exclusion are contested at local, national, and global levels by a variety of different actors (Brenner and Theodore, 2002: 368; Lee and Yeoh, 2004: 296).

Correspondingly, my analytical framework in this book is grounded in Gupta and Ferguson's argument that spaces are hierarchically interconnected, rather than naturally autonomous and disconnected (Gupta and Ferguson, 1992: 8). Additionally, I draw on Richard O'Connor's discussion of the concept of 'indigenous urbanism' in Southeast Asian

cities.<sup>2</sup> According to O'Connor, indigenous urbanism is characterised by an emphasis on urban rule and foreign idioms:

All society-making imposes order but urbanism's regime presumes a ruling centre – a king, palace, capital, or government – whose power institutes higher rites and rules that order a realm of lesser people and places ... the idiom is always changing – Indic, Arabic, Sinitic, modern – but there is continuity in the way foreign symbols set the city and its elites above the countryside and commoners. In effect, what begins as change – Indianisation, Sinicisation, modernisation – functions as an indigenous urbanisation that breaks down the local only to build up the urban (O'Connor, 1995: 35).

Urbanism is not opposed to ruralism, but rather, incorporates the latter into a hierarchical relationship:

Were the urban not conspicuously foreign, it could not stand categorically above the ethnic and the local; and yet were it not effectively indigenous it could not dominate these lesser wholes deeply. Indeed, the city's dominance is so deep precisely because it is a grander version of whatever localism might oppose it. After all, an alter ego is far harder to resist than an alien imposition (ibid.: 34–35).

Additionally, urban dominance might be explained not by looking to economics or tautological notions of hegemony, but by examining the twin aspects of history and culture. The historical explanation suggests that 'urbanism's sheer self-interested mass ... perpetuate[s] itself by creating the conditions that decide what is economically viable and politically effective (O'Connor 1995:35). The cultural explanation, which informs the historical one, is contingent upon Sahlin's notion of a 'privileged institutional locus ... whence emanates a classificatory grid imposed upon the total culture' (Sahlins, 1976: 211, as cited by O'Connor, 1995: 37). According to Sahlins, the locus of the West is the

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2. O'Connor argues that Southeast Asia is composed of a wide diversity of social groups that are characterised by 'localism'. Localism has parallels with the Durkheimian theory of 'organic solidarity', and is based upon an interactive principle of 'symbolic differentiation', wherein which each group makes rules to distinguish itself from nearby groups, something which gives rise to a variety of higher order arrangements. Examples include the ritual that organises polyethnic Lao states, marriage systems, local cults, and competitive feasting. Urbanism is one example of a larger whole, which 'functions as a supra-local and supra-ethnic order just as upland feasting or coastal trading do' (O'Connor, 1995: 34).



economy. O'Connor contends that the locus of Southeast Asia is the city: 'where the Western economy elaborates the product distinctions that create its culture, Southeast Asian cities elaborate the status distinctions that urbanise society' (O'Connor, 1995: 37).

Within this analysis, ruling regimes presume a dominant centre of power (whether city, government, king, palace, or capital), which draws on foreign symbols in order to distinguish the city and its elites from the countryside and the commoners, in the process incorporating the rural countryside into a hierarchical relationship with the ruling urban centre. As O'Connor asserts:

Southeast Asia's cities are indigenous in origin, function and meaning and yet research treats them as alien impositions. Cities are ancient to the region and home to almost a third of its people but somehow scholars assume the 'real' Southeast Asia is off in the countryside and back in the past. This myth misrepresents the region, all of its nations, and most of its cultures, and yet it is the bedrock where research begins (ibid.: 44).

Guinness (2008) similarly observes the existence of tensions between older cultural logics of urbanism and the city as the pinnacle of status differentiation, and newer concepts of the city as the locus of capitalist accumulation in Yogyakarta, and demonstrates that similar processes are at work in an analysis of Pinches' research in Manila (Pinches 1994). In such places, the construction of modern urban spaces such as real estate developments, shopping centres, or skyscrapers are marked by a 'fascination with status' that indicates the continuing influence of older Southeast Asian notions of urbanism (Guinness, 2008: 93).

These notions are structured by concepts of space and power best known as 'mandala' or the 'galactic polity'. Stanley Tambiah's (1976) exegesis of Southeast Asian political structure is perhaps the best-known application of the mandala concept to the Thai polity. Early Southeast Asia was comprised of numerous city-states taking the form of 'galactic polities'. The organisation of these polities was based upon the Indo-Tibetan concept of *mandala*. The mandala is composed of two elements, *manda*, the core, and *la*, the container or enclosing element. Examples of *mandala* include designs and diagrams painted and drawn onto textiles, monuments such as Borobudur, Bayon and Angkor Wat, portraits and conceptions of the human body, and various Hindu and

Buddhist cosmological schemes (Tambiah, 1976: 102, see also Heine-Geldern 1956). Kingdoms were the microcosmic representations of the macrocosmic universe with the capital city, which occupied the position of the 'ceremonial centre' (Heine-Geldern, 1956) or 'exemplary centre' (Geertz, 1980), as the embodiment of Mount Meru, and the king, his princes, and ruling chiefs representing the hierarchy in Tavatimsa heaven (Tambiah, 1976: 109; see also Wheatley, 1971 and Southall, 1998: 238–242).

The galactic state was one in which territory was a variable sphere of influence, and social and religious power emanated from the centre, where it was focused, to the periphery (Tambiah, 1976: 102). A circle of provinces, ruled by royal princes or governors, surrounded the king at the centre. Independent 'tributary' polities surrounded these provinces in turn (ibid.: 112). The overall picture was thus one of 'a central planet surrounded by differentiated satellites, which [were] more or less "autonomous" entities held in orbit and within the sphere of influence of the centre' (ibid.: 113). In other words, rather than being mapped by territorial integrity in the form of clear-cut boundary lines, political spheres were mapped by power relationships (Thongchai, 1994: 75, 79).

Arguing that the introduction of modern mapping technologies led to the creation of Thailand as a nation defined by its 'geo-body', Thongchai points out that although indigenous conceptions of space and modern geography are based on variant conceptual systems, most of the Thai terminology for modern geography comes from the important Theravadin cosmological text, the *Traiphum Phra Ruang*. In other words, 'the attempt to grasp modern geography was done only by assimilating it through existing concepts – and above all through the existing terminology – just as a new language is always learned through translation into one's mother tongue' (ibid.: 59).<sup>3</sup>

For our present purposes, I employ the mandala concept carefully, taking into account Tooker's (1996) critique of the use of the concept in Southeast Asian studies in a reifying, 'top-down' or 'centre-out'

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3. Thongchai documents the coexistence of a variety of different concepts of indigenous space, including the cosmology featured in the *Traiphum Phra Ruang* (wherein which beings are classified by merit and designated different places to live accordingly), other forms of sacred topographies (including geographies of pilgrimage), maps of the profane earth's surface (depicting such things as travel routes with distances measured in terms of travel time), and so on (Thongchai, 1994: 20–36).

fashion that assumes the total dominance of the ruling centre.<sup>4</sup> Tooker argues that 'this "totalising" view both perpetuates the hegemony of the dominant centre, and draws attention away from alternative presentations and possible contestations of that hierarchy that might appear at the lower or peripheral levels of that hierarchy' (Tooker, 1996: 324). Accordingly, I approach mandala not as an objectifying or totalising paradigm, but rather, as set of spatial codes that function as markers of inequality (*ibid.*: 324). Drawing attention to the role of hierarchical power relations therefore provides us with some important tools for understanding how space becomes socially constructed and develops a unique identity as a 'place' (Gupta and Ferguson, 1992: 8).

In 1892, Rama V (also known as King Chulalongkorn) and his half-brother Prince Damrong Rajanubhab devised a set of major provincial reforms that 'entailed the arrogation to the central government in Bangkok of almost all powers originally invested in vassal rulers and local lords' (Keyes, 1987: 51). The rationale provided for political centralisation by the Thai state was to counter the mounting danger of losing peripheral territory to European colonising powers.<sup>5</sup> This transformed the Thai state into a 'radial polity', a centralised political structure based on a swollen metropolis trying to control the provinces through its agents. In a radial polity, control over outlying regions is not absolute, and the centre is unable to incorporate these fully into the political process (Tambiah, 1976: 197–198).

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4. Tooker's critique of mandala includes other spatialised concepts associated with the Southeast Asian 'cosmic polity' (e.g. Heine-Geldern, 1956), including the 'exemplary centre', 'sinking status' (Geertz, 1980), 'galactic polity' (Tambiah, 1976), 'concentric circles', and 'emboxment' (Condominas, 1978) (Tooker, 1996: 324, 348).
  5. This has been criticised by Thongchai as historical revisionism serving the purposes of bolstering nationalism. He writes that, 'seen against a different context, the role of Siam in relation to foreign nations would differ. Within the local context of hierarchical powers without the geo-body, they were rival expansionists contesting for the same prey, albeit with unequal capabilities. Within the global context of international politics of the colonial era, however, the conflicts became unfair disputes between the world superpowers and a remote nation in self-defense ... Siam in this global reference was no longer a contestant, a hegemonic force, or an indigenous expansionist. It became a Lamb instead of a Lesser Wolf. What should be a history of regional hegemonism turns out to be a glorious anticolonial history performed by the Siamese elite. The threat from the immoral power has become a famous cause of whatever Siam did in that period, making Siam's actions a just struggle for its "survival"' (Thongchai, 1994: 148).

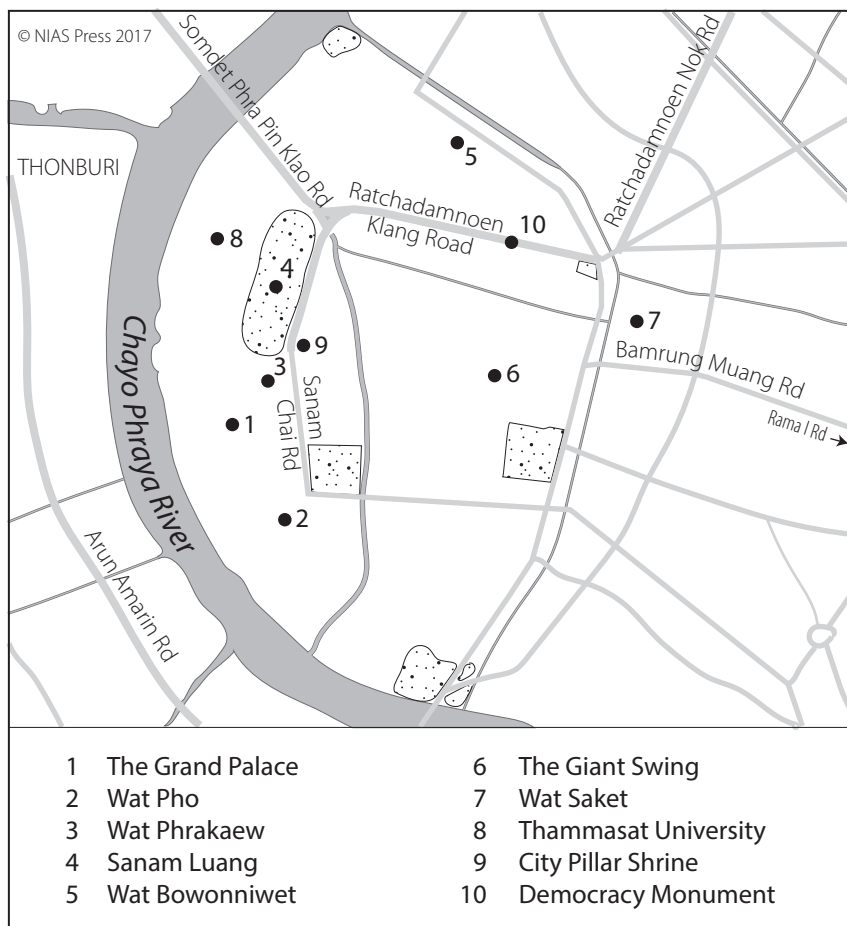
Within the course of political centralisation and Thailand's construction as a nation-state, Thongchai argues that modern geography eventually came to displace 'the premodern, nonbounded, hierarchical realm' of indigenous geography (Thongchai, 1994: 134). In other words, mapping 'did not passively reflect Siam. Rather, it has actively structured "Siam" in our minds as well as on earth' (ibid.: 130). The creation of the 'geo-body' of Siam was necessary for administrative and military purposes, but it also became a potent symbol of Thai nationhood (ibid.: 130, 137). Consequently, the emergence of the geo-body:

Was not a gradual evolution from the indigenous political space to a modern one. It was a displacement of the former by the latter at various moments both by foreign powers and by the Siamese themselves ... it is a phenomenon in which a domain of human space has been inscribed in one way rather than another (ibid.: 131).

Yet, as O'Connor points out, there is 'a truth too obvious and critical to ignore: Thailand revolves around Bangkok. If the geo-body displaced the mandala's capital-centred space, then why has Bangkok's dominance never dimmed? Discourse changed abruptly but reality failed to follow' (O'Connor, 1997: 281). Although the concept of the geo-body has become the cornerstone of official nationalistic discourses, as I will show, indigenous urbanism still plays a significant role in relation to the spatialisation of status and power relations in Bangkok. This becomes evident in an analysis of the two symbolically most important localities in Bangkok – its two centres – Rattanakosin and Siam-Ratchaprasong.

### **The Heart: Rattanakosin**

Rattanakosin is a man-made 'island' bounded by the Chao Praya River to the west, Khlong Phadung Krung Kasem to the north, and Khlong Ong Ang and Ratchadamnoen Road to the east (see Map 3). Built to resemble the old capital in Ayutthaya, Rattanakosin became the site of the king's royal household and administration. As the seat of power of the Chakkri dynasty, Rattanakosin was, and is, home to some of the most important institutions and symbols of the Thai nation, including the Grand Palace and Wat Phrakaew. Wat Phrakaew houses the Emerald Buddha, the nation's palladium, and is considered the most sacred temple in the country. Nearby is Sanam Luang, or the Royal Grounds, which is the cremation ground of kings and queens. During these cremation



**Map 3:** Rattanakosin

rituals it symbolises Mount Meru, the centre of the cosmos. Today, this site remains the venue for performance of the most significant national rituals, such as the annual Ploughing Ceremony.

Over time, other foreign idioms relating to the West and modernity began to pervade Rattanakosin, intermingling with the previous Indic-Khmer symbols of rule as ways to distinguish elite power (O'Connor, 1995: 37). For instance, the architecture of the Royal Palace complex demonstrates the adoption of Western neo-classical and baroque architectural styles by Thai royalty. In addition, the ecology of the city was profoundly transformed by the development of roads with shop-

houses by royalty and monasteries. The new roads were given names that evoked commercial urbanism and material development, such as Bamrung Mueang ('Nurture the City'), Fuang Nakhon ('Prosperous City'), and Charoen Krung ('Progress the City'). Such names show how the ruling elite attempted to associate their power with notions of civilisation and progress as Bangkok began to develop into a modern city. The processions for a Brahmanic ritual called the 'Swinging Ceremony', symbolising the strength of the 'world' and its ruler, once passed through Bamrung Mueang Road. This ritual was abandoned in 1932, the year of the revolution (Evers and Korff, 2000: 82–83). However, this was not the only change to take place.

The 1932 revolution marked Thailand's shift from absolute to constitutional monarchy. In 1928, for the first time, the bureaucracy commenced recruitment on the basis of competitive examinations. This provided the opportunity for many young men of non-royal blood to enter the civil service. Furthermore, the spread of education and the expansion of the foreign-study programme saw a number of young Thais exposed to Western ways of thinking, including the more radical intellectual fashions in France, resulting in the emergence of a new class of intelligentsia. By 1932, some of the most prominent members had formed a joint civilian and military clique, called the People's Party, which went on to stage a military coup, overthrow the monarchy, and promulgate Thailand's first constitution.

However, rather than ushering in a new era of democracy, the transition from absolute to constitutional monarchy merely served to subdue the authority of the traditional *sakdina* class and expand the base of the ruling elite to include the top members of the civilian and military bureaucracy (Ji, 2002: 192). Even so, royalty and aristocrats managed to maintain their considerable wealth, in particular, through investments in land. In addition to high-level bureaucrats who were mostly ethnic Thai, the other power group to emerge were business people, who were mainly ethnic Chinese. This new elite ruled over a middle class comprised of state employees and small entrepreneurs, and an underclass made up of the peasantry, artisans, and skilled and unskilled labourers (Hewison, 1989: 135).

In sum, it appears that while the revolution catalysed profound changes in the uppermost stratum, the overall structure of Thai society

changed little. Democracy's legitimating potency came to serve as yet another foreign idiom to bolster elite rule, and Bangkok became the centre of administration for the nation as well as its cosmological sacred centre. In particular, the symbolic power of Thai democracy came to be manifested in Western architectural forms. For instance, the newly constructed Ratchadamnoen Avenue was 'intended as the new centre of a "democratic" and modern Bangkok, in contrast to the former royal and traditional centres' (Evers and Korff, 2000: 85). Hence:

The meaning of Bangkok was modified from that of a sacred centre, to the centre for the administration of the country ... when the bureaucracy replaced the nobility as the new elite, sacredness, which was connected with the king, was transformed into nationalism, which was connected with the central administration and the officials (*ibid.*: 92).

Ratchadamnoen Avenue was styled after the Champs-Élysées in Paris and Regent Street in London. At the Dinsoh-Ratchadamnoen Klang Road intersection, Anusavari Prachathipatai, or Democracy Monument, built in remembrance of the 1932 revolution, was modelled after the Arc de Triomphe (Wong, 2006: 65).

Having been previously focused around The Grand Palace, Sanam Luang, and Wat Phrakaew, the main axis of the city shifted to include Democracy Monument, Parliament House, and the ministry buildings on Ratchadamnoen Avenue. They became the material embodiments of political authority and elite prestige and status, broadened from the original Buddhist and Indic-Khmer conceptions of religion, cosmology and kingship. Evers and Korff suggest that there are two centres and two distinct cities within Rattanakosin: the traditional Theravada Buddhist capital city, and the national capital city (Evers and Korff, 2000: 91–92). However, because the area as a whole comprises a concentration of state power, in both its ritual symbolic and administrative aspects, for our present purposes I approach it as one ruling centre.

### **Time, Place, and 'Status-Appropriate Behaviour'**

Although the locale of Rattanakosin represents a historical Bangkok of the past and is no longer significant in the daily lives of most residents of Bangkok, notions of hierarchy disseminated by the royal court are still significant. This is evident in the continuing influence of court-based models of behaviour encapsulated in the pervasiveness of moral



discourses such as *ruchak kalathesa* ('to know the time and place'), *ru thi sung thi tam* ('to know the high and the low'), and *khaorop sathan thi* ('to respect the place'). These codes of conduct – which might be termed 'status-appropriate behaviour' – underscore such important aspects of social interaction as level of speech employed, one's bodily comportment, or one's mode of dress. Nithi argues that the continued significance of status distinction in urban social life, especially amongst the middle class, might be considered an imitation of royal forms and attitudes (Nithi, 1993: 49–65, as cited by O'Connor, 1995: 43; see also Raya, 2004: 507).

This is due to the relatively recent emergence and rapid expansion of the Thai middle class, whereby 'newcomers eager to validate their standing seem to prefer to copy either elite practices or adopt their predecessors' customs' (O'Connor, 1995: 44). Another pertinent example is that of religion, where the middle class competes for status by engaging in temple construction, *kathin* offerings, and other conspicuous gift-giving ceremonies – something that O'Connor suggests is 'better suited to court politics than bourgeois practicality' (ibid.: 43). Hence, Mulder remarks that 'even in the most casual encounters, people probe to discover the other person's social rank and consequently, their relative social distance ... his age, his relatives, his group, and his income: all that should be known so that both parties can place each other according to rank and position' (Mulder, 1992: 48).

The notion that status differentiation is still central to social interaction in everyday life is supported by discussions with informants, and my own observations and experiences. The following explanation from one informant serves as a good representative summary:

You're constantly interacting with other people, and gauging what level you are, and what level they are. You're doing it all the time, like how to address a person, like whether you need the politeness marker, or not, how courteous you have to be to them, how low you have to bow when you walk in front of someone. Everyone does it automatically, and they really don't think about it.

These practices and behaviours are captured in a code of conduct known as *kalathesa*. Penny Van Esterik defines *kalathesa* as a Thai concept of great antiquity with Pali and Sanskrit roots (Van Esterik, 2000: 36). *Kala* is the formal term for time, but also expresses proper time, fate,



or destiny. On the other hand, *thesa* refers to space or locality. The two words together explain how events and persons come together appropriately in time and space. I depart from Van Esterik in translating *kalathesa* as ‘time and place’, rather than ‘time and space’. This is in accordance with my informants’ translations, and in order to convey the immediacy of *thesa* – as described by ‘place’, rather than the more abstract ‘space’. In addition to the literal, formal definition of ‘time and place’, my own informants attached to it numerous connotations, including ‘appropriateness’, ‘balance’, ‘situation’, and ‘context’, although none of these translations captures completely the full sense of the term.<sup>6</sup>

Aside from being employed within the bounds of the royal centre of the Bangkok court, and in regional courts, *kalathesa* is understood through other common systems of knowledge, including traditional medicine and astrology.<sup>7</sup> It may also have been used as a means of social control – for instance, by determining how rural peasants or the urban poor should interact effectively with government officials (*ibid.*: 37–40). Strict rules of conduct also determined the conduct between king, nobles, and commoners. For instance, those in the presence of the king were required to prostrate themselves on the ground (see also Kemp, 1969: 10; Wyatt, 1984: 192). In my own research, I found that informants closely linked *kalathesa* with the expression *ru thi sung thi tam*.

*Ru* is the Thai word for ‘to know’. That which is known, on the other hand, pertains to the place or position (*thi*) of people, objects, and places, and so on. These are demarcated as *thi tam* and *thi sung*: literally, ‘the low position/place’, and ‘the high position/place’, respectively.

6. This is similar to Van Esterik’s informants’ understandings of the word (Van Esterik, 2000: 36).
7. As Van Esterik writes, ‘time and space intersect to affect both diseases and cures, and to maintain health. Intersections of time and space – co-occurrences – are also communicated in performative terms through ritual, or mythopraxis, where cosmology meets pragmatics at a critical historical conjecture’. Thus, for instance, the term appears in a fourth century AD Sanskrit medical treatise called the corpus of Susruta (*Susrutasamhita*) and in a Thai medical treatise called the Pharmacopoeia of King Narai (written circa 1659–1661), is implicated in the connection between the ritual of the royal ploughing ceremony in Bangkok and the success of rituals propitiating local guardian spirits of fields that farmers enact to ensure the success of harvests in rural areas, and is embedded within a complex astrological tradition that has operated in court and village settings for hundreds of years (Van Esterik, 2000: 37).

For instance, monks, elders (*phu yai*), teachers, Buddha images, and people's heads are all categorically *thi sung*. Juniors (*phu noi*), servants, and feet are some common examples of *thi tam*. In essence, 'to know the high and the low', is to understand *kalathesa*. Richard Davis draws attention to a similar distinction in northern Thai (Muang) myth and ritual, observing that:

High and low are incompatible categories, and high and low things must be kept in their proper places. Broom bristles, for example, are so low that they cannot touch any part of the human body except for the soles of the feet ... on the other hand, it is equally sinful to step on a high thing, such as a book or a winnowing tray ... in the construction of social, natural, and cultural categories; the dualism of high and low is probably the most often used principle of conceptual organisation. This dualistic framework is reflected with particular clarity in ritual behaviour (Davis, 1984: 98).

*Kalathesa* bears a certain resemblance to the Bourdieuan concept of habitus, which he defines as 'durable, transposable dispositions' (Bourdieu, 1980: 53) or ways of acting, seeing, and being in the world. As a model for social behaviour, Bourdieu argues that habitus is class-based, stating that: 'position in the relations of production govern practices, in particular through the mechanisms which control access to positions and produce or select a particular class of habitus' (Bourdieu, 1984: 102). However, for Bourdieu, habitus is a constant, embodied structure, 'society written into the body, into the biological individual' (Bourdieu, 1990: 63). In contrast, the notion of *kalathesa* is contingent upon situational specificity and hence has a contextual and dynamic quality that distinguishes it from the more static habitus despite the initial similarity between the two concepts. In addition, Thais may not always agree with the codes of *kalathesa*, even though they may outwardly conform. In other words, it is not necessarily an internalised orientation to the world, but rather one that emphasises a social cosmetic surface.

In accordance with *kalathesa*, status inferiors must know their place, but so must status superiors, as well as (approximate) status equals. In other words, *kalathesa* does not only literally take into account the time, and the place, but also the other people present in that given 'time and place'. The similarity between *kalathesa* and the concept of manners or etiquette is also illustrated by informants' explanations that '*kalathesa* is

like one's manners in society' ('*kalathesa muean kap marayat nai sang-khom*'), or that it concerns 'understanding how to behave in different places' ('*kan ruchak thi ja wang tua nai sathan thi tang tang*'). However, its significance extends far beyond manners, and the notion of *kalathesa* 'draws attention to the importance of understanding surfaces, appearance, face, masks and disguise as parts of important cultural strategies of interaction' (Van Esterik, 2000: 36). Moreover, people of a certain social status are expected to look and act a certain way even if they are not interacting with anybody else.

In other words, *kalathesa* possesses a strong moral imperative. To violate *kalathesa* (*phit kalathesa*) is to lose 'face' (*na ta*) and respect, or to feel *krengchai* (a sense of embarrassment in the presence of more powerful people) (ibid.: 39). Even those who do not agree with the rigid status differentiations determined by *kalathesa* – including the accompanying implications of superiority and inferiority – may nevertheless outwardly conform because of the moral imperative. Crucially, however, *kalathesa* is not only about *giving* respect, but also about *commanding* respect, as an upright, moral member of society. As such, I suggest that both these aspects of *kalathesa* might be captured in the term 'status-appropriate behaviour', because they express, on the one hand, the codes of conduct that one is expected to follow according to one's social status, and because, on the other hand, they communicate to others one's own social status.

### Levels of Speech and 'Motoric Morality'

Hierarchical differentiation is also expressed in the various levels or registers of speech (*radap khong phasa*) in the central Thai language, which is the official language and main dialect spoken in Bangkok. In other words, social and class distinctions are reified in verbal signals (Klausner, 1993: 308–309). These signals include politeness participles such as *kha* and *khraph*, as well as other important choices of vocabulary (Basham, 2001: 131). In addition to physical comportment and knowledge of etiquette, proper speech exhibits knowledge of *kalathesa* or status-appropriate behaviour: 'to speak properly shows respect and manners, and shows one knows how to address people according to their rank – when to use royal language, polite language, and when to shift to words stressing social equality and politeness' (Van Esterik, 2000:

36). In everyday life, for example, children widely use the Thai word for 'mouse' (*nu*) as a pronoun when addressing parents or seniors, the latter of whom will also address the children as *nu*. *Nu*, or *nong* (little brother or sister), or other forms of address that imply youth and inferior social status (such as *dek* and *luk*, both words for 'child') are also used as terms of address when referring to younger relatives, unrelated subordinates, or especially service people.

Another example is the pronoun *chan*, which is used by both genders but more typically by women to signify 'I', but can also express a position of superiority on the part of the speaker (hence the common practice of using one's name as the pronoun 'I' and your interlocutor's name as 'you' when speaking with relative equals). *Dichan*, used by women, almost always suggests the latter, and I rarely heard it being used in everyday speech between friends. Using my own and others' names as a pronoun took some getting used to, but once I did, it was the main form of address I used with friends and informants whom I knew well or with whom I did not want to establish social distance. Also common is the use of the pronouns *khao* (he/she), which effectively refers to oneself in the third person, with intimates, as well as *tua eng*, literally, 'self' or 'oneself', instead of 'you', also when referring to the other person. Friends might also use the very informal, and in some contexts less refined, *ku* ('I') and *mueng* ('you') forms of address when speaking to one another.

Ultimately, the importance of the hierarchical orientation towards the social world does not preclude the existence of relationships of equality – for instance, between friends, workmates, siblings, or other family members. As Juree and Vicharat point out, the overriding tendency to conceptualise Thai social structure in terms of vertical linkages may also obscure the importance that Thais also place on horizontal relationships, and 'it is also important to recognise a complementary pattern of social communication based on commonality of experience in various social and temporal settings' (Juree and Vicharat, 1979: 422; see also Juree, 1979: 155–164).<sup>8</sup> I would argue, however, that such

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8. Examples they provide include those of class graduates of the same school, university, or military academy, and contacts arising from similar or shared experiences abroad, although these kinds of 'horizontal' relationships may occur at all levels and in all phases of Thai social life, and can cut across the usual boundaries of class or status. The authors also suggest that horizontal relationships formed the organisational foundation responsible for historically and politically significant

relationships nevertheless assume a keen awareness of *kalathesa*, in the sense of knowing when it is appropriate or acceptable to treat another individual as an equal (and not as higher or lower in status) relative to oneself.

Status distinctions are also embodied. Van Esterik observes that 'both rural and urban Thai exhibit extraordinary bodily awareness, allowing men and women to control the movement of their bodies with consummate grace' (Van Esterik, 2000: 25). This is based upon the 'tendency for the Thai to judge the movements of others according to what might be termed "motoric morality", in which one's pattern of physical movement serves as a crucial indicator of one's social status and moral state' (Basham, 2001: 131). Along a similar vein, Mulder comments upon the 'Thai tendency to take presentation very seriously, the well-trained person demonstrating his *bukkhalikaphap* by his demeanour and graceful comportment' (Mulder, 1997: 306). In his research, Phillips also observed amongst Bang Chan villagers:

[An] emphasis upon *motoric* and emotional self-discipline ... [and] the great emphasis on the importance of the body in human behaviour and social relationships ... a person's physical appearance is an indication of his character, particularly his moral nature, and kinaesthetic modes are explicitly used for conveying love, regard, and ... disrespect (Phillips, 1965: 45, his emphasis).

Thus, in everyday life, height gradations of the *wai* gesture (such as below the chin, at nose level, or at forehead level) depend on the status of the person who is receiving the *wai*. A *wai* at the forehead is used for those worthy of the utmost respect, such as Buddha, or the king, a *wai* around the nose area for elders, and so forth. The same applies to the height at which one carries oneself in the presence of elders, equals, or juniors. Klausner succinctly sums this up with the declaration that 'how the Thai stand, sit, walk past someone, all have the clarity of semaphore flag language in terms of "social definition"' (Klausner, 1993: 315). Nothing indicates respect, insult, intimacy, or equality more clearly than gesture and stance.

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events, including the 1932 revolution, as well as the many cliques and factions that characterise Thai political behaviour (Juree and Vicharat, 1979: 422).

## Respecting the Place, Presenting the Self

In addition to a highly calibrated awareness of the nuances of speech and bodily comportment, there is an emphasis on the mode of appearance which is appropriate or inappropriate, given the specific *kalathesa*. In everyday life, this can be phrased in a number of ways, including: 'dressing in a manner suitable to a place' ('*taeng tua mo som kap sathan thi*'), or 'to dress in an orderly and polite fashion' ('*taeng tua riaproi*'). This is more than about clothing, however, and as Van Esterik argues, 'Thai bodies are constituted by appearance; *taeng tua* refers to dressing or making or composing the body' (Van Esterik, 2000: 207). In other words, 'dressing is less a modification of the body than a construction of the embodied self' (Morris, 1994: 24, as cited by Van Esterik, 2000: 207).<sup>9</sup> Temples, government offices, educational institutions, the Grand Palace, and other such places, are universally *thi sung*, and thereby necessitate a high standard of appearance and conduct. In other words, one should not wear short pants or skirts, sleeveless tops, or flip-flops, and clothing should be fastened up properly. One shouldn't bother other people – including disrupting others' 'senses', whether by sight, smell, hearing, or touch. In other words, behaviour is oriented towards 'not attracting attention to yourself'. This is called '*khaorop sathan thi*' – 'respecting the place'.

In essence, the importance of dressing appropriately to an individual's feeling of confidence, and others' perception of that individual, cannot be underestimated. As mentioned earlier, conforming to the rules of *kalathesa* is not only about showing respect, but also commanding respect. Another example is that of the teacher who must dress in such a way as to be worthy of the respect with which students esteem him/her. This means not wearing anything sleeveless or which reveals flesh, and wearing appropriate, sensible footwear. It also means not wearing too much makeup – if the teacher is a woman – and having a neat, unostentatious hairstyle. Mot, a yoga instructor I interviewed, had once experienced being disrespected by a student in an elevator because

9. Van Esterik recollects her observation of Thai schoolchildren, who, dressed in their uniforms, *wai* their grandparents on their knees and with bowed heads, but who act with considerably less formality around the same grandparents once they have changed out of their uniforms, 'as if by shedding their school uniforms, they were shedding *kalathesa* and the rules of etiquette associated with their schooling' (Van Esterik, 2000:207).

she was dressed in 'shabby' clothes prior to changing into her workout clothes to teach her class. Mot reflected on how the student looked at her insultingly 'from my head to my toe'.

The student's behaviour – her rude stare, her failure to *wai*, and her reference to herself as *chan* – demonstrates that she did not deem Mot worthy of the deferential behaviour normally accorded a teacher because Mot was not dressed in the status-appropriate manner that her role as a teacher required. Only later, when Mot displayed the comportment of a teacher, was the student willing to accept her authority and cease referring to herself as *chan* in favour of the much more courteous, pupil-to-teacher appropriate, self-referent *nu*. The incident serves to show how important appearance and presentation are, in terms of successfully commanding respect. It is an example of the many kinds of status-appropriate behaviours, based on hierarchical status distinctions and stemming largely from royal court etiquette established in the palaces and temples of the traditional ruling centre of power, which have, thus far, continued to be significant in Thai social life.

The markets and shophouses around Rattanakosin and the surrounding vicinity, each with their own long history, are a glimpse into a not so distant past that appears to be slowly superseded by a different kind of life. Yet here in the place that locals call *mueang kao*, or the 'old city', it is still possible to imagine what Bangkok was like before it commenced its trajectory of construction and development that culminated in an urban landscape of infinite stretches of cracked pavement and shopping malls. Ultimately, however, the scattering of development in Rattanakosin pales in comparison to the sheer volume of shopping malls, department stores, and hypermarkets in the remainder of Bangkok, especially in its business, tourist and residential areas. They are especially concentrated in Bangkok's downtown hub: Siam–Ratchaprasong.





## *Hi-So Discourse and Middle-Class Aspirations*

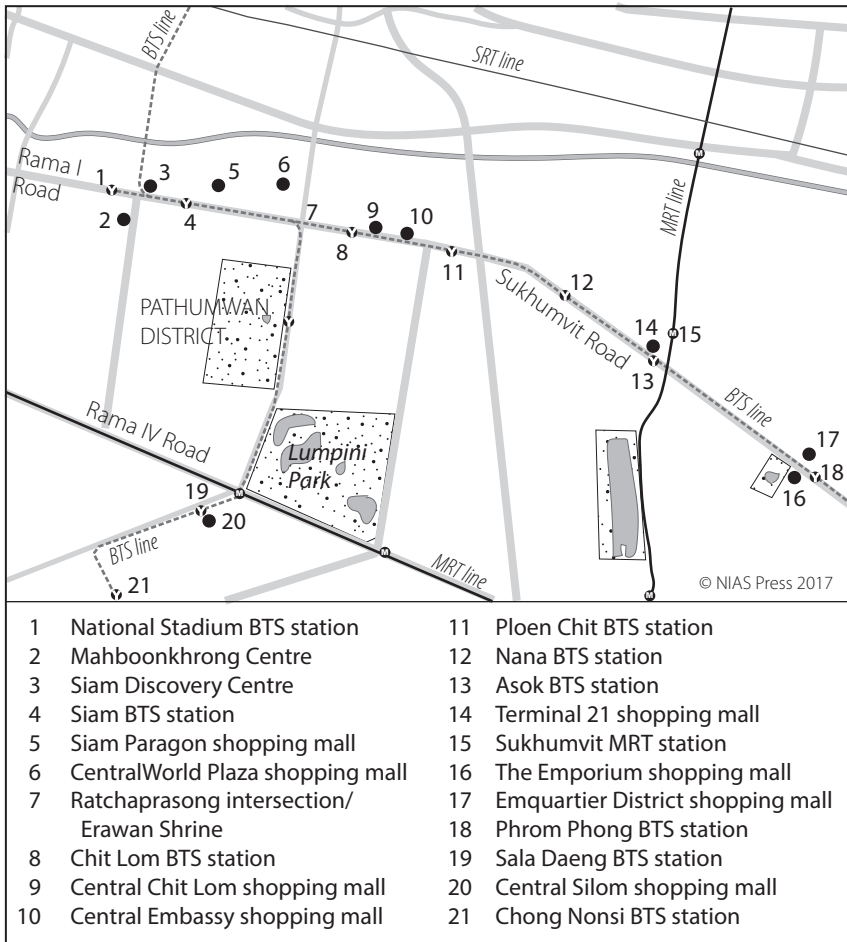
### **Nodes of Social Life**

At first glance it may seem that Thailand's capital city is a metropolis defined by spatial chaos; a dense and complex urban amalgam which follows no discernable order or pattern. However, social life in Bangkok continues to follow a persistent pattern of orientation where places are defined by activities, communities, and historic events (O'Connor, 1990: 61). Where in the past, communal nodes were typically temples, villages, and markets, social centres today tend to be focused primarily around shopping malls. The establishment of the BTS skytrain system in 1999 and MRT subway system in 2004 appears only to have intensified this centralising orientation. For instance, the areas around Lat Phrao, Chatuchak, Phrom Phong, Ekkamai, Asok, Ari, Surasak, Victory Monument, and Chong Nonsi BTS stations, are densely packed with shopping malls, markets, condominiums, apartment blocks, and homes. A similar process is also occurring around new BTS stations with the extension of the skytrain line, with increasing numbers of real estate and commercial developments cropping up in previously overlooked areas such as those around Udom Suk, Bearing, or Bang Wa BTS stations (see Map 2 on page xii, also Map 4 overleaf).

With the introduction of shopping malls,<sup>1</sup> which have been designed as *über*-convenient, 'one-stop' complexes, most everyday needs can now be met under the one roof. The importance of this kind of appeal in huge,

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1. The generic term for malls, department stores, and hypermarkets in Thai is *hang sapasinkha*, or *hang* for short. They may also be called *sun kan kha*, which literally means 'centre of commerce'. Malls are also often known by English words such as 'mall', 'plaza', 'square', 'centre'.



**Map 4:** Downtown Bangkok

sprawling, and traffic-gridlocked Bangkok is integral to their existence. Ploy, an office manager who had lived in Bangkok for many years mused:

In Bangkok, the mall is also a centre. It's like a daily routine for people, that you have this kind of lifestyle. If you work, you have to go to the mall. If you are in the province, the centre is the temple or school or market, but now our life has changed away from the temple, we don't go there and we go to the mall instead, because it has everything.

Just some of the services and facilities provided in malls include banks, Internet service and mobile phone providers, libraries, tutoring, child-



**Figure 2:** Free musical performance at CentralWorld Plaza, Ratchaprasong

care, utilities and company offices. Other features include entertainment venues such as karaoke booths, bowling alleys, cinemas, and games arcades. Some malls house conference rooms or exhibition halls where events are held, such as store openings, fashion parades, parties, concerts, and competitions. Malls even offer convenience in terms of merit-making, where one can place money in donation boxes provided at malls, or buy baskets at varying price ranges in order to offer them at the temple. The popular Erawan shrine and the temple Wat Pathum Wanarum are situated in central Bangkok amidst looming skyscrapers and bustling malls. Another characteristic feature of the bigger and busier complexes is free entertainment, in the form of dance and musical performances or competitions, which is ideal for attracting onlookers, and, consequently, shoppers.

Bangkok is home to hundreds of social centres revolving around malls that are associated with varying levels of popularity and prestige. I found local residents to be quite adept at ranking malls and their surrounding locales in terms of location, environment, clientele, restaurants, cost, quality and variety of merchandise. Thus, for instance, examples of lower- and middle-tier malls included places like The Mall Ngamwongwan, The Mall Bangkok, or Seacon Square. In contrast, the most exclusive malls were all located in the prominent shopping hub in Bangkok that radiates outward from the BTS skytrain station Siam, in Pathumwan district.

Pathumwan district was first developed in the 1970s to provide rental income for Chulalongkorn University, one of Thailand's most

prestigious educational institutions. It is well known for Siam Square, a warren of clothing and accessory boutiques and stalls, and a popular haunt for fashionable and affluent youth.<sup>2</sup> The area experienced a period of decline in the eighties and nineties before rising again during the early new millennium as Bangkok's modern core of fashion, business, and entertainment. This hub now extends to the Ratchaprasong area at the intersection of Ploenchit, Rama I, and Ratchadamri Roads, which showcases CentralWorld Plaza shopping mall, various upscale hotels, and the famous Erawan shrine. Siam and Ratchaprasong are connected by a footbridge system that connects the National Stadium, Siam, and Chit Lom BTS stations, and the shopping malls Mahboonkhrong Centre, Siam Discovery Centre, Siam Centre, Siam Paragon, Siam Square One, CentralWorld Plaza, and Central Chit Lom. This section of Bangkok, from Sukhumvit to Sathorn, with Siam as its focal point, is Bangkok's modern downtown, and, as I will argue, a new ruling centre whose dominance compares with that of Rattanakosin.

### **The Hub: Siam-Ratchaprasong**

The transformations that shaped downtown Bangkok were catalysed by the intense economic development of the Sarit era. Military dictator Field Marshall Sarit Thanarat in effect held power from 1957 to 1963, although he only formally served as Prime Minister from 1959 until his death in December 1963. Although it was the most authoritarian regime that Thailand ever had, Sarit's policies, which included encouragement of foreign and private investors, infrastructure projects, and widespread education, laid the foundation for Thailand's economic development and heralded sweeping changes in society (Hewison, 1989: 54; Wyatt, 1984: 277–297). Secondary and tertiary education expanded at a remarkable rate from the 1960s onwards. In addition, the economy became more industrially oriented, and the occupational status of the majority of the population moved toward wage labour (Hewison, 1989: 55). While per capita incomes rose, this development was largely concentrated in Bangkok and the surrounding regions (Raya, 2004: 508).

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2. Siam Square has undergone some major transformations over recent years, including the construction of Siam Square One mall connecting the original square with Siam BTS station and Siam Paragon.

The transformations to urban space highlighted here provide a lens through which to investigate the competing and converging political and economic interests of business and establishment elites. Modernisation affected the composition of the elite, by significantly extending the ramifications of the 1932 revolution and providing ways for individuals from outside royal and aristocratic circles to pursue upward social mobility. Previously this could be accomplished mainly by rising up through the ranks of the military and bureaucracy, but the spread of formal education and salaried employment meant that upward mobility was now a prospect for a far greater number of Thais, especially those living in Bangkok.

In particular, a large majority of the Chinese immigrant and Sino-Thai communities were transformed into a significant segment of the national urban middle class by the centralised national education system and Sarit's economic development policies. The new generation of this affluent and powerful middle class consists of the state's economic and technical specialists, private sector executives, consultants, researchers, developers, designers, and intellectuals working in NGOs as well as in public and private cultural, educational, and academic institutions (Kasian, 1997: 86–87). These socioeconomic changes led to a shift in emphasis on power as represented by the monarchy and aristocracy, to power as represented by material wealth. In the view of my informants, downtown Bangkok was where, as the city's nucleus of fashion, commerce, and entertainment, this emphasis on economic power and the prominent display of material wealth is at its most intense.

Furthermore, even as Bangkok became more dense and convoluted, urban life continued to be organised around centralised nodes. By all indications, modern sprawl made centralisation even more important. Shopping malls, in particular, became the vital foci of modern life in Bangkok. As I will demonstrate, one of these urban hubs, Siam-Ratchaprasong, became dominant with its symbolic potency based on material wealth and the modern economy. In contrast to Rattanakosin, which residents of Bangkok tend to refer to as *mueang kao*, and describe as a place of tradition and history that had little significance in their daily lives, informants frequently referred to Siam-Ratchaprasong as 'the centre' (*sun klang* or *chut sun klang*). Nonetheless, even with the centrality of shopping malls in modern social life and the sheer volume of malls in Bangkok, the concentrated presence of Thailand's most prominent and

prestigious malls in the Siam-Ratchaprasong district is remarkable. Yet, its ascension does not represent displacement of the old social order, but an elaboration of it. It provided a new range of foreign idioms to augment the potency of Bangkok's elite, whose power now draws on the symbolism of both of Bangkok's 'ruling' centres.

Many informants described Siam-Ratchaprasong as the place where the newest styles and trends emanated, particularly those revolving around the discourse of *hi-so*, or Bangkok slang for 'high society'. Mint, a community relations officer at a well-known Silom hospital explained, 'Siam is where fashion comes together. It's a place for teenagers and young people, for setting trends'. According to Tong, an insurance agent from Bangna, 'Lower-class people don't socialise or shop in the malls around central Bangkok. They cannot buy anything. This is a place for people with money, and who can afford to wear designer brands'. Additionally, Wit, a retired writer with whom I chatted in Siam Paragon, made the comment that, 'The places around here represent the extreme of capitalism and consumerism. If you come here, you have to have enough money to dress up and fit in, and the income to pay for this kind of lifestyle'.

As I described in the last chapter, social forms based on hierarchical status distinctions and encapsulated in codes of conduct known as *kalathesa*, continue to play a significant role in everyday life in Bangkok. *Kalathesa*, or 'time and place', influences an individual's behaviour in a given social setting, affecting a variety of things from mode of dress, to politeness of speech and comportment, and so on. If an individual was in a palace, or a temple, or a government office or educational institution – in other words, a place that is associated with power – he or she was expected to '*khaorop sathan thi*', or 'respect the place', by adhering to these codes of conduct. Related to this is the expression '*ru thi sung thi tam*', or to 'know that which is high and that which is low'. According to *kalathesa*, high and low need to be treated with according respect. Seniors, monks, royalty, parents, teachers, Buddha images, the head, books, are examples of that which is 'high'. Feet, servants, and juniors, are examples of things categorised as 'low'. A person's social status, and the status of others present, has an influence on all of these elements. For this reason, as I outlined in the previous chapter, I refer to them as 'status-appropriate behaviours'. This denotes the obligation to behave in



a way that is appropriate to one's status, and in a way that is appropriate to the status of the place and/or the people that a person is sharing a space or interacting with.

Today, 'status-appropriate' behaviour in accordance with *kalathesa* is largely about being 'appropriately wealthy' – with all its ensuing moral implications. Older notions of 'face' and prestige have come to be closely associated with the deployment of the external markers of material wealth. Moreover, modern urban spaces, such as those of prominent shopping malls, are now subject to similar codes of conduct as those demanded by the *kalathesa* of the traditionally sanctified spaces of temples, government offices, and royal buildings. Consequently, upmarket malls are seen as prestigious and *hi-so* not only because of their marketed images and expensive merchandise but also because people dress up (*taeng tua di*) to go there and adhere to more rigid codes of conduct, conspicuous consumption, and status display, within that space.

When I broached the subject with informants, they did not quite agree on whether or not a place like a shopping mall was subject to the rules of *kalathesa* in quite the same way as, say, a government office, or whether one could say that one was *khaorop sathan thi* ('respecting the place') by dressing up to go to the mall. Much of this ambiguity in their responses is attributable to the fact that the mall lacks the sanctity of a palace, temple, government office, or educational institution. As I will show, people do not necessarily think in terms of *khaorop sathan thi* when it comes to malls, but attitudes towards, and behaviour within, prestigious malls clearly feature echoes of this orientation.

For instance, in response to one of my questions regarding whether or not she thought it necessary to *khaorop sathan thi* in malls, Kay, a government employee from Phutthamonthon, stated, 'Not for malls. I don't think it's necessary. But it depends on the place. Like ... if you go to Emporium and Paragon and you are in your pyjamas, it's not right, is it? But it's not because you respect the place, but it's because you run into people you know. If people know you and you are in your pyjamas that can't be allowed. But if you ask me whether you need to respect the place, I don't think so.' Suda, an MBA student at ABAC, was able to blend in at Siam Paragon and Emporium, although she also described such places as 'another society', where one must be conscious of one's appearance: 'Well, if I go to a mall ... say for instance if I go to Paragon, or Emporium,

I wouldn't dress too ugly or poorly, if I went to a mall, like Paragon or Emporium, it's another society, so if I was dressed too shabbily, other people would look at me'. On that particular day, she was dressed in a good quality knit top, pants, and heels, all bought from a department store, and she explained, 'Say if I'm dressed like this, then okay, I can go in'.

In another example, Ni had been a regular at Central Chit Lom for years. She felt that it had been a much more relaxed place before its renovations. Now, she felt she needed to be 'correctly dressed' to go there. She stated that she did not feel this way about somewhere like Central Lat Phrao, which is further away from downtown Bangkok and ranked distinctly lower in status. Ni observed of Central Chit Lom: 'It's changed. It's too pretentious and it makes me not like it'. Kan, an engineering student at Chulalongkorn University, reflected:

With malls close to home, Lotus [a chain of low-cost hypermarkets] or something like that, you don't have to dress up very well. But if it's in the middle of the city you shouldn't wear the clothes you wear at home to walk around because everyone else is a little more dressed up. If you dress down it looks strange.

Dear, a student from Pattanakan, emphasised:

I think it's important whenever you go outside, whether you shop or you don't shop. I think when you leave the house you should dress well, or at least appropriately. It enhances your character. It makes you look good.

Furthermore, according to Maew, a tour guide from a village in Nakhon Phanom:

*Kalathesa* is a guide to what we should and shouldn't do, so that other people don't look down on us. We have to take into account the time and the place – where we are in that moment. So you wouldn't wear a bikini inside a temple! But you wouldn't go into Siam Paragon with messy hair, without having a shower, or wearing really smelly or ratty clothes either, would you? People would look at you like you're a criminal.

As these observations indicate, the social space of malls has attached to it meanings that bear striking similarities – albeit not necessarily identical – to *kalathesa*. In Rattanakosin, especially in the Grand Palace and Wat Phrakaew, dress codes are very strict, to the point that people are refused entry if not dressed correctly. Yet, in places like an upmarket shopping



mall, if a person doesn't have the right status symbols – the right clothes, shoes, handbag, hairstyle, accessories, and so on – they are also, in a sense, behaving inappropriately, or *phit kalathesa*. This is not identical to the way that they would *phit kalathesa* if they were to attempt to enter the Grand Palace wearing shorts, but there is a similar sense of moral disapproval – the attitude that a person who is dressed 'inappropriately poorly' (no pun intended) does not belong in that 'society' (*sangkhom*).

Regardless of the fact that many people cannot afford to shop at the designer boutiques housed in malls such as Central Embassy or Siam Paragon, being able to comport themselves in a way appropriate to a modern, cosmopolitan urban space without looking out of place – in other words, to be able to engage in 'status-appropriate behaviour' – is no small feat. There seems to be no practical reason why the common style of dress for a market – shorts, t-shirt, and open shoes – would not be comfortable to wear inside a mall. In fact, it would probably make more sense for residents of Bangkok to dress like this more of the time, given that one usually needs to at least endure some exposure to the hot, tropical climate in order to reach a mall in the first place. However, the *kalathesa* of the mall and other such spaces that place increased emphasis on status obligates that a certain standard of appearance be maintained.

Being able to move comfortably between different environments was something that was often brought up by informants to describe the flexibility of middle-class lifestyles. As many individuals I spoke with noted, 'If you're in the middle, you can move up and you can move down.' I quite frequently shared meals with middle-class individuals who could eat at unfussy street restaurants, as well as dine at upmarket establishments. For instance, one woman remarked on her own flexibility as follows:

I enjoy going to the Conrad and having a few drinks there. I'd spend a thousand [baht], and I'd do that on a weekly basis. Actually, I didn't know how frivolous I was being. But it seemed normal. So I can have noodles on the street-side and that's normal, and then go to a really posh hotel lounge and it's still normal. Most of my friends are the same. It's probably the mark of the middle class.

In another example, I would often meet one informant, Muay, around Siam, because she worked in the offices adjoining CentralWorld Plaza. I also met her at Seacon Square, a mall on the outskirts of Bangkok near her home. Depending on location, she presented herself in remarkably

differently fashion. Around Siam, she dressed very fashionably, and was in full makeup, heels, and jewellery. Yet, at Seacon, I almost didn't recognise her when she appeared in shorts, a t-shirt, sandals, and with a bare, fresh face – an appearance undoubtedly inspired by a combination of proximity to her home and a need to blend in with the Seacon environment.

For those of lesser *thana*, or economic status, the required standard of dress in malls and other *hi-so* spaces is a considerable departure from their standard mode of appearance. Hence, there is more emphasis on 'dressing up'. Indeed, many people living and working in Bangkok are actually from towns and villages in the provinces where markets, rather than malls, tend to be the norm. Such provincial migrants may also lack the social background to know how to behave inside exclusive malls or restaurants. As I elaborate in chapter four, as a result of these expectations, some of my working-class informants were too afraid to even set foot inside shopping malls in downtown Bangkok. Others were literally turned away at the door because their appearance or behaviour did not match that of the mall's desired clientele.

For those of greater *thana*, dressing in accordance with their status is practiced as a matter of course.<sup>3</sup> Essentially, the daily lives of Thais of higher *thana* are geared towards being able to blend in within spaces of heightened investment in *kalathesa* through showing that they have the wealth and status to belong – *khao sangkhom* – in such places. Typically, over-the-top demonstrations of material wealth – jewellery, designer clothes, and heavy makeup – attract service that borders on sycophancy, while a simply dressed, plain-faced person might be ignored or spoken down to. As Mot indicated: 'Sometimes when I go to *sue khong* with my kids, and we look extremely shabby, we might not get very good service. But if I dress a bit better, if I wear makeup, they look at us so much better than before, like I have a good job, even though I am the same person'.

According to Nan, an import/export business owner:

Some people have money and don't dress up. Before I used to be an attendant at a store, at The Mall Ramkamhaeng. Some people came in wearing shorts, but took out wads of thousand-baht notes. It's hard to tell nowadays. Some people don't have money but dress up well. Once,

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3. As always, exceptions do exist, and there are examples of wealthy or high status people who dress down or behave in a humble, 'down-to-earth' manner. I address this issue further in the section in this chapter titled 'Old Money, New Money'.

I went to The Mall with my friend. I wore shorts. When I wanted to buy underwear they would not sell it to me, but, when a person in a suit and tie came, they sold it to him, just one [piece]. I picked up three or four but they wouldn't sell it to me, so I didn't buy it.

A possible reason for this kind of behaviour might be the fact that the potential for making a sale, and hence, a sizable commission, is believed to be higher when dealing with those who appear to be more wealthy or have more spending power. Another may be that sales staff, with their low status, fear to displease someone who appears to be of relatively greater status, simply because it may cost them their job. Essentially, however, it may just be that wealth obligates deference.

Ultimately, the evidence suggests that malls also demand a certain kind of *kalathesa*, if not strictly the kind of *kalathesa* adhered to inside sacred places like educational institutions and government buildings. In particular, malls in Siam-Ratchaprasong demand a stricter level of adherence to *kalathesa* than those on the outskirts of the city and lower down in the hierarchy, such as The Mall Ramkhamhaeng or Seacon Square, the latter of which are much more relaxed. Just as in traditional understandings of *kalathesa*, to go against expected codes of conduct – in other words, not to engage in status-appropriate behaviour – is linked with one's state of morality. For instance, people might feel as if they were doing something morally wrong, or they may perceive another person to be doing something morally wrong, by going into such a place without looking or acting appropriately wealthy. This is especially the case due to the strong association between wealth and virtue, and poorness and immorality in Bangkok – something I elaborate on further in chapter four.

Such strict codes of behaviours and practices highlight the extent to which places like exclusive malls have become spaces of power: significant settings for the articulation of rank, identity, influence, and status, which mutually constitute both persons and space. Today, the most pre-eminent of these modern spaces of power is the city's newest ruling centre, Siam-Ratchaprasong. As a rival ruling centre, downtown Bangkok's importance lies in its embodiment of a different form of power – economic power – as compared to royal power. This influence is expressed in the symbolic language of conspicuous consumption and in concepts of fashion, luxury, cosmopolitanism, and modernity. I am not arguing here that the old elite is not part of the modern social

and business scene of Bangkok, or suggesting that the 'traditional' social order represented by Rattanakosin is being replaced by a 'new' one represented by Siam. Indeed, the business interests of the older political elite are heavily intertwined with property and commercial developments that have modernised Bangkok (see Harms, 2009, for an example from Vietnam). Moreover, much of the land in the Pathumwan district is owned by Crown Property Bureau, the agency that manages the personal wealth of the royal family and through which they are the largest owners of real estate in Bangkok.<sup>4</sup>

At the same time, however, the cultures of conspicuous consumption emerging from these processes gave rise to new idioms that represent a departure from older modes of status differentiation and concepts of power centralised around the monarchy, bureaucracy, and military. In short, 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. Many of Thailand's most successful companies and business organisations (examples include the Charoen Phokphand agribusiness corporation and Central Group) are dominated by Chinese-Thai or Sino-Thai families, who rank among Bangkok's most affluent and powerful elite classes. This newer class manifests itself as both distinctively Sino-Thai and cosmopolitan in consumption, taste, and lifestyle, as opposed to the

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4. The royal family ranks as one of the largest business groups in Thailand, with interests in more than 50 companies. It is also linked with the most powerful capitalist groups in the country, like the Kanchanapat, Lamsam, Yip In Tsoi, Wanglee, and Tejapaibul families (Hewison, 1989: 272). Hewison suggests that the origins of this capitalist class lie back in the mid-nineteenth century. During this time, private ownership of the means of production, the beginnings of wage labour, and the separation of political and economic power, began to emerge. This produced a capitalist segment of society comprised mainly Chinese merchants, involved in monopoly trading, tax farming, compradors engaged in import/export, and administration. They were able to amass large personal fortunes, through cooperation with the traditional *sakdina* ruling class, which held the rights to the agricultural and trading surpluses through taxation and trade monopolies. The economic expansion of the Sarit era contributed further to the development of this bourgeoisie class, and 'its power is enhanced by the close business and familial ties it has both within itself, between the various fractions of capital, and with influential functionaries of the Thai state, particular with the military hierarchy' (ibid.: 37).

older aristocratic elite classes (Szanton Blanc, 1997: 267– 272; see also Hewison, 1996).<sup>5</sup>

As a result of the pre-existing orientation towards *kalathesa*, people already tended to relate to one another based on external attributes – personal presentation, mode of speech, manners and behaviour – and are very preoccupied with hierarchy and status differentiation. In modern Bangkok, this has developed into a situation in which the emphasis on *kalathesa*, combined with the importance of wealth as an idiom of power, has translated into an intense everyday preoccupation with status display. The culture of status display functions to convey to people how much money one possesses, how much ‘face’, status, and prestige one possesses, and hence, where exactly an individual is positioned in the social hierarchy. However, it must be emphasised that this hierarchy of wealth would not have taken the form it did, or be so pronounced, if there were not already pre-existing structures of status differentiation based on the *sakdina* system.

The embedment of shopping malls, department stores, and other venues of consumption in Bangkok within a hierarchy of prestige and exclusivity demonstrate how a global phenomenon – consumerism – has been infused with the local vernacular of status. These notions are especially encapsulated in the discourses and practices associated with middle-class desires towards *hi-so* status. Bangkok’s high society radiate what it means to be at the zenith of the social hierarchy, enthralling the middle classes with their symbols, culture, and way of life. Aspirations to elite or *hi-so* status frames the social competitiveness that characterises so much of middle-class life in Bangkok and which embodies many of the symbols encapsulated by the spaces of the Siam-Ratchaprasong downtown hub. One of the most pre-eminent of these spaces is Siam Paragon.

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5. Significantly, the 1990s saw what has been referred to as the rise of ‘Sino-Chic’ and the rediscovery of Chinese roots among the middle classes. This was linked to the opening up of China’s economy and the prospects open to those who could parlay Chinese connections and backgrounds into business opportunities, as well as the growing confidence and political power of Thailand’s Sino-Thai community (Vatikiotis, 1996).

## To See and Be Seen in Bangkok

The commencement of my fieldwork in Bangkok coincided with the opening of the colossal fifteen billion baht<sup>6</sup> Siam Paragon shopping complex. On the first of my research trips, from July to September of 2005, construction had yet to be completed on the project. I would often gaze at the bustling works from the vantage point of the platform at the Siam BTS station and wonder exactly how big it was going to be. The answer turned out to be a whopping 300,000 square metres of retail space, which, incidentally, is still not as large as nearby CentralWorld Plaza at 500,000 square metres.

Siam Paragon opened to much fanfare within days of my second trip to Thailand, on 9 December 2005. Grand openings of new shopping malls are major events in Bangkok, and feature plenty of free entertainment in the form of concerts and shows, attractive displays of merchandise and other decorations where friends, partners, and families can pose for photos, as well as the draw of new restaurants, cinemas, cafes, and other places to socialise. Amidst all this novelty and excitement, actual shopping is only part of the allure. The same was the case at Paragon, where intensive sales and promotional activity attempted to encourage visitors to buy, when really, people were only there for the spectacle. The gala celebrations, presided over by HRH Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn, went on for days, and included circus performers, a drum dance, pyrotechnics, fireworks, and a song written especially for the occasion. A giant billboard lauding 'The Glorious Phenomenon' featured the image of a woman's rapturously upturned face, illuminated by an ethereal glow. Next to the glittering, transparent dome of the main entrance, an enormous twenty-metre tall crystal Christmas tree shot up out of the square that connected Paragon with the Siam Centre, one of Bangkok's oldest malls.

Thousands of Thais and tourists alike meandered in and around Siam Paragon, posing for photo after photo in front of boutiques, luxurious sports cars, Christmas decorations, escalators, video screens, fountains, and gardens. With all the excitement, one would not be remiss to think that Siam Paragon was the first shopping mall to open in Bangkok, and not just the latest of hundreds. Yet for months after its opening, even mall-jaded Bangkokians spoke continually of their visits to the shiny new Paragon, where almost impossibly chic individuals strutted to the

6. Approximately USD 375 million, at the time.

beat of the latest pop hits, sporting gravity defying coifs and multi-hued accessories that sparkled in the fluorescence of looming billboards and shop signage. The complex, itself, is a huge, slick, marble-clad construction that provides every imaginable comfort. It includes a five-star hotel and serviced apartments, a cineplex, restaurants, an aquarium, a gym, karaoke booths, educational facilities, and an event hall. It is marketed as a world-class shopping and entertainment destination, although the cost of merchandise in its stores makes purchasing these extravagant items a distant prospect for the vast majority of Thais.

Glitz and glamour obscure the more complex narrative surrounding Bangkok's upmarket malls. Siam Paragon in particular is a peculiar combination of regal flourish and behind-the-scenes debacle. Completion of the complex had evidently been rushed and many of its shops were yet to open for business at the time of the 'grand opening'. More tragically, a young girl was injured (and later died) after plunging five metres through an uncovered gap in the floor. Cracks showed in some walls, paint was absent from others. When the rainy season came, whole sections of floor became flooded. The toilets were constantly overflowing.

Not long after opening, Siam Paragon became the backdrop to some of the struggles of Thailand's ongoing political turmoil. On 28 and 29 March 2006, Siam Paragon and its neighbours, Siam Centre and Siam Discovery Centre, closed their doors in response to an estimated 30,000 strong protest outside the malls against then-incumbent Prime Minister Thaksin by the PAD. Occupied by yellow-clad, singing and chanting demonstrators, Rama I Road, from Pathumwan to the Ratchaprasong intersection, was completely blocked to traffic, which of course exacerbated the usual snarls in other parts of the city, ultimately leading to the early end of the unpopular protest. A wry joke circulating at the time attributed the abortion of the rally to the reluctance of PAD leaders to invoke the wrath of their mainly middle-class support base by blocking access to their beloved shopping malls.

One might think the presence of Maserati, Chanel, Gucci, and other designer brand names would demarcate Siam Paragon as an upper-class consumption space. Yet, although some of its clientele are indeed very affluent, the majority of its patrons certainly are not. The Bangkok Post's *Guru Magazine* noted sardonically at the time: 'We have figured out Siam Paragon: It's a place where rich people go to fashion shows, middle-class





Figure 3: Window-shopping at Emquartier District, Phrom Phong

people go to eat and working-class people go to escape from the heat. But we're still not quite sure who shops there' (Guru Magazine, 2006). As Muay, a marketing executive, summed up for me, 'People go there to "be seen". People want to go there just to be part of the trend'.

In my numerous interviews and conversations with people on the topic, informants made a clear distinction between three kinds of consumption behaviour: *shopping*, *doen len*, which translates as 'buying things', and thirdly the consumption of daily necessities. *Shopping*, a term which is the Thai adoption of the English 'shopping', refers to the purchase of any non-essential items – in other words, frivolous, superfluous spending. *Doen len* is distinct from *shopping* in that it does not necessitate the purchase of goods and services. It refers to the practice of just 'going for a walk', being stimulated by the various surrounding sights and sounds, with no particular aim in mind. While it may result in some purchases during the course of walk, buying things is not central to the activity.

In the city, the temperature and tropical humidity, and the lack of scenic environments or outdoor leisure spaces, aside from a few public parks such as Lumpini or Suan Rot Fai, ensure that going for a stroll or passing time almost invariably means spending time in an air-conditioned shopping mall. Dao, an entertainer and entrepreneur, explained:





Figure 4: Friends spending time together at a restaurant in CentralWorld Plaza



Figure 5: Food court inside Siam Paragon shopping mall, Pathumwan

Bangkok being Bangkok you can't really walk on the streets, and there's not much to see on the streets either, no places of interest that you can just pop into for a while, so for me, *doen len* usually means somewhere comfortable and air-conditioned, and that would be a mall. Maybe in the provinces, you might go to a park or something, and there's usually one or two in every town or a playground. We have these things in Bangkok too, but it just takes so long to get there, and there's no place to park. I think in Bangkok there's not much choice about what you can do. You can't really go to museums or anything, so I associate shopping with not working and it's just fun, and relaxing, and, and you don't have to think. When you go shopping you're being constantly bombarded by new things to see, and hear, and to eat.

A bank employee, Tan, indicated that when he and his friends went to malls, it wasn't for the purpose of shopping *per se*, but rather, just 'to chill'. Additionally, Pam, a real estate agent, mused that at the mall, 'Some people might walk around alone, some might shop, some come and walk around with friends and talk'. As these informants' reflections indicate, the emphasis is less on consumption, and more on socialising.

Often, people go to malls or markets not to *shop* or even *doen len*, but simply, to have a snack or a meal. Busy urban lifestyles preclude spending lengthy amounts of time preparing food, particularly as meals to suit every budget are available on almost every corner, whether these are street stalls, food courts, restaurants, hawker food, or take-home meals. Meals inside the food courts of pleasantly air-conditioned shopping malls and hypermarkets can be cheaper than, or the same price, as eating at street restaurants. However, with Bangkok's heat, humidity, and traffic pollution, street stalls are markedly less comfortable than restaurant food courts.

Furthermore, many people living in Bangkok on low incomes share tiny one-room studios without cooking facilities, making eating out a necessity. Wut, who had lived in Bangkok for over twenty years, recounted his student days at Ramkhamhaeng University, just after moving from his home province of Nakhon Sawan. At the time, he shared a room with as many as nine other men at a time. Now a teacher, his present living arrangements consisted of sharing one studio apartment with four or five other colleagues not far from the school at which they taught. The group paid five thousand baht per month, excluding utilities, for the apartment. There were a great many other people I spoke with who shared their rented rooms with at least one or two other people, normally a fellow student,

work colleague, or relative. The cramped nature of shared residences, the lack of cooking facilities in many middle-class households, long working hours, the easy availability of food, and the cost of air-conditioning and other utilities, make shopping malls, which are convenient, comfortable, and stimulating, the natural place to socialise in Bangkok.

While Thais might engage in *doen len* anywhere, like a market or fair, in Bangkok the activity has come to be strongly associated with shopping malls, where people may spend hours and hours just walking around, echoing Gottdiener's observation that in contemporary times, people go to the mall to 'be seen' just as they 'have done for centuries through daily visits to the town square or central city downtown' (Gottdiener, 2000: 284). Pierre Bourdieu (1984) and D. Miller et al. (1998) have both argued that consumption and lifestyle are key to processes of status differentiation and class structuration. Bourdieu argues that corresponding to the 'hierarchy of the arts' is a 'social hierarchy of consumers', which 'predisposes tastes to function as markers of "class"' (Bourdieu, 1984: 1–2). Along similar lines, Kasian suggests that consumerist culture in Thailand is characterised by 'cultural consumption' of 'identity commodities', which he summarises as 'the consumption of consumer products not for their intrinsic *use value* or socioeconomic *exchange value*, but for their *cultural value* as signs of desired identity' (Kasian, 1998: 118, his emphasis). In other words, 'goods communicate, and are communicated as, *social relationships*' (D. Miller et al., 1998: 26, emphasis in original).

In this respect, it is relevant to consider Appadurai's (1986) critique of the limitations of the production-oriented Marxist conceptualisation of 'commodity', wherein he argues that the value of a commodity can be discovered by following 'the things themselves, for their meanings are inscribed in their forms, their uses, their trajectories ... it is the things-in-motion that illuminate their human and social context' (Appadurai, 1986: 5). This notion can be connected with Pierre Bourdieu's suggestion that 'economic power ... universally asserts itself by the destruction of riches, conspicuous consumption, squandering, and every form of *gratuitous* luxury' (Bourdieu, 1984: 55, his emphasis). Mulder further elaborates that:

As one's hierarchical position rises, the investment in presentation also increases. One builds up one's stature by increasing one's power – and by the demonstration of that power. Since Thailand has become a

## A MEETING OF MASKS



Figure 6: Young people *doen len* in Siam Paragon



Figure 7: Crowded restaurant floor in Siam Paragon



relatively open society, in which the power of the old nobility has been broken, the competition for power and status has become even more intense and that competition socially enacted in the flagrant display of status symbols and the blatant show-offs that fill the society pages of the newspapers (Mulder, 1992: 50).

In sum, as places where people go to 'see and be seen', shopping malls in Bangkok in general play a key role in processes of status differentiation, the marking out of hierarchical boundaries, and the construction of class identity.

As O'Connor points out, these days, 'Bangkok and the Bangkok elite rule a powerful and elaborate hierarchy . . . of wealth and style expressed in a person's clothes, car, house, ideas, and education' (O'Connor, 1988: 253). This status hierarchy 'is inescapable in that the theatres or *wat* one visits as well as one's dress, mode of transportation, language, companions, surroundings, and such are all matters of prestige whether one is concerned with them or not' (O'Connor, 1988: 263–264). Additionally, Mills contends that for rural migrant workers, participation in consumeristic, commodity culture in Bangkok is a primary vehicle for demonstrating 'modern', or *thansamai*, status (Mills, 1999: 127). Furthermore, conspicuous consumption based on trends and images disseminated from Bangkok serve as markers of prestige and success in upcountry towns and villages, denoting individuals, households and communities as *thansamai* ('modern' or 'up-to-date') (Mills, 1999).

One's level of engagement with mall culture is therefore considered a sign of distinction, and the status that comes with being *thansamai*. Bourdieu's (1984) analysis of the varied patterns of consumption of different class fractions in contemporary French society is also illuminating, in this respect. Bourdieu maintains that:

Taste classifies, and it classifies the classifier. Social subjects, classified by their classifications, distinguish themselves by the distinctions they make, between the beautiful and the ugly, the distinguished and the vulgar, in which their positions in the objective classifications is expressed or betrayed (Bourdieu, 1984: 6).

In other words, according to Bourdieu, there is a close relationship between cultural practices or 'taste', and the structural indices of educational capital (measured by qualifications) and social origin (measured by father's occupation) (Bourdieu 1984:7,13). This is somewhat of an

ironic reversal of Western attitudes towards malls, which are seen to embody mass, mainstream culture, and as such, are often considered 'vulgar', as Bourdieu puts it. Yet, despite being positioned as an upscale shopping complex, since its opening, Siam Paragon has become a distinctly middle-class space to *doen len*, and to establish one's claims to *hi-so*, or 'high society', status.

### ***Hi-So* Hopefuls**

*Hi-so* is a word used often in Bangkok to describe the rich, successful, and famous. In addition to describing people, it is also used to describe objects, places, and activities. Siam Paragon and CentralWorld Plaza – the two main malls which anchor the Siam-Ratchaprasong nexus – are *hi-so*, as are malls like Central Embassy or Emquartier. Dining on French or Italian food is *hi-so*. Even clothes can be described in the same way. It is by no means a static or an objective category, and what is defined as *hi-so* is constantly changing. Although use of the word *hi-so* is widespread, it holds particular significance as a middle-class discourse. The majority of individuals I knew or encountered who might be considered *hi-so* by others had a distinct dislike for the word, and refused to describe themselves as such or think of themselves in such terms, although they might frequently employ it in the course of conversation. This is because there are also negative connotations attached to the term. They centre in particular on the phenomenon of middle-class hopefuls to *hi-so* status – whom some informants called the attention seeking, pretentious, 'pretend *hi-sos*'.

The opposite of the slang *hi-so* is *lo-so*. While it is sometimes used to refer to the working classes, the term *lo-so* can also be used to taunt friends, who might say things like, 'You're so *lo-so*!' to one another. This might be interpreted as a light-hearted critique of middle-class aspirations to *hi-so* status, especially as it lacks the derogatory implications of calling someone *chan tam* ('lower class'), which would more likely than not lead to a rupture of the friendship. In fact, the term *lo-so* is probably much less suggestive than *hi-so*, as the latter has many negative connotations, including that of being materialistic, superficial, pretentious, judgmental, and attention seeking.

In sum, *hi-so* is a popular, class-loaded slang used to describe people, places, or things, but never typically oneself, unless one has an especial

interest in being perceived as *hi-so*. Being a subjectively defined category, who or what might be defined as *hi-so* varies. Some of my informants included royalty (*chao*), in their definition of 'hi-so', whereas others did not. Others may also have included old money (*ngen kao*) and aristocrats or nobility (*phu di*). These days, however, people perceived to be *hi-so* increasingly come from wealthy Sino-Thai families without royal or aristocratic backgrounds, who now control a vast proportion of the Thai economy. In 1994, they held 90 per cent of Thailand's manufacturing and 50 per cent of services, and the four largest banks (Yeung, 2000: 270).

One afternoon over coffee, Dao, a good friend and informant, related the story of the first *hi-so* to me. A savvy advertising company had decided to use the daughter of an extremely successful business family in a television commercial instead of the usual actress or model. She was depicted in the advertisement riding a horse (a very posh activity) and when she removed her helmet, she revealed a head of especially lustrous hair. Her name and surname were listed in tiny letters at the bottom of the screen, and she became an instant star. In addition to appearing in numerous subsequent commercials, she went on to host a talk show and to become a politician in a major party. Dao reflected, 'Everyone wanted to be like her, and wanted to be as beautiful as her, and that rich and successful'. These days, it has become common practice for companies to use *hi-so* people as spokespeople and models for their products. As Dao emphasised: 'Everyone wants to be like them. They're role models'.

The word *inter* is another slang term closely related to *hi-so* discourse. It is an abbreviated adaptation of the English word 'international'. Aside from being used to describe the jet-setting, foreign-educated, international school elite, it can be used to describe anything that is foreign, or which possesses a foreign image.<sup>7</sup> The discourse of *inter* arguably has its precedent in the discourse of *nok* (literally, 'outside'). The term came to denote 'foreign' and especially Western things and contexts, which ex-

7. Comparable discourses exist in other urban areas in Thailand. For instance, in her study of youth subcultures in the northern Thai city of Chiang Mai, Cohen (2009) shows how the fashionable youth identity of *dek inter* (*dek* is the Thai word for child), drawn from global punk, hip hop, breakdance, and other subcultures, is formed through the construction of boundaries and the categorisation of an external 'Other', the latter in this case being *dek saep*, or their rural, less cosmopolitan counterparts.



isted during the reign of King Chulalongkorn, during which time *farang* (Western) things became highly valued among royal elites and gradually spread to the general population. The consumption of imported, *farang* goods and adoption of *farang* ways of life served to mark emerging new cultural identities and confirm social status. The term could also be used to refer to foreign- or modern-minded people (*hua nok*) or students who had returned from an education in Europe (*nakrian nok*) (Pattana, 2010: 68).<sup>8</sup>

Although hierarchical divisions in Bangkok cannot adequately be explained in terms of Western concepts of class, how they are constructed and experienced is inseparable from the influence of Thailand's engagement with, firstly, Western colonial powers, and later, globalisation. For instance, one of the key strategies that indigenous rulers employed to stave off domination by colonial powers from the mid-nineteenth century onwards was by presenting an image of being 'civilised' (*siwilai*) (Jackson, 2004: 234–235; see also Thongchai 2000). Harrison observes that '*siwilai* served as a technique by which Siam could stake a claim to social, cultural and technological parity with the West. But in addition to its purpose as a display of civilisational standards to the West, it simultaneously functioned as local legitimisation, shoring up both the real and the symbolic powers of the Siamese elite, which could in turn be exercised more effectively over the provinces' (Harrison, 2010: 17). In other words, the presentation of *khwam siwilai* (i.e. the state of being 'civilised') functioned, paradoxically, as a form of hybrid elite resistance to the West.

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8. With the rise of the Sino-Thai/Chinese-Thai middle class, there is also an ethnic component to discourses like *hi-so* and *inter*. Chinese migrants have settled in Thailand since at least the thirteenth century, with migration increasing substantially in the nineteenth century. These migrants were concentrated in urban areas and predominantly engaged in commercial activities, as labourers in the tin and rubber industries and in the rice export trade. Involvement in commercial activities increased from the 1960s and 70s onward, with Chinese entrepreneurs dominating both small and large Bangkok-based business groups and the consolidation of Sino-Thai commercial and social networks in the elite strata of Thai society (Cushman, 1989: 241–242). Today, many Chinese and their descendants have acculturated and assimilated to the point where it makes more sense to refer to them as Thai or Sino-Thai, rather than Chinese (Basham, 2001: 108; see also Kasian, 1997: 86), as distinguished from those who continue to speak Chinese and identify as Chinese or Thai-Chinese.

Peleggi's (2002) study illustrates the deployment of this strategy through the fashioning of the Siamese monarchy's public image as a modern, civilised and civilising institution in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century by means of the deployment of a variety of material and symbolic attributes, including adoption of Western modes of dress, etiquette, and consumption. These transformations exist in tension with historically precedent concepts of status differentiation rooted in the *sakdina* era as well as Buddhist notions of hierarchy, creating a hybrid pattern of status relations which is neither purely local, Thai and 'traditional', nor completely foreign, Western or 'modern'.

Hence, while designer goods, cosmopolitan lifestyles, and foreign trends are articulations of globalised modernity, they also play a part, as Pattana suggests when writing of the key role of *farang* or Western 'Other' in the construction of modern Thai identity, in terms of 'a cultural practice in the service of local projects of power' (Pattana, 2010: 60). These historically and culturally rooted epistemological tactics, which Pattana terms 'Siamese Occidentalism', were initiated by royal elites in the nineteenth century, continued by military dictators and bureaucrats through the twentieth century, and in the present day are driven by middle-class consumers and mass media, reflecting firstly elite desires to be modern and civilised and later developing into a powerful marker of cosmopolitan modernism (ibid.: 58–59).<sup>9</sup>

In taking such an approach, I attempt to avoid the problematic application of Western categories of understanding social divisions on the one hand, and an exoticising approach which reinforces the discourse of Thai exceptionalism, on the other – whilst simultaneously acknowledging the strong historical and contemporary impact of Western and foreign influences on understandings of status differentiation. In the past, this was expressed in Thai elites' adoption of foreign markers of sophistication in clothing, food, and other aspects of lifestyle and consumption. Today, as I will demonstrate, it is encapsulated in concepts that articulate cosmopolitanism, prestige, and affluence.

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9. It should also be noted that while the mechanism may remain similar, processes of globalisation have ensured that *farang* is no longer the only key foreign influence on Thai identity. Among young people in particular, the popularity of Korean and Japanese celebrities, music, film, and television series have had a striking impact on fashion and entertainment trends.

In Bangkok, the *hi-so* and *inter* crowd has achieved a kind of ‘celebrity status’ which draws massive amounts of fascinated popular and media attention, as reflected in the countless television shows, newspaper headlines, society pages, and tabloid magazines with Bangkok’s *hi-so* as their subjects. My first introduction to one so-called *hi-so* informant, Ek, was not in person, but when his friend pointed him out to me on the cover of a magazine. The cover displayed two candid photos of Ek’s girlfriend, a singer and celebrity – and hence, a prominent member of the *hi-so* elite herself – captured somewhere in Bangkok. In one photo, she was holding hands with Ek. In the other, she was holding hands with another man. The ‘sordid’ nature of this revelation was emphasised by the bright red circles drawn around the offending hands. Such intense fascination with the lives and dalliances of the *hi-so* is pervasive. Dao referred to it disparagingly as ‘Paris Hilton Syndrome’. It is the phenomenon of being famous just for being famous; notoriety generated purely on the basis of notoriety.

Just as numerous would-be Hollywood celebrities court the tabloid gaze, aiming to achieve public adoration, many would-be *hi-sos* strive for prominence and visibility in Bangkok, hungry to belong to the exclusive pantheon of rich, famous, and fabulous luminaries. I sat through a great many discussions where gossip was exchanged about this or that *hi-so*, either a celebrity or a *phu di*, during which people were referred to as, for instance, the ‘youngest son’ of a particular prominent family, as often as they were by their actual names. Driven by middle-class desires and imaginations, a whole subculture has emerged that centres on mimicking what the middle class perceives to be, and the media depicts as, *hi-so*. Aspirants to the ‘title’ slavishly follow trends that dictate the most desirable clothes, foods, accessories, activities, and places to socialise. I even received reports from informants that some individuals hoping to be perceived as *hi-so* initially paid for their photos to appear in magazines and society features in newspapers. In sum, the most important thing is to ‘be seen’ as living the lifestyle, wearing the fashion, following the trends, and possessing the material trappings of the *hi-so* – or coming as close as one possibly can.

Hence, in a very real sense, much of the appeal of upmarket shopping malls lies in their role as educational institutions: in effect, malls like Siam Paragon offer free tuition in middle-class and *hi-so* lifestyles. One

regular patron of Siam Paragon reflected that, 'If I go to Paragon I feel like I am like the higher class people ... it's not like I feel *hi-so* to that extent, it's not that I feel on the same level as them, but that I am in the same group as they are because I can go there and fit in'. Toi, an administration manager, elaborated on the issue in similar terms in reference to The Emporium: 'The upper-most limits of Emporium are very, very upper class, right? I don't think of myself as very, very upper class when I'm there. [But] I might feel proud or confident in the fact that I can go to those places and fit in'. In this case, engaging in consumption at posh malls doesn't automatically confer upper-class status. However, it does contribute to one's sense of self by demonstrating one is sufficiently familiar with mall culture and lifestyle, and hence, can claim a certain degree of distinction for him or herself.

### Middle-Class Status Anxiety

As we chatted inside a coffee shop in Thong Lor, in Sukhumvit, Ratni, an international relations student at prestigious Chulalongkorn University, became distracted after spying a good-looking man walk through the front entrance of the cafe. She speculated that he might be a *dara*, or celebrity, a common sight in *hi-so* upper Sukhumvit cafes such as the one we were hanging out in that afternoon. After her attempts to identify the man proved inconclusive, Ratni returned to our conversation and asked me whether or not I'd heard of a book called *Social ... So Easy*, or in Thai, *Kan Khao Sangkhom ... Rueang Ngai Ngai* (Alisa, 2007). She thought it was a good example of a genre of books specifically marketed to middle-class people anxious about fitting into exclusive social circles. The book purports to help the reader to 'be confident while participating in various events' (*chuay hai khun man chai nai kan ruam kitchakam tang tang*) and to 'avoid being embarrassed by anybody' (*chuay train hai khun mai ai khrai*). On the cover is a sophisticated, attractive (and of course, pale-skinned) young woman in a little black dress, holding a cocktail drink. Inside, the book is divided into nine chapters, each of which provide 'lessons' on such things as the most prestigious designer brand names, how to dress up to attend important functions, and how to behave appropriately in various places and situations such as a posh restaurant, a hotel, when on a tour in a foreign country, at the airport, at



Figure 8: *Social ... So Easy*

the beauty spa, at a cosmetics counter, or when participating in sporting activities at an exclusive club.

Lesson one of the book is titled 'Dressing Up'. The goal of this chapter is to guide aspiring individuals on how to 'present oneself appropriately according to *kalathesa*' (ibid.: 14). The author warns that failure to do so may result in social ostracisation and humiliation. Thus, for instance, a woman attending a daytime event stipulating a 'formal and smart casual' dress code would be expected to sport apparel such as a straight-cut skirt or slacks with heels, a collared, sleeved blouse, or a pale-coloured shirt in white or cream. A colour scheme of black and white is considered particularly dignified. Women should also avoid ostentatious jewellery. Rather, simple diamond studs are preferred in order to project one's confidence. Alternatively, pearls also give the impression of being a

sweet and pleasant person with whom others will want to associate. Men should dress similarly conservatively in a collared shirt and suit, and refrain from wearing flowery or paisley patterns, or anything with tattered seams. However, the author emphasises that the event must be formal enough to require this kind of apparel. Otherwise, the reader runs the risk of being perceived as overly polite and serious, and entirely lacking in charm. The rest of the chapter features similarly detailed guidance on the correct attire to wear to gala, and black tie events, grand opening events, cocktail parties, conferences and seminars, business lunches and dinners, birthday parties, weddings, and funerals.

Another chapter, on dining etiquette, explains such things as allowing a server to help one take one's seat, using a napkin to wipe one's mouth, and the layout of a formal Western-style dinner setting, complete with a diagram and instructions describing the placement, function, and proper way to use each piece of crockery, glassware, and cutlery. The author goes on to explicate appropriate manners for a variety of cuisines including Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Indian, and Italian. Additional sections provide information on partaking in a buffet, the distinction between American, English, and a Continental breakfasts, as well as differences between types of wines (e.g. Bourdeaux as opposed to Chenin Blanc), beers, cocktails, and spirits. The chapter on correctly navigating the protocol at a luxurious hotel or resort painstakingly explains room types and corresponding rates (from deluxe to superior to pool and presidential villas), online booking, check-in and check-out procedures, use of conference rooms and public areas, laundry and butler service, and knowing when and how much to tip.

*Social ... So Easy* provides a compelling illustration of the kinds of challenges faced by middle-class individuals who are attempting to climb the social ladder. It is also indicative of how the intense contemporary emphasis on wealth as an indicator of power is expressed in a pervasive preoccupation with status display, 'face', prestige, and reputation. The resultant status anxiety is described by common expressions such as 'to wear masks to meet one another' (*kan sai nakak khao ha kan*). This was also referred to variously as *klaeng tham* ('pretending' or 'faking'). Associated expressions include *klaeng tham lok luang* ('pretending and deceiving'); *kek na*, described as 'trying to act cool'; and *khi kek*, which is used to describe those who are seen to be putting on an act. For English



speaking informants, the main word used to capture these sentiments was 'pretentious'.

Such discourses are evocative of Goffman's conceptualisation of social interaction as dramaturgy, in which he remarks that, 'all the world is not, of course, a stage, but the crucial ways in which it isn't are not easy to specify' (Goffman, 1959: 72). They also underscore the nature of 'middle-class culture as practice, production, or performance' (Liechty, 2003: 4). Understood in this way, class is not merely 'structure' or 'category', but something that happens in human relationships (Gewertz and Errington, 1992: 2). Writing on middle-class America, Ortner argues that, 'classes are relationally constituted ... they define themselves always in implicit reference to the other(s)' (Ortner, 1991: 172). This is nowhere more apparent than when considering the issue of middle-class identity in Bangkok, which is arguably not only the product of the projection of one's own identity, but is also defined by a tension between persona 'suggested' or 'aspired toward', on the one hand, and such limiting factors as one's income or background of origin. One's true situation may nonetheless be communicated through 'unintentional' (as opposed to 'intentional') status markers which are more difficult – or even impossible – to manage, thereby marring the authenticity of the performance (see Goffman, 1959: 51).

Of course, others may not inform an individual directly if his or her presentation of self fails to make the social grade, in accordance with the agreed-upon definition of the social interaction, although it may nonetheless impact on their appraisal of the other's status and become fodder for gossip. Inadvertent cues can include such *faux pas* as not knowing the correct dining etiquette at a gala event, insufficiently expensive or sophisticated displays of status, or being unfamiliar with the etiquette of shopping in a designer boutique – hence the appeal of books like *Social ... So Easy*. Ratni offered the following reflection: 'Siam Paragon is regarded by the mainstream as a posh place, as a luxurious place. But when I go to Siam Paragon the people try hard. A lot of people don't look very natural. They are not there to shop but it seems to me like they are there to show off. The way they hold their handbag. The way they walk. They look uncomfortable'.

In addition to books like *Social ... So Easy*, there are a multitude of magazines, television shows, and other forms of media designed to



cater expressly to middle-class anxieties. Importantly, the constraints of wealth serve as a constant reminder of class boundaries, not only in terms of consumption of material goods, but also in terms of lifestyle. As Liechty points out, 'class culture is always a work-in-progress, a perpetual social construction that is as fundamentally bound to the "concrete" of economic resources as it is to the cultural practices of people who jointly negotiate their social identities' (Liechty, 2003: 4). Hence, it was not uncommon for me to hear of people who owned luxury cars, or lived extravagant lifestyles, but who inhabited considerably more modest residences. I was able to observe the disjuncture between public and private material lifestyles on many occasions when invited to informants' homes.

For example, Ratni, whose adopted mother was a *phu di*, and who was rather fond of speaking about her trips abroad, her broad knowledge about high-end makeup, and the lives of the aristocratic *hi-so*, rented a tiny, modest studio in Phrom Phong. Another woman related the story of relatives who had once been extremely wealthy, but who had lost most of their money. However, maintaining 'face' was important enough that they refused to give up the trappings of their previous lifestyle, and as she noted, 'They've refused to move out of their house to live in a condo, because that'd be losing "face". They refuse to sell their Volvo, because it'd be losing "face". Sometimes they don't even have enough money to fill it up.'

As such examples demonstrate, the construction and maintenance of aspired-towards status identities in Bangkok has additional strong parallels with Goffman's notion of front and back stages in social interaction (1959). As Goffman elucidates, a positive version of the self is presented in front of audiences, in which desired impressions are highlighted: 'individuals often foster the impression that the routine they are presently performing is their only routine or at least their most essential one' (ibid.: 48). In contrast, backstage and in private, 'the impression fostered by the performance is knowingly contradicted as a matter of course' (ibid.: 11). Here, where there is no audience, societal roles and personas are set aside.

The cost of clothes and groceries from department stores and malls can be very high, even for a middle-class Bangkok person. Since middle-class incomes can only be stretched so far, in order to minimise



Figure 9: Bargain hunting at a market near Siam Square, Pathumwan

the dissonance between true social position and identity claimed so that one can successfully enter certain *sangkhom*, certain strategies exist which aim to make the best use of available resources to help ‘save face’ amongst friends, colleagues, and acquaintances. As a result of this practice of ‘strategising’ consumption, I observed middle-class informants purchasing clothes, food items, and other things from street markets on numerous occasions, while they purchased some items in department stores and did most of their socialising in malls. They also did some of their shopping in hypermarkets, but this was mainly for groceries.

For middle-class individuals with limited incomes, cost is less important when it comes to *doen len*, where making purchases is not the main aim of the activity, although small, affordable forms of consumption – such as seeing a movie, having a coffee or snack, or taking a meal at a food court – are common. As a regular patron of Siam Paragon remarked, people go there to: ‘Eat, maybe. See movies. I mean, it’s crowded, but seriously, if you go there, not that many people actually go to shop for a Balenciaga bag or Dolce & Gabbana clothes.’ In sum, going to *doen len* in upmarket malls provides a simple and ‘safe’ way to be blend in with a particular desirable social milieu without subjecting an individual to the demands of spending more than they can afford, or running the gauntlet of a high society event with only a tentative grasp of the correct social protocols and etiquette.

So far, I have argued that in order to make sense of who the Bangkok middle classes are, it is essential to comprehend what they are striving to become. As Fern commented, 'I think the lower class, I don't know if they aspire to that, but the middle class, certainly. In terms of wealth, but they [also] try to cultivate their taste to approach [that of the] higher class'. She continued: 'You should go to a classical music concert. It's very obvious [people] are there not to appreciate the music, but to be seen.' 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, mannerisms, and lifestyle. Nowadays, being well presented is no longer about merely looking 'appropriate', in terms of correct personal presentation, mode of speech, manners, and behavioural conduct. It is now also about looking 'appropriately wealthy' in accordance with *kalathesa*.

### 'Face', Prestige and Respect

In Bangkok today, the traditional emphasis on presentation, as captured in the discourse of *kalathesa*, has translated into the display of power and social position through external markers of material wealth and status – in the slang lingo, *furniture*. Of course, sofas and coffee tables are furniture. But in Bangkokian slang, *furniture*, adopted from English, can also be a watch, a ring, designer sunglasses, a bag, or jeans – anything displayed as adornment or decoration, that 'furnishes' the body or oneself. *Furniture* can and often does serve a practical function (shoes, for instance), but it doesn't need to, and often just refers to accessories (*khrueng pradap*). As we were hanging out at a shopping mall one day, 'Did you see her *furniture*?' hissed one friend furiously, after spying a Rolex with a mother-of-pearl dial (worth upwards of hundreds of thousands of baht) on another woman.

Obviously, a Rolex watch is a piece of 'furniture' *par excellence*. Designer bags – Louis Vuitton Speedies, Chloe Paddingtons, Hermès Birkins, and the like – are also pieces of *furniture*. Counterfeits are ubiquitous in Bangkok, and it is impossible to walk around a mall without seeing fakes on sale or on the arms of female shoppers. Inside some malls,



Figure 10: Watches, jewellery, smartphones, and designer bags as *furniture*

such as Siam Paragon, the Emporium, Emquartier, or Central Chit Lom, there will be plenty of genuine articles mixed in with the copies. Fake or real, the phenomenon of designer handbags possesses an almost farcical quality as people rush to cash in on the perception of ‘instant status’ that a designer bag provides.

Wearing a fake is better than nothing at all, and displaying a middle status brand like Levis or Nine West, or even a department store brand like AIZ (found in Robinson, Central, and The Mall, as well as the high end malls like Paragon and Emquartier), is better than not wearing a brand at all. Each successive level of exclusivity corresponds with enhanced status and hence, social position. *Furniture* is related not only to displaying one’s class and status, but also being accepted in a given social circle (*yom rap nai sangkhom/sangkhom yom rap*), and about being accorded respect (*nap na thue ta*). As Kay, a government employee from Phutthamonthon stated of designer brand clothes and accessories: ‘You own it to feel like, okay you fit in. You won’t get looked down on’. May, a hair salon owner, reflected: ‘People are always looking at you on the outside. They look at your clothes, your appearance, your *furniture*. And they judge you for it’.

People wearing *furniture* is a common sight in Bangkok, especially at exclusive malls, restaurants, clubs, hotels, and particularly at important

social functions like weddings, galas, and industry events, the latter of which can be a sea of designer brands, glittering diamantes and cubic zirconias. These functions provide important networking opportunities and also serve as an outlet for status display, whereby elites or aspiring elites can confirm (or suggest) their inclusion within the uppermost echelons of Thai society.

One event that I observed at close quarters was an opulent wedding, held at the luxurious Dusit Thani hotel overlooking Lumpini Park. The traditional Chinese wedding banquet had been eschewed in favour of a more sophisticated buffet style affair, which provided a chance for the high profile guests to mingle. The crowning feat, however, was the presence of the prime minister of Thailand at the time. The triumphant parents of the bride and groom were able to demonstrate their clout in securing the prime minister's presence, and hence, convey the full extent of their social status to others. A close relative of the bride informed me that the bride had received a *sin sot* ('bride price') of four point four million baht in cash, four *rai*<sup>10</sup> of land, and forty bars of gold (the increments of four reflect the groom's Teochew Chinese ethnicity and the cultural association between the number four and good fortune). When I asked what factors contributed to deciding the amount of *sin sot*, I received the following response: 'It's not actually your judgment of what [the bride] is worth ... the people who get the most "face" from the dowry are not the bride's parents, but the groom's parents, saying, "This is how rich our family is"'. Along with the presence of the prime minister and other important guests, the substantial *sin sot* the groom offered to the bride acted to bring himself and his family a great deal of 'face' (*na ta*), and further acted to boost his family's reputation and prestige (*chue siang*).

Another example of the importance of maintaining 'face' is provided in the following example involving two women I knew, both of whom were successful entrepreneurs. At a casual dinner at Nueng's home in Sathorn, the topic of Muk's mother-in-law's recent death came up. Muk had been estranged from her husband for years. They had a daughter, Nina, for whom Muk was the custodial parent. Both Muk and her husband were from wealthy families involved in property development and manufacturing, respectively. However, Muk had never gotten along with her in-laws, perhaps because she never fitted the mould of a subservient,

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10. One *rai* = 1,600 square metres.

docile, Chinese daughter-in-law. Moreover, Muk and her family felt that the ex-husband and his family had never been able to match the high standard of living she was accustomed to while growing up.

Given the acrimonious relationship she had with her mother-in-law, Muk declared that she didn't care what her ex-husband's family thought of her; she might be obliged to attend the funeral but she wasn't going to bother to dress up for it. At this point, Nueng sternly announced, 'You *must* wear silk'. The other women at dinner agreed. They also agreed that she should wear tasteful diamond jewellery with her outfit. Nueng reasoned that, 'You must show them what you have – if not for your own sake, then for Nina's sake'. Muk and Nina had already experienced a loss of social position within the ex-husband's family due to the divorce. As such, it was imperative to command respect with *furniture* – as embodied in an outfit of silk and diamonds – at such a public occasion as the funeral, in order to prevent further loss of 'face', and the ex-husband's family looking down upon them.

Additionally, there exists a common cliché of *hi-so* madams aspiring to the title of *khunying* (awarded to commoners and similar to the English title 'Lady'), with hyper-volumised hair, white powdered faces, garish makeup, dripping gems (which are frequently fake), obvious plastic surgery, and silk suits, who yet persist in creating an appearance so comical that it is mocked on a regular basis by the rest of society. Fern explained to me that sometimes these ladies were referred to by the disparaging label, *hi-so* (the latter syllable pronounced to rhyme with 'jaw'). Amused, she noted, 'I mean, they have money, but they lack taste'. Along the same line of thought, I once reflected to a friend that all these people running around wearing flashy designer goods and fake jewels must look terribly tacky. She responded with the following story: 'I saw once, a woman, dressed in Dior from head to toe. Shirt says Dior, belt is "CD", and [she was wearing] those really skinny pants, with the Dior print all over them. In pink. You know that get-up must have cost her at least, what, a hundred thousand [baht]'. I asked her what that might say about those people. Laughing, she replied, 'It means they can afford it'. I opined that other people must also think that the woman was quite tasteless, to which she replied:

I think most other people would probably be like, 'Oh, she can actually afford the whole outfit'. It's not tasteful, but they would definitely get



the connotation about money. And you never know about Thai taste anyway. Some people might think she looks great! Taste is ... well, taste can vary. But, definitely, you know, it's *furniture*. So the *furniture* can open a lot of doors, and can get you respect and status. It's sort of like wearing a badge saying, 'I can afford this.' It's kind of tacky, but it's true.

*Furniture* was a term I found to be used predominantly amongst young middle-class women and was by no means familiar to all of my informants. However, there is something compelling about how the English word for 'furniture' came to represent an aspect of social identity in the local vernacular. Just as conventional furniture contributes to the constitution of a 'home' (as opposed to a 'house'), the use of *furniture* on the body contributes to the constitution of the self. As an expression of older notions of 'face' and prestige, *furniture* is the quickest, and loudest, way to suggest one's level of wealth, and simultaneously, one's social position to others. While not everyone may understand the term *furniture*, everybody recognises the importance of such adornment in the quest for 'face', respect, and prestige, which may come from not only material goods or the extravagance of one's house or car, but also one's district of residence or place of employment.

Having high-status friends and associates implies one's own social status matches theirs and brings 'face'. Famous surnames (*nam sakun dang*) fulfil a similar function. Although such surnames were once the domain of what is often referred to as the 'real' or 'old *hi-so*' of prominent aristocratic, political, or military backgrounds, names that are becoming increasingly prominent are those of highly successful entrepreneurial families, or celebrities. As Fon, a Thai-Indian systems administrator, commented:

'Here, many of [the upper class] come from a few distinct families. [And] with wealth and prestige, comes power. So they tend to utilise that to get particular ambitions. And so they tend to be front-page news, famous, that sort of thing ... and also here, it's family-based, right? So you have the CP family, the chicken people. And the Shinawatras ... so, a handful of families who control vast empires as a result of their wealth. That's why prestige comes from [being in] the right family.'

Those in the public eye or who are of high social status face particularly strong pressures to manage their appearance and reputa-



tion – in other words, to maintain ‘face’. This was the case for Andy’s celebrity brother, and, by extension, Andy himself. Andy was a Hong Kong-born Chinese-Thai from a successful entrepreneurial family involved in manufacturing. His brother was an entertainer and a TV personality. Andy’s brother began his career by dating a lot of *dara* (‘celebrities’), which eventually opened the door to the entertainment business. His big break came at a restaurant opening, where the owner had invited him to sing and play the saxophone. Reportedly, a producer saw him there and decided he had potential. Andy noted that his brother always had to dress up when he went out, in order to maintain his image. However, as he explained, it was also imperative for Andy to participate in maintaining appearances for the sake of his family’s image:

You don’t want to screw up your last name. It’s very important. You don’t want to screw up your family’s reputation. My brother, he’s in a business. If he does anything – if I do anything bad, let’s say, if I get drunk, crash into something and kill somebody, then that last name is my brother’s ... it’s hard to live in a society where you don’t have ‘face’. People are just not going to respect you.

Andy’s example of drunk driving is something of an extreme of socially unacceptable behaviour, but maintaining ‘face’ for the sake of preserving one’s own, and one’s family’s status, is a principle that operates in many everyday situations and can extend from maintaining one’s appearance to being careful with the people one is seen to associate with. Mot, a yoga teacher, additionally emphasised, ‘When you have high social status, you have to deal with other things, too. You have people looking at you, and you lose your freedom. Or, if you do something, and you don’t think of the consequences properly, it can be very bad. Or, for example, when you are in that position, there are many people around you, and you can’t always decide whether or not people are there because they need something from you.’

Education is another important form of *furniture*. A foreign degree brings the most ‘face’, followed by a degree from a prestigious university in Thailand, such as Chulalongkorn, Thammasat, and Assumption Universities. The same is true of speaking a foreign language like English (how well one speaks it also reveals class distinctions). Furthermore, a person who lives in, for example, Bangkapi, Thonburi, Onnut, or Lat

Phrao, which are lower and middle-class districts further away from the downtown, will gain less ‘face’ from these quarters than someone who lives in the very affluent districts of Sukhumvit or Sathorn. Markers of wealth displayed as *furniture* – the practice of status display – are accessible to middle-class individuals trying to make their way up the social hierarchy in a way that more exclusive status criteria are not. Although they lack the exclusive defining elements of upper-class standing such as family background, vast wealth, excellent connections, a prestigious education, or important societal positions, they possess the capacity to carve out a space in the social order with the resources that they do have – a certain degree of affluence. Bo, a flight attendant from a wealthy family, explained:

Before, we had *phu di kao*,<sup>11</sup> people who were royalty, and they were in a class all of their own. These days, it’s changed. Money is the most important thing. Now it’s very materialistic. We are divided along the lines of wealth. These days, even if someone doesn’t have a good education, as long as they have money, everywhere they go, people still respect them.

Further adding to our understandings of status display in the Thai context is Jackson’s (2004) argument that Thai personhood and identity might be understood as ‘performatively constituted’.<sup>12</sup> According to Jackson, the distinctiveness of Thai forms of power is said to lie in ‘an intense concern to monitor and police surface effects, images, public

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11. Note that the term *phu di kao* does not only include royalty, but also aristocrats and members of the nobility, as well as their descendants.

12. This contrasts with Western conceptualisations of image as merely a surface representation of the inner self, and points to a difference between Thai and Western cultural logics, ‘in the way that the relationship between representational surfaces and inner subjective realities is imagined’ (Jackson, 2004: 211). According to classical Western epistemologies – in which ‘the prestige value of a statement depends on its truth value’, and a correspondence between inner truth and external reality is assumed – the contrast between the public and private fields of the regime of images might be viewed as contradictory (ibid.: 205). However, he argues that it should instead be understood as ‘a discursive and representational system based on epistemological multiplicity, which should not be equated with duplicity. Under the regime, the disparity between public image and private truth is not resolved by assimilating this difference to a universal principle of discursive unity. Rather, the tension of this difference is managed by assigning separate contextualised “time and space” domains of operation to the different public and private cultural logics of representation and discourse’ (ibid.: 201).

behaviours, and representations combined with a relative disinterest in controlling the private domain of life' (Jackson, 2004: 181). In other words, as Phillips noted long ago, what 'is socially important is that a person acts nicely, not how he feels about the way he acts; the latter is his own business' (Phillips, 1965: 72). Jackson describes this aspect of Thai social behaviour as the 'Thai regime of images'. His usage of the term 'image' is based upon two Thai expressions, '*phap-phot*' and '*phap-lak*', both of which are widely used to denote such things as the '[good] name', 'standing', 'reputation', or 'public image', of an institution, organisation, or individual (Jackson, 2004: 185). The two expressions 'draw on and develop older notions of "face" (*na*) and "reputation" (*cheu-siang*), and reflect a pervasive cultural concern with 'constructing positive images' (*sang phap-phot thi di*) and avoiding damage to the reputation' (ibid.: 186).

In everyday life, this can often translate into differential treatment for those who appear to be wealthy. Ek, an informant from a wealthy political and business family, indicated: 'If you dress like you've got a bit of money, then you do receive differential treatment.' [Ek emphasised] 'But this is quite normal. If you have money, there are a lot of girls who would, you know, who would really just go for the money. They don't care how you look, they don't care where you come from.' I asked him whether it was the case that people treated him differently once they found out he had money, and Ek reiterated, 'That's normal. That's normal.'

Choosing not to participate in the game of status display puts a person at a disadvantage in comparison to the many others who are fighting for a position in the hierarchy. The contest to be accepted into the right social circles, and to make the right connections, can be intense. Additionally, an orientation towards gauging others' power through visible markers like *furniture* can also serve the more practical functions of discerning with whom it is acceptable to socialise (in terms of being one's equals), whom it might be useful to make a connection with, or, whom it would be unwise to cross.

For those lacking economic power, merely projecting the appearance of possessing it can, and often does, work just as well. This is captured in a local Thai colloquialism, *pakchi roi na*, which literally refers to the garnishing of food with herbs to enhance its appearance, but which also captures the practice of passing off appearance as substance (Basham,

2000: 257–258; see also Basham, 1989: 131–132). In essence, while the message sent by the Dior-covered woman may have been a crude one, the fact remains that the majority of those who encountered her would have *received* that message, as the following remarks from Dao, who described the origins of the word *hi-so* earlier in this chapter, indicate:

Your material wealth is an indicator of your status and power. So, since Thailand is really deferential to power anyway, from our old system, that's why material things are important. When they had lords and the patronage system, people had a lot of power; people had a lot of money. Money and power are really, really connected, here. So if you have things that cost a lot, then you must have power. It's an unconscious association that people make. That's why brand names are such, special, special items here. When you meet someone who's royalty, you don't even know who they are, because these people keep to themselves. So your title and your surname are not things you can flash, unless they're on a business card ... but if you wear a brand name, if you wear a really expensive watch on your wrist, it's something that other people can pick up straight away, even if you're not well-behaved on that day. It doesn't matter because they'll know that much. So it's a lot more obvious than just manners and upbringing, or [for example], you can't wear your education on a badge. Now, everyone knows the brand, and knows how much it cost, so if you have it, more people are likely to know how rich you are. In a culture that worships money, as Thailand is, if you have money, you put it out there. Because when it's necessary, you will get the respect, you will get the service, you will get the attention ... people worship money and all the things that come along with it. Like power.

In essence, the emphasis here is not only on possession of material wealth *per se*, but on its accoutrements – prestige, connections, respect, and attention. In life, this can translate into such things as political authority, the approval and acceptance of friends, acquaintances, and work colleagues, securing of potential romantic partners and marriage alliances, making a successful business deal, getting one's child a top-notch education, or even just receiving good service in a department store. Implicitly understood by all, the presentation of wealth is a *lingua franca* in Thai society. Its fundamental principles are that money and power are inseparable, and that an individual stands to gain the most if his or her wealth is communicated to others.

## Old Money, New Money

As in many other parts of the world, there is a distinction in Thailand between 'old money' and 'new money' (*ngen kao* and *ngen mai*, respectively). Distinguished comportment, as expressed in knowledge of *kalathesa*, can serve to differentiate between those who can make a real claim to true societal status, like nobility and aristocrats, and those who are merely affluent. Being a member of the royal bloodline in the present day still brings a great deal of prestige, and having an 'M.L.' (*Mom Luang*) or 'M.R.' (*Mom Ratchawong*) in front of one's name is as honourable as the English equivalent of 'Sir' or 'Dame'. Arun, a banking analyst from a famous political family, earns a low income in comparison to his circle of friends, yet is still able to fit in with them because of his Ivy League education and distinguished family background. I asked him why he thought that was the case, and he replied, 'It's probably perceived. I mean, some of it has to do with new money but some of it also has to do with, I guess, the way one carries oneself'. Arun observed that people normally made the assumption, 'Oh well, you know, you're from a good family and you have great education, so we'll assume that you're rich'.

Arun's example can be contrasted with that of Muk. Muk defined herself as middle class, despite her high income. Additionally, her family owns and runs a successful property development business. Whenever I saw her, Muk was in possession of the latest (authentic) designer handbags from Louis Vuitton, Coach, or Tod's. Muk remarked that sometimes she presented herself casually (*tham tua sabai sabai*), unlike *hi-so* women who, according to Muk, are always 'pretty' (*ngam*) and 'quiet' (*ngiap*), because they have to *raksa phap* – 'maintain their image'. Muk elaborated, 'There's a difference between how people of different classes present themselves. The upper class, they have their own demeanour and etiquette. When they go out, they must dress up. It doesn't matter if it is a market, or anywhere. They must dress in a way that is appropriate so that others will recognise that they are an upper-class person, so that they are differentiated from others'.

As I argued earlier, rather than merely replacing status distinctions derived from the symbols of the monarchy and knowledge of court-based etiquette, the idioms of wealth and modernity have been incorporated into the urban hierarchy of prestige. Nevertheless, in the circles of the traditional elite, great emphasis is still placed upon understanding of *kalathesa*

– as expressed through comportment/character (*bukhalik*), manners or etiquette (*marayat*), and refined speech (*kan phut ja*) – which is not as easily acquired as, say, a Louis Vuitton bag, or a Rolex watch, the latter of which can merely be bought with sufficient accumulation of wealth, or some clever strategisation.<sup>13</sup>

Even possession of conspicuous material status symbols is not a solid guarantee that others will accept the impression presented. Something as subtle as the way a woman holds her handbag can signal to practiced observers whether she is accustomed to wealth, or whether the handbag is the only expensive one she owns. Other indicators include furtive scanning of others in the vicinity to check whether or not they are paying attention to her accessory, inordinate investment in the welfare of the bag, or unnecessary mistreatment of service people. Aspirants to the most elite circles therefore must also learn to adopt the mannerisms of the upper classes, often portrayed by the media (including in the popular soap operas, or *lakon*, shown every night on television), and embodied in the elite individuals whom the middle class observe in *hi-so* spaces. However, this latter trait is much more difficult to acquire than the right *furniture*, or a suitably sophisticated lifestyle.

Deploying all the correct status markers, whether tangible or intangible, is made all the more difficult by the fact that the meanings of status markers can change according to social context. The higher up the hierarchy one goes, the more elaborate these status distinctions become. For instance, it is popular amongst members of the lower and lower middle classes to use 23-carat gold jewellery as status markers, in order to indicate a certain degree of affluence. This practice can often be disparaged by the elite classes as being rather crass, particularly when (mis)matched with unsophisticated clothing and grooming. As Ratni noted: ‘I think that the richer people are, the more their ways of showing wealth become sophisticated. For example, the common thing, if you’re a fisherman, and you have money, is to wear a gold ring’. She continued:

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13. For instance, during the time I began conducting fieldwork, around Siam Square there existed a number of stores where office workers and university students can rent designer handbags with which to accessorise their outfits, thereby providing access to status symbols when one doesn’t possess the income to actually own the products.

But if you're a *hi-so* in Bangkok, then maybe you [might] mention, I don't know: 'Oh, yesterday I went to lunch at the Oriental'. It *needs* interpretation. Because dinner is more important, it means that you have a lot [of money] to spare, whereas the gold necklace of the fisherman is really obvious.

Another informant remarked:

I see some people, and ... they just don't look right. I think it comes with exposure, right? What you get from being upper class is, you have this taste, and you know what's normal. People who don't know, they do these kind of token gestures, like carrying a Louis Vuitton. But, they carry it as if they are carrying something really precious, and you know when you look at them [and think], 'Okay, that's the only Louis Vuitton bag that you own, you've never owned one before in your life'. They just don't look comfortable. And I don't own one, but I mock people who own one and treat it like they spent their life savings on it, which they probably have. And it just looks ridiculous.

Another example she provided was that of the people who 'sit in Greyhound [a trendy café with branches across Bangkok] and look really satisfied'. There were also those who 'prance around in designer sunglasses when there's not even any sun'. She continued:

They do it because they want to prove a point, or to show off, or something. And you can tell! Or the thing that I hate most, people who dress up nicely, and then they walk around and they look at you, to see if you're looking at them. Like they dressed up nice on that particular day or something, and they want everyone to be looking at them, thinking that they have expensive clothes and they must be rich ... but Thai people actually don't dress up that much, and everyone uses cheap stuff. When you get down to it, everyone owns a one-nine-nine [baht] pair of shoes, everybody.

In contrast, informants felt that those whose social statuses are more established, are less likely to engage in ostentatious displays of wealth, even though they might do so if the occasion required it (for instance, at an important social or business event such as a wedding or a networking function). As Ratni observed, 'People who are really rich, like wealthy people that I know, they don't show off'. Her family's factory in Thonburi was situated near another factory belonging to one of the richest men in Thailand, who was involved in the beverage industry. When she was



there, she often saw a man in a singlet and shorts walk into the factory. The man turned out to be the owner of the factory. She had also heard that due to his unassuming appearance, one of the guards had failed to recognise him as the owner, and had said to his boss, 'Don't come in, *nong*'.

Another informant related a story concerning a friend who was a diamond dealer. Apparently, he was extremely down-to-earth, despite his considerable wealth – something that was unusual enough to be remarked upon. Although he regularly entertained clients in expensive restaurants and hotel lounges, and drove a Lexus, the man was nonetheless comfortable enough in his high status to think nothing of drinking Sangsom whisky from a bucket when the group went out to Khao San Road (at the time of my fieldwork, it was a popular zone not only for Western backpackers, but also for the Bangkok *inter* crowd). The informant contrasted his behaviour with that of people who were less secure in their status:

We went out, and we got the Sangsom and we poured it into a bucket and then poured a bottle of Coke after it, and everyone just got straws and drank from that. And [I thought], 'You're so rich, you don't have to be [doing this]'. But I think those are people who are very secure in their position and they don't have anything to prove. Whereas people that were less secure would be ... trying to move up and climb up all the time, then they would be like, 'Oh, okay, I can't drink Sangsom, because that's low class. I'd have to get – okay, if I can't afford Black, then I'd have to get Red'.

She also noted that he had no problem being friendly with service staff, who in turn were highly appreciative of his unexpected courteousness. Such examples of very wealthy or high-status individuals dressing down or behaving in down-to-earth ways were not uncommon. These individuals were perceived approvingly as role models of how a very affluent or important person should behave. Nonetheless, they were also seen as notable exceptions to the general norm of displaying status markers in everyday interactions.

Ultimately, even though a distinction is made between old and new money in some circles, in practice, especially outside of these circles (and in the eyes of the lower and middle classes), having an enormous amount of wealth at one's disposal – and having others aware of that

fact – tends to blur the distinction and provide one with a great deal of prestige regardless of family lineage (*trakun*).<sup>14</sup> Being either wealthy (*nouveau riche* or not), famous, or from an established family is far better than being none of these things. As one individual from a high status family, Arun, stated:

You have the grand last names of society and everything, but you also have the ‘new money’, and I think the grand last names, even if they’ve lost their wealth and fortune, they still control some sort of influence and awe. Whilst the new money, I guess often they do tend to feel like they can just throw money at it ... but what is clear is that those without either are almost second-class citizens. If you don’t have the money, if you don’t have the last name or you don’t have the, you know, modelling contract or, you know, the soap opera TV contract, then, you’re pretty much a second-class citizen.

The numerous degrees of belonging or not belonging within the ‘right social circles’ – clearly, within the tangle of ‘face’, ‘furniture’, and ‘masks’, social is *not* so easy – is indicative of the intense preoccupation with status in Bangkok. As Muk indicated: ‘It doesn’t matter what class you are, but everyone wants to maintain face (*raksa na*), have honour (*mi saksi*), have respect (*mi kiat*) for themselves. Even lower-class people desire honour and respect’.

As we have seen earlier, within the more elite classes in Bangkok, distinctions become more and more finely grained, with divisions between the established aristocratic segment and the *nouveau riche*, between those with differing levels of wealth, and so on. For instance, some of my informants who were affluent entrepreneurs with high incomes, considered themselves to be of low social status, as a result of comparing themselves to their more successful friends, who might come from much wealthier and better-connected families or who had had foreign schooling.

One example of such a person was Nueng, a woman in her late thirties who had come from a poor village near the Thai–Cambodian border, and

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14. Under Thai law, only one family can use any given surname, which means that everybody with the same surname is related. Last names only became legally required of Thais in 1913 and before then people only used a first or individual name. Names of upper-class families or families with Chinese descent are often longer than usual (although there are exceptions), the latter being through the conversion of Chinese names to Thai names.

had managed to put herself through university and then raise the capital to establish and operate a very successful business. Especially when socialising with other parents from her children's school, she now found herself in contact with people who came from dramatically different backgrounds, such as the wives of ambassadors, or wealthy property developers. She often expressed to me her sense of discomfort about her background and her anxiety about not being able to 'blend in' with such people.

The case of Ratni also illustrates the how finely grained divisions of status within the more elite circles in Bangkok can be. Both her parents were doctors. She was completing a degree at prestigious Chulalongkorn University, after having spent some time living in France. She spoke fluent Thai, French, English, and Chinese, and earned forty thousand baht a month as a private language tutor. Her family was well known in their hometown, and she enjoyed very high status there. Ratni was particularly fond of emphasising the fact that her mother was a (distant) relative of royalty. However, in Bangkok, she experienced a rather steep drop in status relative to her high position in her hometown. There, Ratni reflected in English, 'I'm Little Miss Nobody'.

In Bangkok, everyone in the circles Ratni moved in was just as affluent, if not more so, and had some degree of social status. She recalled the judgemental behaviour she encountered at social gatherings, when some people she met realised she didn't have a car or a driver, and would be returning home by taxi or skytrain. Others would become much less friendly when they found that she wasn't originally from Bangkok. In this case, in spite of her exclusive education, parents' occupations, and connection to royalty, Ratni was not able to compete in the very affluent circles within which she moved, where people came from similar backgrounds but were often much wealthier.

The overriding sentiment I discerned from friends and informants of various class backgrounds is that there is an inordinate amount of emphasis placed on external characteristics in Bangkok, and that people tend to judge one another on the basis of outside appearances (*tat sin chak rup lak phai nok*). This is why *furniture* and other visible markers of status are so important. While distinctions become more finely grained the higher up one goes in the hierarchy, prestigious education, occupation, or even family background are not things that are easily

communicable. Sometimes, these things don't even matter. In contrast, these days, *furniture* can say all there really needs to be said. That said, winning or losing the game of status competition and the concomitant acceptance or rejection from a certain status level or class grouping has ramifications far beyond that of dominating popularity contests and the dramaturgical construction of one's identity. The consequences extend to various spheres of life opportunities, from access to education or employment, to the privileges that an individual may feel entitled to, to the ease with which he or she may navigate the various pathways towards success.

### Exclusivity and Ephemerality

I have argued thus far that middle-class identity in Bangkok is strongly influenced by the desire to attain the status of the elite, or *hi-so*. Simultaneously, those who might capitalise on middle-class consumption also have interests in pursuing an association with *hi-so* culture and identity through sophisticated marketing techniques closely attuned to the aspirations of the middle classes, and being known as a *hi-so* establishment (or not) plays a major role in the type of clientele and patronage that that particular establishment will attract. Correspondingly, Siam Paragon's popularity with the middle class has caused many of Bangkok's elite to shun it in favour of the upmarket malls that remain exclusive. These elite, especially the older ones, prefer to stick to venues like the Emporium, or Central Chit Lom, where there is less chance of middle-class people going there to 'be seen.' As Kamon, a regular patron of both the Emporium and Paragon observed: 'I think Emporium is certainly different from Paragon. Emporium has tried to keep people out, and really maintain their exclusivity. More *hi-so* people, more rich people, will gravitate towards Chit Lom and Emporium.' Toi, a regular patron of Central Chit Lom, similarly felt that: 'There are some *hi-so* people who think that Chit Lom is more of *their* place.'

Central Chit Lom, established in the mid-1970s, is the flagship store of the ubiquitous chain of Central department stores, after undergoing major renovations aimed to increase its level of prestige and exclusivity. The origins of the Central Group, and its subsidiaries Central Retail Corporation, Thailand's biggest retail conglomerate, and Central Pattana, the largest developer and operator of shopping centres in Thailand, lie in

the establishment of a general merchandise store by Thiang Chirathivat in Samphanthawong district in Bangkok's Chinatown. Thiang's son, Samrit Chirathivat, held the position of chairman of Central Group for 21 years, and was the first person to open a shopping mall in Thailand. The 'second' Central was located in lower Silom near Mahaset Rd and opened in the 1960's, while the third, Central Chit Lom, opened in the early 1970's (A. Wilson, 2004: 29–67).

Paragon's prime location in the Siam-Ratchaprasong hub guaranteed its popularity – for the time being. However, its cachet dropped somewhat in favour of newer luxury malls such as Central Embassy or Emquartier, in the ever-continuous search for sources of prestige in order to distinguish oneself from the masses. Built on the former grounds of the British Embassy, in Ploenchit, just two sky-train station stops away from Siam, the 18 billion baht Central Embassy complex opened in May 2014. Aimed at occupying the position as the most exclusive mall in Bangkok, and, in the developer's own words, 'Redefining the New Luxury Shopping Experience' the 37-storey complex featured high-end designer stores such as Christian Louboutin, Givenchy, and Vivienne Westwood, upscale food courts, restaurants, and a cinema, as well as the six-star Park Hyatt Hotel.

Other recent, albeit less upmarket, mall developments include Terminal 21 in October 2011 and Asiatique The Riverfront in April 2012. Located at the bustling Asok intersection, Terminal 21 promised to differentiate itself from other malls by virtue of themed floors based on famous shopping streets of the world. Thus, for instance, the first floor is based on Nakamise-Dori Market and Harajuku Town in Japan, while the Mezzanine floor is based on Paris' Champs-Élysées Boulevard. Asiatique is situated on the former docks of the East Asiatic Company on the Chao Praya River. Designed as an open-air mall and bazaar, it was hoped to replace the popular Suan Lum Night Bazaar after the latter closed down in 2011, with the property slated to become yet another multifunctional retail complex. Despite an initial spike in value due to novelty value when these newer malls first opened, my recent visits showed that they still do not attract the same volume of crowds as Siam Paragon has managed to sustain over time due to its prestigious reputation, highly central location, and popularity as a middle-class leisure space. Meanwhile, older malls like The Emporium in Phrom Phong or Siam Discovery Centre

in Siam have undergone multibillion baht makeovers intended to help them compete with newer retail developments.

Perhaps in something of a backlash to the huge mega-mall developments that had been cropping up over the last decade or so, more compact 'community mall' developments have been mushrooming in trendy, affluent locales such as Thong Lor and Ari. Hence, J-Avenue on Thong Lor Soi 15, one of the pioneering community malls in Bangkok, was joined by Seenspace in April 2011, while K-Village on nearby Sukhumvit Soi 26, opened its doors in March 2010. Not far away, between Phrom Phong and Thong Lor BTS stations on Sukhumvit Road, Rain Hill Plaza opened in January 2012. Over on the other side of Bangkok in the trendy Ari neighbourhood, known for its popular fusion restaurants and retro-themed cafes, Aree Garden on Soi Ari Samphan has been a stalwart of the hipster scene since around the middle of 2010, featuring a regular Saturday artisanal and flea market. In essence, the retail and entertainment industries in Thailand have cannily capitalised upon the obsession with everything *hi-so* in order to differentiate and distinguish its products and drive business.

Yet, ultimately (and ironically), niche marketing putatively targeting Bangkok's elite *hi-so* often seems aimed equally towards would-be *hi-sos* in the middle classes who clamour for information on elite venues and tastes in order to emulate the 'real' *hi-so*. Even when prices are such that they guarantee genuine exclusivity (in the classic luxury pricing approach aimed at seducing the hip pockets of the affluent by excluding those of lesser means), they still cater to the Thai predilection to *doen len*. As well, there are a plethora of soap operas, lifestyle programs, books, magazines, clothes, furniture, and all manner of other consumer goods which fuel, target, and cash in on, the middle-class fascination with all things *hi-so*.

This highlights the question of the role played by marketers in redefining categories of people, and the extent to which 'market segmentation [has] created or exaggerated social and cultural divisions that might otherwise not exist' (Robbins, 2008: 26). Savvy marketers, who decades ago produced the first commercial to feature a *hi-so*, have created a highly specific category of individuals and a set of tastes, lifestyles, and images, which now pervades the media and which has become a *bona fide* cultural phenomenon. This has, in turn, created a sharp and

discernable distinction between those who are *hi-so*, those who are trying to be *hi-so*, and those who will never be *hi-so*.

Despite their attempts to distinguish themselves from previous malls, the newest mega-mall offerings feature more of the same monotonous brand names, restaurants, food courts, and showy ambience as older developments. Similarly, although much smaller and cultivating a more 'local' feel, the popular new community malls place no less emphasis on fashionability with their wine houses and craft beer bars, specialty bistros and cafes, and farmer's markets. All are subject to ephemeral moments of fashionability and prestige – as demonstrated by the distinct emptiness of some places, and the stifling crowdedness of others – before newer and more fashionable establishments replace them. Nevertheless, while they continue to attract patrons for their novelty value and promises of exclusivity, the crop of shopping mall developments that Bangkok sees every few years is a pattern that looks set to continue.

### Centres in Tension

Into the early twenty-first century, Rattanakosin has remained a potent, sacred material and symbolic embodiment of the monarchy and Thai democracy, and the hierarchical Indic-Khmer and Buddhist bases of royal influence continue to imbue the status differentiations that remain integral to urban Thai social life. Yet, even as Bangkok became denser and more convoluted, urban life continued to be organised around centralised nodes. By all indications, modern sprawl made centralisation even more important. Shopping malls, in particular, became the vital foci of modern life in Bangkok – no doubt a result of their multifunctionality as 'one-stop complexes' where people meet, work, run errands, or spend leisure time alone or with family and friends – and of course, indulge their consumer urges.

One of these hubs, centred around Siam and Ratchaprasong, emerged as the dominant area, its symbolic potency based on material wealth, education and modernity (see Map 4, p. 60). Yet, rather than replacing Rattanakosin as a ruling centre, I argue that the shift is much more nuanced, and is characterised by a tension between the two centres, rather than a replacement of one with the other. In other words, Siam-Ratchaprasong's ascension does not represent a displacement of the old social order, but an elaboration of it. It functions to provide a



new range of idioms to augment the potency of Bangkok's elite, whose power draws on the symbolism of both of Bangkok's ruling centres. This increases the complexity of the pre-existing system of social differentiation, and demonstrates how indigenous concepts of space and power framed the nature and manifestations of the transformations produced by modernisation and globalisation.

My analysis emphasises the importance of history and continuity, as well as the subtle nature of cultural transformation. The modern form of monarchic influence and authority was not achieved through the supplanting of older Indic-Khmer symbols of power. Rather, it was constructed via the augmentation of traditional symbols of monarchic prestige with the trappings of capitalist market domination. This is evident in the continued sacredness of such places as palaces, royal temples, and government offices, and the strong persistence of hierarchical distinctions in everyday life – albeit expanded with the vernacular of consumption and material wealth.

While it is important to acknowledge the influence of widespread globalised notions of material consumption on local notions of middle-class identity and lifestyle in Bangkok, it is also important to consider its interplay with older cultural logics of status display linked with urbanism. Today, older notions of 'face' and prestige have come to be closely associated with the deployment of the external markers of material wealth. Moreover, modern urban spaces, such as those of prestigious new shopping malls, are now subject to similar codes of conduct as those demanded by traditionally sanctified spaces of temples, government offices, and royal buildings. People may not really think in terms of *khaorop sathan thi* ('to respect the place') when it comes to malls, but attitudes towards, and behaviour within, prestigious malls – many of them located in downtown Bangkok with Siam as its centrepiece – clearly feature echoes of this orientation. In such places, individuals adhere to stricter codes of appearance and behaviour, just as they do in traditional places of power. Ultimately, while the new dominance of the idioms encapsulated by Bangkok's Siam-Ratchaprasong downtown hub represents immense change in everyday social relations, and in the way people define themselves and one another, these transformations are informed by enduring, albeit evolving, notions of space, power, and hierarchy.

The fact that the overwhelming majority of my informants felt that Thailand is divided along lines of *thana* demonstrates how important wealth has become as a way to distinguish among categories of people. In this sense, the ascension of Siam-Ratchaprasong as a 'ruling centre' is nothing less than a strikingly dramatic reflection of how social relationships have transformed since the Sarit era. The importance of *thana* in social differentiation also highlights a blurring of the distinction between 'old money' and 'new money', and illuminates why the markedly hierarchical relation between urban and rural Thai society, where there is a vast wealth disparity, has been exacerbated in contemporary times.

The increased frequency of protests in the Siam-Ratchaprasong area provides further evidence for the symbolic importance of the locale. As one of the busiest nodes in the city, where many Bangkok residents go to work and school, interact socially, and run errands, any disruption in the vicinity is a major disruption to daily life. As a major business and tourist district, any protests in the area also severely affect the Thai economy and the country's international reputation as a safe place to travel and to do business. In 2010, there was a months-long occupation of the area by socially and economically marginalised Red Shirt demonstrators. In the ensuing crackdown, almost one hundred people lost their lives. When protests flared up yet again in 2013 and 2014 against the Yingluck regime, led by Suthep Thaugsuban and the PDRC, many parts of Bangkok including its central commercial and business districts were paralysed. Ultimately, the corollary of the immense value placed on material wealth in Thailand is the social diminishment of those who lack wealth. This is something that has contributed in no small part to political tensions, as I demonstrate in the following chapter.



## *City Above Countryside*

### **Bangkok or *Bannok*?**

As I argued in the previous chapter, Ratchaprasong, in conjunction with the adjacent district of Siam, as well as nearby Silom business district, comprises a hub of shopping malls, luxury hotels and skyscrapers in central Bangkok which both materially and symbolically manifest Thailand's intense economic development from the latter decades of the twentieth century. The new dominance of Siam-Ratchaprasong's idioms represent major transformations in everyday social relations, and in the way people define themselves and one another, alongside persisting and ever more elaborate concepts of status distinction and hierarchy. The implications of this evolving system can be further seen in the nature of interclass relations and in the deeply entrenched, and often openly prejudiced attitudes, of many in Bangkok toward rural Thais.

In essence, the increased emphasis on wealth in Bangkok has exacerbated an already hierarchical relationship between city and countryside, especially between Bangkok and the economically disadvantaged Isan region, where the majority of the population is ethnically Lao. Furthermore, Bangkok's upmarket districts, and the exclusive malls that define them as such, represent the physical and symbolic spaces from which the urban and rural working classes are strictly excluded. Concomitantly, the many symbols of the city and urbanity, such as the Central Thai dialect, pale skin, education, wealth, and lifestyle are placed in a higher position – *thi sung* – in relation to all things associated with the rural countryside, such as dark skin, manual labour, dialects, and lack of wealth, all of which are categorised as 'low', or *thi tam*.

As a result, many rural Thais are treated as inferior in day-to-day social interactions, and either physically rejected, or expected to exclude themselves, from the most elite spaces in the city. Structural class gaps reproduce and reinforce social and cultural hierarchies, to the effect

that the urban and rural poor are not merely ‘different’ in comparison to the city’s elite, but are demonstrably considered to be inferior. It is not difficult to see why tapping this considerable bed of working-class resentment has been such an effective political strategy. These deeply ingrained prejudices also provide an explanation as to why primarily urban middle- and upper-class voters so readily reject the crushing electoral mandate of the lower-class majority.

From this perspective, the May 2010 Red Shirt protests, which paralysed Siam-Ratchaprasong and the arson attack on CentralWorld Plaza shopping mall, come to mind as a striking example of the working-class response to their disenfranchisement from Thailand’s economic progress and the shopping malls which have come to represent modern consumer capitalism. As I will show, this dramatic incident reverberates on an everyday level in the exclusion of rural and lower-class Thais from neoliberal urban spaces, and the authority that comes with having a command over such spaces through the mastery of transformed, modern notions of *kalathesa*, or ‘time and place’, to include material status markers and familiarity with *hi-so* consumption habits and lifestyle.

### CentralWorld Burning

In late May 2010, billowing charcoal smoke rose from the Ratchaprasong district, casting a dark pall over the city. Much of it came from the flaming inferno of the upmarket mall, CentralWorld Plaza. Rather than marking the end of the political crisis, it was merely the climactic close to one chapter of the unrest, during which thousands of red-shirted anti-government protestors swarmed the commercial centre of Bangkok in an ultimately failed attempt to oust the then Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva’s regime from power. In the aftermath of a brutal military crack-down to disperse the protests, Red Shirt UDD protestors allegedly looted and set fire to CentralWorld Plaza and also targeted the Thailand Stock Exchange, the Metropolitan Electricity Authority, the Metropolitan Waterworks Authority, the Office of the Narcotics Control Board, numerous branches of the Bangkok Bank, the Siam Paragon shopping complex, and several other commercial sites (see Map 4, p. 60).<sup>1</sup>

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1. Some speculators have suggested that CentralWorld was targeted because its owners refused to cooperate with Thaksin. There are rumours of past tension between the Chirathivats and the Shinawatras over a land-lease conflict. It is also rumoured

The 2010 UDD protests began in mid-March, immediately after 46.37 billion baht, or approximately USD 1.4 billion dollars, worth of Thaksin's assets were seized by the Supreme Court after it found him guilty of conflict of interest during his term as Prime Minister. Accusing Abhisit's coalition government of coming to power through illegal means, the UDD was also demanding fresh elections. Following a series of failed negotiations, the violent military crackdown on UDD protestors in 2010, and considerable pressure on Abhisit's government, an election was held in July 2011. The election results were in the UDD's favour, with the Democrat Party eventually losing control over parliament to the Pheu Thai Party led by Thaksin's sister, Yingluck Shinawatra.

At the time, however, it seems that opponents of the Red Shirt movement had yet more to gain from the attack on CentralWorld Plaza, which played right into, and compounded, pre-existing negative perceptions of the UDD and its members as violent and unscrupulous. These images are reflected in a cartoon in the 29 March 2010 edition of the ASTV-Manager Daily newspaper, founded by PAD leader Sondhi Limthongkul, which depicted the red demonstrators as water buffaloes led by ex-PM Thaksin Shinawatra, congesting Bangkok's streets in lieu of the usual traffic. In Thai slang, *khwai*, the word for buffalo, is also used as a derogatory euphemism for slowness and stupidity.

Such intensely negative stereotypes of Isaners are pervasive in everyday life in Bangkok. A major contributing factor lies in the large number of provincial migrants who go to Bangkok for employment, often as domestic workers or in service-type roles as drivers, waiters, cooks, and guards – designated in the status hierarchy as 'low', or *thi tam* – in relation to those whom they provide service for, who are categorised in the hierarchy as 'high', or *thi sung*. This dynamic, embedded in everyday life and social relations, accentuates the unequal relationship between affluent and underprivileged residents of Bangkok in concrete as opposed to abstract terms. Urban superiority is additionally encapsulated in the stigmatisation of provincial migrants as unsophisticated and unat-

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that Central Group has provided financial support to the anti-Thaksin movement. In public, however, the Chirathivats prefer to distance themselves from politics. This points to hidden factions within the Bangkok elite that further undermine analyses of the political crisis that are based only on class conflict and urban–rural antagonisms.

tractive, and the typecasting of economically disadvantaged people as morally suspect.

My aim in presenting examples of these perspectives in the following sections is not to reproduce such stereotypes. Rather, my goal is to draw attention to the widespread and deeply prejudiced nature of discrimination against poor and/or rural individuals. These examples highlight why relations between Bangkok's middle and upper classes and the urban and rural lower classes have deteriorated to the extent they have. They also suggest why Thailand's lower classes feel such strong resentment towards being perceived in such a way, and provide an understanding of why the rhetoric of class warfare persists in discussions and analyses of the Thai political conflict. Yet, as the following evidence indicates, the core struggle is about inclusion in the benefits of capitalism and development, rather than about challenging the system itself.

### **Labour Migration to Bangkok**

As opportunities for education and employment in the countryside are severely limited in comparison to those available in Bangkok, many rural people seek better prospects in the city, where there are greater opportunities for education, and earning a higher income (see Mills, 1999). Before the promulgation of a minimum mandatory level of formal education of nine years of schooling, most rural families rarely had access to education beyond primary school level, meaning that the only options were unskilled, low-paid occupations (Raya, 2004: 508). However, even menial labour provided the possibility to earn a better income and to achieve higher status in one's home village or town, something that explains the attractions of big cities like Bangkok. As Mills suggests:

Beyond conventional ideals of filial obligation and economic difficulties of rural households, labour mobility also reflects young women's (and others') powerful desires for acquiring the personal status associated with Thailand's modern, urban centres. Working and living in the city, particularly the capital city, Bangkok, provides young people with the cash wages and social opportunities to participate in new experiences and forms of entertainment and to acquire the commodity emblems – such as blue jeans, television sets, cameras, and other items – that represent claims to modern sophistication and self-identity (Mills, 1999: 12; see also 128–133).





**Figure 11:** Cleaner inside a luxury shopping mall

Given the huge numbers of Isaners that migrate to Bangkok to take up menial labour employment, it does not appear that education levels and occupational mobility have improved dramatically for most northeasterners.<sup>2</sup> Such structural inequalities were further exacerbated by the 1997 economic crisis. Isaners experienced perhaps the worst impact during the crisis, and huge numbers of people dropped below the poverty line as the ‘crisis struck at the weakest’ (Pasuk and Baker, 2000: 96).

2. In her study on gender, class, and ethnicity in paid domestic service employment in Thailand, Raya found that most domestic workers in private households in Bangkok have at best a primary school education, a situation that corresponds with the national workforce as a whole. She also reports that the average wages of workers hired in private households is 6,458 baht for males, and 4,390 baht for females (Raya, 2004: 508). Based on an informal survey of friends and informants who had maids, salaries can reach the six or seven thousand baht per month for long time employees, but are often much less, especially if the employee is a native of the poor neighbouring countries Burma, Laos, or Cambodia. Enquiries made about the security guards in my apartment buildings revealed their salaries were typically in the range of three thousand baht, per month. Although these salaries seem low, it should be noted that these enquiries were made prior to the introduction of the 300 baht minimum wage law in Thailand in 2013. It is also possible that the security guards were employed on an unofficial basis and were earning less than the amount they were entitled to. In addition, they may have been working part-time, or had part of their salaries deducted for room and board. This is not an uncommon employment arrangement in Thailand.

The lowest prestige and lowest paying jobs in Bangkok are filled predominantly by unskilled workers from Isan as well as from less developed neighbouring countries such as Burma, Cambodia, and Laos. Some unskilled migrants come from countries even further afield, like Nepal. It is not uncommon for even moderately well off households in Bangkok to hire domestic employees such as maids, nannies, cooks, and gardeners, at least on a part-time basis. Thus, hiring domestic staff isn't a sign of vast wealth, although it is an indication of a middle-class family's disposable income. As Muk, a successful Sino-Thai businesswoman who, like all of her friends, hired several domestic staff, pointed out to me during a conversation: 'If you want to find social divisions there is no need to look far and wide. You can see them within the household.'

Duang, a housekeeper from the northern provinces who had lived in Bangkok for many years, explained:

If you have a good education, then you can have a high status. You can be a manager or a supervisor. If you don't have a good education you will be like us, with only a low income of 5 or 6,000 baht. But even then, our lives in Bangkok are better than in the province. Here we have to clean the house or help look after the children, but if we are at home we have to work in the fields or on the farm. It's a big difference. And in the provinces, if there is no farming work, if they are not looking to hire people, then you don't have an income at all. Here we get a salary every month. It is better to be in Bangkok.

Puk, a nanny who worked for the same family, added: 'Then when you go home you have more "face", because you work in Bangkok. It's not a lot. Just a little, because we've lived in Bangkok for a long time, and also, because we can send money back.'

Another example is that of Maew, a tour company operator from a small village in Nakhon Phanom. She was the first person in her village to attend university, supporting herself through her studies by working as a singer, beer girl, and salesperson for CP fish and living in a share house with five small rooms, three people to a room, which she and her roommates rented for three thousand baht per month. Eventually, she graduated with a Bachelor in Tourism from Sakon Nakhon Rajabhat University. Now, her younger sister Chomphu had followed in her footsteps and was studying English at Ramkhamhaeng University in Bangkok.

Since arriving in Bangkok, Maew had become a partner in an extremely successful bicycle tour company, and now managed a large team of tour leaders and office administrators from similar rural backgrounds. The family's social status in the village had risen dramatically as a result of Maew's success, transforming them from the poorest family in the village to the wealthiest and most prestigious. Not only had Maew attained a bachelor's degree, but the work she was engaged in as a result brought her a much higher income than those of her peers in the village. In addition, whenever she and her sister Chomphu returned to the village, there was a great deal of fuss over the Maew, Chomphu, and their mother's trendy city clothes, well-maintained skin, and sophisticated hairstyles and makeup.

Puk and Duang had secure positions in a household where they were treated well by their employer and they were satisfied with their working conditions. However, not all provincial labour migrants end up in such situations where they are reasonably comfortable and secure. Outside of the domestic sphere, rural migrants can also be found working as valets, shop assistants, drivers, service people and waiters, janitors, security guards, hawkers, street vendors, or construction workers, all occupations which lack prestige and pay poorly. The common expression *ha chao kin kham*, has a meaning similar to the English expression 'to live from hand to mouth', and captures the precarious economic predicaments of some of the urban and rural working class. In addition to unreliable income, lack of opportunities, and financial insecurity, being positioned as inferior in everyday social relations are additional issues faced by Isan migrants to Bangkok who work in low-status occupations. Other studies have shown that the inferior status of domestic workers can also result in behaviour on the part of employers that could be described as abusive or exploitative.

For instance, Raya found that some domestic workers, especially foreign ones, are exploited and abused by their employers. This manifests itself as physical violence, unpaid wages, insufficient food, and confinement. She posits that this may be a legacy of the *that* (slavery/debt bondage) system of premodern Thailand. Yet, even in less severe cases of abuse or exploitation, 'the existence of the *that* system has created a boundary between members of the employer class and those who perform domestic work, as reflected in the relationships between the

two parties in contemporary Thai society' (Raya, 2004: 508). The dissemination of negative stereotypes of rural migrants is also exceedingly common in Bangkok, as the following examples demonstrate.

### **Negative Rural Stereotypes**

Discrimination against individuals from the countryside is pervasive in Bangkok. The perspectives I present here provide common examples of these kinds of prejudices, as drawn from the opinions and observations of middle- and upper-class informants. As is the case with many stereotypes, they are a way to categorise, hierarchise, and provide means to establish relations of superiority and inferiority. Many informants offered anecdotes to describe a newly arrived person from the provinces who obviously didn't know the ways of the city. These included knowing how to negotiate the perpetual motion of escalators, make the death-defying dart across multi-laned roads, navigate the public transport system, or dress to blend in at an air-conditioned mall. As one Bangkok resident, somewhat apologetically, admitted:

I know this is bad, [but] when I'm on the road and I'm driving, and I see a car, and it's got an upcountry license plate, they're always driving around slowly, not knowing where they're going. And you're like, 'I'm a Bangkokian, I'm in a hurry! Move!' And you resent them. But it's not their fault. They just got here. But when upcountry people come to Bangkok, they don't know what to do, they don't know how to get on the BTS. [I saw] this couple when I was on the MRT, and they didn't know what to do with the little black coin. Because you'd expect to put the coin somewhere, but in the first instance, you just have to tap it. And nobody tells you that. But everyone in Bangkok knows that. Right? When people are from upcountry, they don't know! So they're standing there, and you're in a hurry! And it just adds to this feeling of resentment. Bangkok people are so ... because you're taught to be competitive, and fast, you know? So, that is why we discriminate against people from upcountry ... you know you shouldn't do it, but I think people are just naturally judgmental, so anything that can set it off, will. And you always want to feel like you're better than another person, it's just climbing the social ladder, so ... if someone gives you an opportunity to look down on them, most people wouldn't think twice of doing it.

As is evident from these remarks, rural people make an easy target when, in the city, there exists an imperative to communicate one's own social

status by establishing one's superiority in relation to others, especially when the other is a rural person who is unaccustomed, by no fault of his or her own, to the ways of the city.

Once, when I asked Arun, a man from an upper-class family in Bangkok, what he thought about the provinces, he replied: 'The provinces are where dumb Thai people come from.' Noticing my shocked expression, he laughed and assured me that he was kidding. Arun's attempt at humour was an attempt to capture what he believed to be the prevailing attitude, and he continued: 'I feel that's a perception lots of people have.' Ek, another informant from an upper-class family, revealed that:

'If people come from a different part of the country, like Isan ... instantly you would have an opinion that this guy is a different status to us. It's just because of the way people perceive that part of the country. But it's just a stereotype. I think the people from Bangkok kind of make the rules. The people in Bangkok set the perception that this group is different to us, [or] that group is different to us.'

Sometimes, friends (from both the city and the provinces) would affect the exaggerated, 'snobby', *phra ek* or 'leading man' voice that is typical of actors in Thai soap operas (who generally play *hi-so* characters). This voice is often heard on the radio, as well. Such jokes are a light-hearted but incisive critique of the privileging of Bangkok speech – and hence, Bangkok people – over country people. Bangkok's central Thai dialect (*phasa klang*) is the official language of education and governance, and therefore, the one that carries the most social capital. While all formal schooling is conducted in central Thai, and most Thais from the provinces that I encountered who were living in Bangkok spoke *phasa klang*, they often did so with an accent that distinguished them from native Bangkok residents, and made 'blending in' with locals rather difficult. This is especially the case for Southerners and Isaners, who have distinctive accents compared to Bangkokians.

Accents may change as individuals spend a greater amount of time in Bangkok. Thus, mastering central Thai and a 'city accent', is seen as essential to marking one's length of stay and degree of establishment within the city and thus status in the urban hierarchy. The following opinion from Fon, a systems administrator, is quite representative of this attitude: 'It's not fool proof, but then there are certain assumptions that you can make, based on things like the way people talk, accents, for

example. And, so, if you can tell if someone is, say, from the northeast, chances are they weren't from a middle-class family'. However, even when someone has been in Bangkok for an extended period of time, social competitiveness means that others may be quick to pick up on even slight accents during social interaction.

Dao described a story involving a company dinner to which she and her parents had been invited, where another attendee happened to remark on Dao's mother's almost imperceptible Kanchanaburi accent. This caused her mother to feel quite affronted. She recollected:

We went out with some *really* snobby people. And my mum hates going to these social functions. She hates them! [And] some woman, who was married to another director, said to her: 'Are you from Kanchanaburi? I can tell.' [Laughing, Dao continued:] And my mum was *so* mad. I don't think she has an accent, certainly not that strong, but this woman was able to pick it up.

Dao also revealed that her mother's family felt that she had married 'beneath her', when she partnered with Dao's father. Ironically, however, Dao's father's family felt that Dao's mother was the one who wasn't 'good enough' – despite the fact that she was much wealthier and more well-connected than her future husband. She may have been a millionaire, but she was only what they referred to derogatorily as *sethi bannok* – an 'upcountry millionaire' – and as such, she was of a lower station, in their eyes, than their Bangkok-born and raised son.

Food serves as another divider and marker of social capital. The simple diet that constitutes Isan food – some of the better-known dishes include *khao niao* (sticky rice), *somtam* (papaya salad), *kai yang* (grilled chicken), *lap* (minced meat salad, sometimes prepared with raw meat), and *pla ra* (fermented fish) – is seen to be the food of the working classes. In contrast, the sophisticated, cosmopolitan fare in Bangkok, includes both traditional (palace-influenced) Thai as well as Chinese-influenced Thai dishes, and international cuisines like French, Italian, and Japanese food, eaten with cutlery and in air-conditioned food courts or restaurants, attains a kind of celebrated superiority in comparison with its northeastern counterpart.

Skin tone serves as another significant status marker. Countless television commercials, print advertisements, and billboards promote the whitening lotions that fill the shelves of supermarkets, chemists,



and cosmetic departments. More invasive whitening treatments are also available in clinics and hospitals across the city. Thai language websites offer a myriad of posts, threads, and indeed, whole forums dedicated to which whitening products work the best. Chat, a Sino-Thai teacher friend was fond of making the joking remark: 'Women don't like me. I'm black, and I'm poor'. Chat's darker skin often led people to assume he was a rural, working-class person. As such, his friends would often call him *Khamen* (Khmer) or *Phamma* (Burmese) as a 'joke'. Chat's cynical self-appraisal is a self-conscious commentary on the superficial association of darker skin with rurality, economic marginalisation, and hence, lower social status. Perhaps as a partial result of its large ethnic Chinese population, those from Bangkok are also often associated with having pale skin, at least in comparison to phenotypically darker Isaners, and Southerners. Many female informants complained that guys in Bangkok are only attracted to girls with the *a muay* look, the stereotype of the thin, ghostly pale, and demure Chinese girl.

In addition to ethnic variation, skin colour is linked with class-based labour distinctions, particularly the sun exposure associated with low status agricultural work and manual labour. Those who are fortunate enough to be born with white skin (or who are able to artificially achieve it) benefit in being treated perceptibly – and sometimes dramatically, better – than their darker cousins. Ratni, a Sino-Thai woman with very pale skin, marvelled at the fact that people never seemed to look down on her, no matter how under-dressed or dishevelled she looked, because of her skin colour. She also reflected that having pale skin had now taken on the dimension of being educated, as well. While the current obsession with white skin might be partially attributed to the current Japan and Korea craze in Thailand, in the past, the fad was attractive *luk khrueng*. Thai-Caucasian models and celebrities could be seen in every commercial and magazine, and were splashed across giant billboards, epitomising the most desirable form of beauty.

Whatever permutation on whiteness is embraced by current fads, the undeniably relentless pursuit of perfectly milky-toned skin by many in Bangkok, particularly women, appears to be a way to distance oneself from the status-diminishing associations of darker skin colour, economic marginalisation, and rural origin. Yet, social class and status boundaries such as accent, education, employment, cuisine, lifestyle, and skin col-



our have repercussions far beyond the symbolic. Such stereotypes also translate into the construction of physical, spatial boundaries to keep out those who are stigmatised as being poor and working class.

### **Prejudice and Spatial Boundaries**

The Emporium shopping complex is located on bustling, iconic Sukhumvit Road adjacent to Benjasiri Park, a popular sporting and leisure venue. Real estate in the Sukhumvit area is amongst the most expensive in Bangkok and the residents of the many condominiums and apartments in the area comprise a considerable proportion of the shopping complex's target market. In addition, there are several elite international and prep schools in the area, providing for the educational needs of the children of wealthy Sukhumvit residents. The complex was developed and is owned by The Mall Group, a retail empire founded by Supachai Umpujh, who manages the company with a core team of family members, with his eldest daughter Supaluck at the helm. The Mall Group is also responsible for Siam Paragon shopping complex, and the older 'The Mall' shopping complexes, of which there are seven located in and around the central Bangkok area, and another located in Khorat (Nakhon Ratchasima).

Along with Central Group, their close competitor (which is also similarly owned and run by a close-knit family group, the Chirathivats), the Mall Group is a leader in the lucrative Thai retail industry. The mall underwent major renovations in 2005, at the cost of 800 million baht, and again in 2014, at the cost of three billion baht. The latest renovations comprised the addition of another mall, the equally exclusive Emquartier, across the road from the Emporium nexus. The two malls are connected to each other and Phrom Phong BTS station with a broad footbridge that provides easy access for desirable patrons. For those not perceived to fit within the targeted group of clientele, however, the exclusive image of the complex is, literally, heavily guarded.

Aum, a thirty-year old Sino-Thai teacher, told me how one weekend morning she decided to buy some take-out noodle soup for herself and her sister from the popular food court on the top floor of the Emporium. On that occasion, Aum left home in casual clothes, as she was only planning to 'pop in' at the store. However, as she walked to the entrance of the mall dressed in shorts, a t-shirt, sandals, undone hair and without

make-up, she was stopped by a guard, who simply stated that she could not enter (*'khao mai dai, khrap'*). She did a double take and told the guard that she went there all the time and that her home was just down the road. He simply repeated that she could not enter. She ended the story with the furious pronouncement that *'khon Thai chop du tuk khon Thai'* (Thais like to look down upon fellow Thais). Noting Aum's casual appearance, in her flip-flops and shorts and cosmetic-free face, the guard assumed she was a lower class and, perhaps, a rural person.

Aum's story is not unusual. I heard of many similar incidents that point to a more or less 'unofficial' policy of exclusion of such people from the most prestigious malls. Aum's experience contrasts with that of Arun, who is also Sino-Thai but has pale skin and markedly Chinese features. He described his own debate with a friend, who insisted that he had witnessed people being refused entry to the Emporium because of their appearance. Arun was sceptical, maintaining that he had gone to the Emporium several times dressed in what he described as 'an old crumpled t-shirt, shorts and flip-flops' and had not been turned away. His friend pointed out: 'Fair enough, but you're white and you have Chinese *ngo heng*.<sup>3</sup> If someone who has Thai facial structure and is dark does that, they're not going to let them in'. Arun later mused, 'Now everything's pushed towards being skinny, white and foreign. Everything's about whitening cream ... everything's about weight loss, and all the condos are about being "Manhattan" or "Parisian". Apparently it's no longer good enough to be Thai'.

The following statements by Fern, a Sino-Thai university lecturer, corroborate Arun's remarks. She related a story about a longhaired friend who hated to wear a collared shirt, and who preferred to wear jeans and a t-shirt as he went about his daily business. According to Fern: 'He gets really horrible treatment everywhere he goes'. When I enquired about what kind of assumptions people made about her friend, Fern replied that they assumed 'that he's poor, and he's not really educated. And in the worst case, some might think that he's a criminal or something'. When I probed for further information on whether or not people were judged on looking poor or uneducated, she responded: 'Yes, but I think there's an exception for Chinese men. I don't know, I just noticed. For example, my brother, he dresses very casually as well. Like, shorts, and

3. *Ngo heng* is the Teochew Chinese word for 'facial structure'.

loose t-shirts. But sometimes he wears white shirts and accessories. So others are willing to overlook his clothes, and instead focus on his watch or ring.' Fern also mentioned a colleague who was often judged by the colour of her skin: 'She's a bit dark skinned and her eyes are really huge, because her family came from Indonesia. Yeah, so she looks quite dark. And then, the other day she was walking with her *farang* colleagues, and people treat her as ... they look at her in a way, as if they are questioning if she's a prostitute. It has happened to her so many times. Like, if you look a bit Isan, you are immediately put into certain categories.'

Fern was emphatic that those from the lower class, or assumed lower class, had more difficult lives and needed to 'prove themselves more'. She provided another example:

If you are an employer, and there are two candidates, and one comes from like, a Chinese family from Bangkok, and the other one comes from, I don't know, Loei, maybe, some province, in Isan, and they look totally Thai. I think, because we have this stereotype in Thai society that 'Thai' people, I mean the 'real' Thai [as opposed to Chinese Thai] are lazy and they always spend their money gambling and drinking ... and in the same situation, if your appearance is exactly the same, but one person speaks a Southern accent, for example, I think it's very likely that the other one would get the job. It's very ingrained. I mean, I am pro-equality, but in practice I think hierarchy is very ... there's no way to get rid of it. Even though I don't like this it will always still be there.

Needless to say, in the context of Fern, Arun and Aum's remarks, 'being Thai' is strongly connected with appearing to be poor and/or having rural origins. The possibility of being turned away, coupled with the sense of feeling out of place if one does make it past the guards, means that there are many who simply do not make the attempt to go to these malls. This was typically phrased to me as, '*Mai kla khao*', which should be distinguished from the expression, '*Mai yak khao*' (I don't want to enter). '*Mai kla khao*' denotes that the speaker is 'not brave enough', or does not 'dare', to enter. Som's experiences are a good illustration of this. Originally from Buriram, in Isan, Som completed her education up until *po hok* (grade six) and is a housewife. She said: 'I don't want to go to Central. It's full of people who dress nicely. At Lotus (a hypermarket), there are people who dress nicely and people who dress naturally, nor-

mal. I've been to Central a couple of times. They emphasise the way you dress, so I don't want to go'.

I found similar views amongst other informants of provincial origins, including Tum, a teacher who graduated at Ramkhamhaeng University. His wife stayed at home to care for their baby daughter, and also sold lottery tickets to earn some extra income. In response to my questions, he said that he had been with his family to Robinson department store a few times but shook his head adamantly when I asked if he had ever been inside any of the branches of Central, he responded, '*Mai kla khao*' (I don't dare to enter). Chat had an identical attitude toward Siam Paragon. When I asked why, he answered, '*Sangkhom mai muean kan*' ('It's a different society/social circle'). He pointed out that a poorly dressed or obviously unfamiliar individual in a *hi-so* place would stand out as an outsider amongst all the other patrons. As a result, he said, they would 'be looked down upon' (*don du tuk duay sai ta*); people would 'stare at you from your head to the bottom of your feet' (*mong tang tae si sa charot plai thao*). He added that they might also wonder why you were dressed that way (*thammai taeng tua yang ni*).

Other scholars have also made similar note of such class-based spatial boundaries. In the domestic sphere, Raya (2004) reports both self-imposed and enforced segregation between employers and domestic workers reflecting the status discrepancy, as well as reluctance to cross social boundaries. This could for instance involve the use of separate bathrooms and living spaces, use of separate furniture and kitchen utensils, separating laundry, and determining when domestic workers should retire to their bedrooms. She contends that segregation can be explained through Douglas' pollution theory, and the notion that in Thailand, hygiene and cleanliness are class markers. Raya also found that the inferior status of domestic servants was expressed in the terminology employers use to refer to these workers, such as *khon chai* (literally, 'person who is used' to refer to a domestic worker), *dek rapchai* (child servant), *luk chang* (employee), and *dek* (child), although some employers preferred to use more respectful terms like *phi liang* (nanny or caregiver), *khon ngan* (worker), or *khon tham ngan ban* (household worker). In contrast, the employees themselves preferred to use words like *mae ban*, which has no semantic or cultural overtones of subordination. Additionally, it was quite common for the children of employers

to call even older servants by their given name, something that would typically be considered very impolite given the importance of age as an index of status (ibid.: 514–519).

A study by Brody addresses the importance of dirt, cleanliness, and discipline in constructing an image of modernity and a modern, janitorial workforce in a Bangkok shopping mall, something which is contrasted with ‘less civilised’ rural spaces and peoples (Brody, 2006: 552). The cleaners are ‘disciplined’ by management practices that restrict their movements to the specific areas that they are assigned to clean, that set rules that ensure cleaners work alone and in silence so as to seem ‘invisible’, that have time strictly starting and finishing times and breaks, and assign them the position of *dek* (children) in the social hierarchy (ibid.: 544–545). They are also integrated into the systematic, urbanised approach – more highly valued than the unsystematic, rural approach – to cleaning through costly training programs upon being hired, which, according to Brody, ‘implicitly suggested that training and adopting the standards of city life and work would bring rural migrants into the modern world’ (ibid.: 548).

Brody also employs ‘resistance’ theory to characterise the predicaments of the janitors. She argues that such practices as sneaking into the storage closet to gossip, flirting with other employees, going to the nearby slum communities during work breaks, and eating *somtām*, are examples of what Scott (1985) referred to as a ‘hidden transcript’ of ‘everyday resistance’, and can be interpreted as a ‘subtle critique of Bangkok-centric notions of Progress’ (Brody, 2006: 536). As Brody argues, ‘behind the deployment of these everyday politics was a deeper political undercurrent, whether consciously intended or not ... an implicit challenge to the idealised image of a modern, largely urbanised Thailand driven by transnational businesses’ (ibid.: 553).<sup>4</sup>

My own observations and discussions with informants suggested that the notion of hygiene as a class marker is an important one. Thus, for instance, a common stereotype of the provinces, from the perspective of an urban dweller, is that the environment is dirty and food is

4. Brody further adds that ‘the cleaner’s attitudes disputed notions of cultural uniformity that underpin the project of constructing a modern Thai nation. Moreover, their lack of respect for the rules was an indication that they knew those making the rules could only do so by virtue of an unfair, unequal system determined by power rather than merit’ (Brody, 2006: 554).

not prepared with the standards of hygiene considered acceptable in the city. Yet, while it is possible that domestic workers may attempt to achieve a sense of autonomy within their work households by segregating themselves from their employers, self-imposed segregation may also stem from fear of retribution if the employee is caught (or, is perceived to be) crossing such boundaries as a result of the constraints on action and behaviour experienced by people of very low status.

Additionally, acts of 'everyday resistance' may be explained in less controversial ways. Brody herself notes that the cleaners felt it was *sanuk*, or 'fun' exchanging gossip and anecdotes, or flirting with other employees at the mall (ibid.: 551). As well, for the janitors, a quick meal or snack from a street vendor is both more fitting for their limited budgets and more relaxing than purchasing and consuming food from a mall. Brody notes that through the funds raised with their salaried employment, the janitors see a better future for their children, who might become the managers and bureaucrats who make the rules (ibid.: 554). However, this does not appear to be a rejection of the prevailing, urban-dominated social order, but rather, an indication of the desire to be included within it.

In my own research, I found that unfair behaviour on the part of employers, clients, or customers went largely unchallenged by the lower status party. In large part this was due to fear of provoking negative ramifications by transgressing status-appropriate behaviour. In other words, the asymmetry of the power relation requires that they adhere strictly to predetermined roles, even if it is just on a surface level, or they risk suffering the consequences. This is particularly true of people working in service occupations in Bangkok, who are always expected to defer to those who are of higher status than them. It also requires conforming to divisions and segregations of space in both the public and private spheres as a result of deeply unequal status relations and corresponding expectations of social behaviour. As the 'traditional' status differentiations of *kalathesa* have been transformed by the idioms of modernity and wealth, the consequence has been the coupling of economic disadvantage with moral inferiority.

### **Merit, Karma and Morality**

Dan, a community relation officer at a hospital in Silom, felt that he belonged in the middle class because he lived a normal, if not extravagant,

life, and didn't want for anything. However, he also added that: 'It's not like people who are in need are bad people'. The fact that he felt it necessary to qualify his remarks in this fashion, however, reflects a discourse that revolves around just such a theme. As we have seen, *kalathesa* has always been inextricably bound to morality. Those of high status and who have a greater knowledge of *kalathesa* are perceived to be more morally sound than those who lack these attributes.

At the same time, the 'traditional' status differentiations of *kalathesa* have been infused, in more recent times, by the idiom of wealth. The corollary of this is the discernable devaluing of people and places seen to lack the distinction of wealth – as well as the coupling of economic inferiority with moral inferiority. I came across many people who were not shy about expressing such attitudes. Indeed, elite disparaging of the moral status of the lower classes often appears to be a kind of verbal *furniture*, functioning as a status marker of a person's privileged background. It is also an attitude not uncommon amongst middle-class individuals striving to emulate the affectations of the elite, or trying to convey that they are of an exclusive background. At the same time, many members of the social elite appeared to genuinely believe in the moral inferiority of economically disadvantaged individuals, as the following examples demonstrate.

Amara was one person who harboured such views. She had studied for her bachelor's and master's in law at Chulalongkorn University and was now undertaking her second master's degree with a full scholarship at Assumption University, where her uncle held a senior administrative post. Her father is an entrepreneur and her mother works in politics. While Amara is planning a career in law, her elder brother is a general practitioner, and her sister is studying veterinary science at Kasetsart University. She currently resides with her mother and sister in a large home in an affluent neighbourhood in downtown Bangkok. Amara had expressed to me on one occasion that she disagreed with how her neighbours treated their maid, who was not permitted to eat her meals inside the main house with the rest of the family. Their own maid was never given leftovers, or treated this poorly.

One afternoon, Amara revealed that she didn't like to go to Siam Paragon, or CentralWorld Plaza, or the clothing market Tawanna, in Bangkok. According to Amara, the designer boutiques in Siam Paragon were overly extravagant for her student income, and the layout of



CentralWorld Plaza was confusing. However, I also knew from spending time with her that she felt completely at ease at both these places. She avoided Tawanna because, 'It's scary! I think it's ... scary!' Laughing, she continued, 'I don't know. I think it's very crowded, and the people are scary (*na klua*)'. I then brought up Amara's preference for going to the weekend market at Chatuchak, and asked her why there was a distinction between Chatuchak and Tawanna. She replied:

Chatuchak is okay, because the atmosphere is creative, and the vendors there are artisans. They're creative and it's great. But Tawanna is not creative, it's just people who distribute goods they purchase from other people. Therefore, the people who go to walk there, the [other] shoppers ... I don't know ...

At this point, Amara's sister, who was also present, interjected, 'Na Ram too!' Amara agreed, saying:

Yeah! I cannot go to Na Ram – it's so scary! It's very likely that you'll lose stuff there. And the people there are ... actually, they are factory people, factory workers, I don't mean anything by it, but they're just scary.

She went on to explain:

If you go to a market, the difference between the classes of people is much greater than at a mall. There are lower-class people, who are scary. You might lose stuff, or have stuff stolen, that kind of thing.

In order to properly contextualise Amara's remarks, it is necessary to describe the nature of Tawanna and Na Ram. Tawanna market occupies the grounds of a well-known shopping complex, The Mall Bangkok. Being further away from downtown Bangkok, property prices are much lower around Bangkok, although it is by no means a slum in the manner of, say, Khlong Toei. Being so close in proximity, The Mall and Tawanna market share patrons who drift between them. The latter specialises mainly in women's clothing at very low prices: bright, colourful, and trendy tops, dresses, skirts, bags, jewellery, and cosmetics. Given this range of merchandise and the low prices, the clientele of the market are mainly women of low to middle income, who are usually either university students or office workers. There are very few men at the market besides the vendors, or those who come with their wives or girlfriends.

Talat Na Ram (literally, 'Market in Front of Ram'), on the other hand, is not so much a market in the true sense of the word, but a shopping

area comprised of booths, vendors, and shop-houses which runs along the main road near Ramkhamhaeng University, not far from The Mall Bangkok. Like Tawanna, the vendors here offer low-priced women's clothing and accessories. In contrast to Tawanna, however, there is a much broader range of merchandise, which is of lower quality. It is also less fashionable, targeting a broader range of ages and tastes. At Na Ram and around Ramkhamhaeng in general, are found many of the lower- and lower-middle class youths of the type who frequent Saphan Phut. Nonetheless, as a result of the heavily female clientele at both markets, who are mostly university students or office workers, Amara's assertion that they are both filled with 'scary people' is somewhat incongruous.

Muay, a marketing executive who worked in the fashion industry, held similar views to Amara. On our initial meeting, she had been reluctant to tell me her exact place of residence, preferring to say that it was on the 'outskirts of Bangkok'. It ultimately came out during the course of our discussions that she lived across the road from the Seri Centre mall, in the Bangna area. However, Muay preferred to avoid Seri Centre, despite its proximity to her home. Her favourite malls were Siam Paragon and Central Chit Lom. In comparison to these two places, Seri Centre was 'different ... *totally* different'. When I asked her whether she liked going to The Mall, Muay shook her head, and explained:

I don't like the crowd. I sound a bit spoilt, but I don't like the crowds, and if I go to some place that I'm not sure about the crowd, I would feel a bit unsafe, especially if like I'm fully dressed up as if I'm about to go to Paragon, and then I go to like, IT Mall, Fortune Town, that's another place, or like Central Pinklao, then I would feel *really, really* unsafe, because wherever I go, there would be scary looking people staring, so I would be like, 'Oh, no', you know? 'I don't want to walk around here'.

Kamol, a language teacher whose mother was an aristocrat, also revealed quite candidly her apprehension when in the presence of people who were obviously of an inferior status to herself – something that she said she could surmise easily by their appearance. Her feeling was that she was somehow vulnerable – as a potential victim of a theft, robbery, or worse – because of her conspicuous wealth. She recounted an occasion when she was at a restaurant, and took her handbag off the table when a busboy walked past, for fear that he would snatch it. She did,

however, state that she would feel comfortable leaving it lying around if someone whom she described as ‘well presented’ (*‘taeng tua di’*) were sitting at an adjacent table. She acknowledged that this was probably not the right attitude, but felt that she couldn’t help thinking that way.

Similarly, Kan, an engineering student at Chulalongkorn university, felt that it was possible to discern a person’s status through: ‘Education, behaviour, the way they speak, their character, the way they act. If they are low, low-class, they will have not very good behaviour. They’ll be loud and boisterous. If they are high-class they will be polite.’ Another example comes from Fon, who stated that: ‘I know that my mother would definitely never, *ever* step into a market’. When I enquired as to why, he replied: ‘Because it’s hot, sweaty, [and] uncomfortable’. Upon further prodding, however, he revealed that she: ‘just sort of feels like it’s for a different type of people’.

Another time, when I discussed with Tun, Ek, and Ice, three young upper-class men, about where they liked to go out, they specified that they preferred to patronise clubs located around Sukhumvit. They would not, however, go somewhere like Ratchada Soi Four, because they felt the mechanics students who went drinking there tended to be ‘aggressive’. When I asked whether they thought these people were of a different class Tun and Ice concurred. Ek, however, disagreed, saying: ‘The fact that I wouldn’t go to Ratchada is not because of the different social statuses. It’s just, that place is quite dangerous. People act ... I don’t know, they’re like, gangsters. It’s like a gangster hangout’. In contrast, the people at the places where they tended to go out are ‘more polite’. Although Tun and Ice agreed that there was a class element to their perceptions, Ek did not (at least, not explicitly). In their discussion, the young men jumbled attributes such as ‘aggressive’, and ‘polite’, with ‘gangsters’, ‘mechanics’, and ‘class’. However – and perhaps this is the point – in everyday discourse all of these concepts *are* mixed in together, and difficult to separate from one another. These discourses may be explained through notions of what is considered status-appropriate for an elite person. They are also indicative of how a person who fits in securely with the *kalathesa* of elite space would stand out in a non-elite space or would find themselves extremely uncomfortable in such spaces.

Such perspectives as the ones I have presented here may appear to confirm the classic merit-power thesis in studies of Thailand. However,

I found that in practice, the situation was somewhat more complicated. The merit-power paradigm holds that position on the hierarchy, and hence, the power of an individual, is based on the amount of *bun*, or Buddhist merit, that the individual has earned in past lifetimes. As Wilson writes:

The position of a being, human or otherwise, in this universe may be measured by the degree to which he is subject to the will of and has power over others. This conception is the one which must be kept in mind in any discussion of Thai politics; that is, the necessary and just unity of virtue and power. Those who have power are good and deserve power. Those who gain power are good and deserve good fortune. Power justifies itself. This is not to be understood in a cynical sense, which would lead to the view that right is right. It is rather a magico-religious view that right is might (D. Wilson, 1979: 282).

In other words, social status is not fixed by birth, and ‘a man rises because of merit and is accepted without regard for his humble origin. Indeed, a humble origin implies a considerable store of merit and might increase his prestige’ (Hanks, 1962: 102). These ideas were originally promulgated in the *Traiphum Phra Ruang* as a means of legitimating the high status of royalty and aristocrats with superior virtue and morality. In other words, an individual’s social position was justified as a result of his or her positive or negative karma.

Yet, the connection between karma and status in Thai life has been challenged by a number of scholars. For instance, Evers suggests that the merit-power explanation is a line of thought that ‘confuses ideology and social reality’ (Evers, 1979: 173). Additionally, Juree and Vicharat argue that the ‘culture personality’ approach, which involves equating or explaining Thai cultural patterns in terms of a Buddhist world view oversimplifies the complexity of social interaction and ignores other, perhaps more likely causes, of Thai behaviour and personality (Juree and Vicharat, 1979: 420–421). Subsequent empirical research by Basham (1989), conducted in Chiang Mai, Ubon, and Bangkok, as well as by Bowie (1998), in rural northern Thailand, lends further support to these critiques. Basham reports that:

Many Thai who attend merit-making ceremonies, and comport themselves in public as if they subscribed wholly to merit (including, reporting belief to stranger-interviewers), express scepticism concern-

ing merit in more private contexts. Those who *do* profess belief in the concept in a variety of contexts – and, thus, who can probably be considered ‘true’ believers – find its explanatory value dwarfed by more mundane explanations for events which signal fortune or misfortune for those they know personally (Basham, 1989: 129).

People who are in positions of power are held to have risen through such factors as wealth, ability, or connections, and in fact, merit and power are perceived by ‘true’ believers to be mutually incompatible due to the amoral quality of power (*amnat*) (ibid.: 131). Ultimately, he suggests that, although ‘the merit and power theme is an integral part of conscious, overtly held Thai culture and not merely an anthropological construction’, there is nonetheless ‘the tendency to grant it excessive explanatory power’, when it might be best considered as part of Thai ‘official culture’ (ibid.: 128).<sup>5</sup>

Bowie argues that in the village setting, giving from rich to poor not *only* serves the function of paving the way for a more prosperous rebirth, to gain social prestige, or improve one’s fortunes in life, or state of happiness, but also reflects moral pressure on the rich to be generous. Their giving thus serves to mitigate interclass tensions, protect the status quo of the elite villagers, and allows them to keep the setting and amounts of charity under control. This provides inequality with a veil of legitimacy, yet ultimately, contributes to assuaging more dramatic forms of peasant resistance (Bowie, 1998: 476). As she points out, ‘charitable giving is a complex language expressing both domination and resistance ... generosity should not be located in the margins of volition and religion. Rather, it is central to the political dynamics of the relations between elites and subalterns in class-stratified societies’ (ibid.: 478).

My own research indicated that even if it were a given that Thai society offered a high level of opportunity for upward social mobility, people would not actively pursue it, and rise as easily as Hanks suggests, if they felt that their own and others’ fates, social status, and position within the hierarchy were already predetermined by the karma of past lives, and not by more mundane explanations. These explanations did sometimes include karma, but this was more prevalent as an ‘official’

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5. For more on scepticism concerning the place of traditional Buddhist beliefs in modern society, see Jackson (1989); Taylor (1989; 1990); Suwanna (1990); Schober (1995).

rationale, a discourse by which middle- and upper-class people could connect economic disadvantage and inferior morality. As I will elaborate further, more secular explanations for a person's status position were just as common. These included one's family background, educational opportunities, connections, and individual talent and effort.

So far, the examples shown here demonstrate how negative stereotypes of rural migrants and economically disadvantaged individuals result in the construction of spatial boundaries. These boundaries distinguish between the interior space of the upmarket mall and the outside world. They function to keep those with undesirable, immoral, 'rural' qualities – such as dark skin, unpolished presentation, inexpensive clothing – away from the sophisticated urban space of the mall. These frontiers also shape perceptions of entire neighbourhoods and districts, so that certain parts of Bangkok are perceived by the affluent as 'dangerous' by virtue of being working class. Yet, I also found the commonplace marking out of social boundaries in everyday status relations. The accompanying tensions are a common part of daily life in Bangkok, as the following cases demonstrate.

### **Status-Appropriate Distance**

One of Dao's most memorable lessons concerning appropriate social distance came at an early age, in an incident that clearly marked out the class boundaries to which she was expected to conform. As an only child, Dao was accustomed to playing with the family's maids. At night, she would invite them to come to her air-conditioned bedroom and watch television with her. According to Dao, she would also go with the maids to chat with the construction workers who came by now and then to work on her parent's house. Her father happened to come home one day and observe the interaction. Although he didn't say anything to her at the time, her mother spoke with her in private later, saying: 'You have to know who you are, you shouldn't be talking to those people because they're not ...' Pausing, Dao recalled her mother's words: 'She said, "*Man khon la chan kan*", which translates, "They're not the same class as you". Dao continued: 'But I was just a kid, I didn't think anything'.

Dao's childhood recollection demonstrates the tangible weight of class difference in human relationships, beyond the educational, occupational, and wealth related structural disparities that exist between

urban and rural Thais. A lonely only child saw potential playmates in her backyard, but Dao's parents insisted that she had to know whom she was: the daughter of an eminent family, and on a different *chan* – a different class, or level – from the maids and construction workers. On the other hand, as class equals, there was nothing inappropriate about the maids interacting socially with the construction workers. Another informant, Ratni, remarked, 'Thai society still has a class that receives service, that receives special treatment, and a class that gives service. Even though feudalism isn't official anymore, it's still here. It's in our culture. Thailand is still an elitist society'.

Another pertinent example is that of Nueng's relationship with her nanny. Nueng's nanny had been caring for her young children for many years. However, I never saw Nueng being warm and affectionate with her as she was towards her friends, including myself. When I asked Nueng why she wasn't closer to the nanny, who was so ensconced in their family life, Nueng replied that it would be highly improper for them to interact as equals, as she always had to be mindful of her role and status as the employer/superior in the relationship. However, the latter part of this assertion was not borne out in her relationship with her assistant of several years, whom Nueng herself admitted she treated as a younger sister, helping to pay for her college course, buying her food and gifts, and sharing a friendly camaraderie that was lacking in the relationship between Nueng and her domestic helpers. The variation in tone between the two relationships cannot be explained in terms of how closely Nueng worked with each of the two women or how much time she spent with them (if anything, the nanny probably won out in that respect, as a result of her involvement in the children's lives). Nonetheless, Nueng was able to emotionally invest more in the relationship with her assistant because the class discrepancy was not as wide. Even though Nueng and her assistant still weren't equals, and Nueng's role tended towards that of patron, they shared a genuine friendship, something that wasn't possible between Nueng and her nanny.

Also illuminating is Fon's case. Fon was a Thai Gujarati Indian whose family has been in Thailand for over five generations. The paper manufacturing business had been sold some time ago. Although still fairly affluent, they had experienced a considerable drop in status over the past couple of decades. Fon wryly noted: 'I was born into a higher-



class family. And then twenty years on I found myself middle class'. The family's drop in status was the consequence of illness in the family and heavy financial losses in the aftermath of the 1997 economic crisis. He recalled:

As a kid growing up, you knew that you were the boss, and the servants were the servants. So I would probably not talk to, for example, people from Isan. Because I would say, 'Okay, they're lower class'. I would not talk to the technicians [working at his company], or at least, I won't socialise with them. I wouldn't go out for a beer [with them], or whatever ... it would be considered improper. I have other friends, who are of the same social level. Some of the people who have worked for us since I was a boy, a little kid, [even] now, I still don't really know how to deal with them. Because growing up, I've always been the boss. But now that's not quite the case anymore. With these specific groups of people, they would still treat me with the utmost respect. I suppose [now] I'm more sympathetic to people on the lower rung of the social ladder. Before, I would have thought they were lesser people.

I then posed the question of whether he felt they were inferior, to which Fon responded: 'To a certain degree. They are labourers, people who work for you, or do as you command. Not, you know, humans with their own desires or merits'.

When I enquired as to whether or not people ever behaved outside of the roles that are expected of them, Dao responded that there was room for individuality, but that a person would be noted for it. For instance, she said, people would remark that: 'Oh, this is a *phu di* who is *tit din* – a high-class person who is "down to earth"'. She continued: 'High-class people are not supposed to be down to earth, but the variations do exist. Mainly, though, people expect you to act a certain way'. Dao's, Nueng's, and Fon's perspectives and experiences are typical examples of servant-employer relationships in Bangkok. In each case, interacting *as equals* with individuals from a much lower class would result in loss of 'face', as well as constitute 'inappropriate' status behaviour. The expectation to 'act in a certain way' (that is, to *ruchak kalathesa*) effectively means that the distance between a person of higher status and a person of markedly lower status is rarely bridged, as others will look to how well one maintains that distance – in the way one carries oneself, and the way one talks – as a measure of one's social status and moral fibre.

## An Incendiary Dynamic

I have shown in this chapter that the Thai political crisis is based in large part on entrenched barriers of class- and ethnicity-based discrimination, and the culturally engrained hierarchical positioning of city over countryside, which long preceded Thailand's trajectory of capitalist modernity. I found discrimination against lower-class and rural Thais to be a major source of resentment, especially amongst individuals from Isan. For instance, Maew, a tour guide from Nakhon Phanom, had a cheerful disposition and was often the first person to self-deprecatingly refer to herself or her home village as *bannok*. At the same time, however, she was extremely sensitive to slights against her background. Moreover, whenever I asked her about how she felt about places like Siam Paragon and the Emporium, Maew would, without fail, go on a rant about how she hated all the *hi-sos* in there who walked around like they were better than everyone else:

Before, the *hi-so* were people with royal blood. They had impeccable manners. From the way they sit, to how they chew their food, or the way they speak, you can tell what kind of upbringing they had. Now, there is the new *hi-so*, and they aren't the same. They buy expensive things, and wear flashy clothes, and they think they're better than you because they have money. These days, people judge you just on your appearance. I don't think that's right. I don't categorise people along the lines of wealth. You can have nice clothes, or a good education, or high status. But that doesn't say anything about what kind of person you really are.

Maew continued: 'These other kind of *hi-so*, they don't bother with people who are a lower class than them. When they go out they only go out with people who are the same'. Although she herself had experienced discrimination, she pointed out that others are often confronted with much worse. Maew gave the example of people from different parts of Isan:

Thai people value white skin, right? I'm a bit lucky because I'm dark but not too dark. If you're from the north of Isan like I am, people don't look at you that much. But if you come from the southern part of Isan, for example Buriram or Surin, and have very dark skin and square-ish bone structure, people look at you and think, 'Oh that person has a really Lao face. This person is so Lao'. Or if you speak and you have a

very strong accent, people will look at you and wonder where you're from. And they look down on you or they judge you.

Piek, a teacher from Ubon who had been in Bangkok for twenty years, once related how insulted he had been when mistaken for a driver when out with his Japanese girlfriend, because of his dark skin. Arm, a dark-skinned colleague of Piek's who had also dated a Japanese woman, had been confronted with the exact same situation, even though Arm was from a central province and not from Isan at all. Piek was proud of his background and his success as a teacher in Bangkok, and like Maew, he was easily upset by real and perceived insults to his background. Additionally, Nga, a woman from Yasothon who ran a *somtam* restaurant near Soi Convent, revealed:

I don't like *hi-so* people. Sometimes there are *hi-so* who come here because other people recommend the food to them. But when they arrive, they see that the place is very basic, there is only a dirt floor and plastic chairs, and they think it's not clean enough for them so they walk out again. Or sometimes they come and ask if there's a second room upstairs or if there's air-conditioning because the fan is not enough. They look at the setting and they think it's not good enough, but actually, when they eat the food they like it.

She continued:

People like to divide themselves into different levels. But in the end, we're all human. There are people who come to my restaurant, and they are maids. But they still pay the same amount [as the wealthier customers], 50 baht, for a plate of *somtam*.

Similarly, Puk, from Lamphang, who was as a domestic worker for a middle-class family with three children, observed:

The things that separate people from different levels in Thailand are money and education. Sometimes people who are rich, they don't want to talk to us. They feel like we are inferior to them. They might turn their head away rather than look at us. Sometimes even if you live close by, like if you're neighbours, they ignore you when they see you. They see us as very inferior to them. I just try not to take any notice.

Duang, a housekeeper who was also from Lampang, and who also worked for the same family, added: 'They are richer than us, so they think we are low compared to them.' Puk interjected:

Right, they have money so they don't see a need to bother with people like us. They stick to their own circles. I think it's good to have money because you have opportunities, but for some people it also means that they are not down-to-earth. They feel like they are better than others. It's not true when they say that poor people have no manners or don't have a good character. It depends on the person, not your background.

Discrimination was so severe that some individuals from the provinces divulged that they preferred to dissociate themselves from their rural backgrounds in certain social circles. For example, Nueng had achieved considerable upward social mobility in her lifetime, having put herself through a tertiary education, and having established a successful business. However, she would always emphasise to those who asked that she had been born in Bangkok, despite the fact that right after she was born, her mother had taken Nueng back to their rural village near the Thai-Cambodian border and raised her there. Although she felt it was unfair, her success meant that she frequently came into contact with those whose backgrounds were different from her own, meaning that she felt forced to hide her upbringing. In addition, she also had darker skin, which meant that she encountered spoken and unspoken questions about her background more often than perhaps a successful, pale-skinned Bangkok businesswoman, might.

The material on such forms of discrimination against rural people that I have presented in this chapter adds a further dimension to analyses of the urban–rural divide, by showing how the issue goes beyond conflicting conceptions of democracy, as proposed by Anek (1996), to small and large injustices and deeply entrenched prejudices that add up to a far more complex picture of ethnic and class tensions. These resentments provide a striking backdrop to the Red Shirt movement's occupation of central Bangkok and the subsequent razing of one of the city's most upmarket shopping complexes. The May 2010 and other political demonstrations in Bangkok have played dramatically on the feelings of various segments of the population. Furthermore, the 2006 and 2014 military coups show that the Bangkok-based elite are still unwilling to accept the electoral clout of the large numbers of rural voters whose efforts to have their political voices heard are getting louder and louder.

In an analysis of space and politics in downtown Bangkok, Ünaldi (2014) suggests that the former popular site for protests, Ratchadamnoen

Avenue in the old city centre, has become sterile, depoliticised, and sanitised, and now, increasingly resembles an outdoor museum. In contrast, 'as the centre of elite networks, spiritual forces, and Thai modes of capitalism', Ratchaprasong is a physical embodiment of the system which the UDD is seeking to criticise with their protests (Ündaldi, 2014: 220). The increase in demonstrations in this modern commercial district therefore indicates a change in the political discourse from a traditional struggle for democracy, as encapsulated by the 1973 and 1976 student uprisings and the May 1992 protests against military rule, towards agitation for major systemic changes and the disruption of the status quo.

Ündaldi rightly contends that the shift in protests from Ratchadamnoen Avenue and Democracy Monument in the old city centre of Rattanakosin comprise a meaningful strategy on the part of Red Shirt demonstrators to highlight their specific aims and demands. However, I suggest that this thesis concerning the growing politicisation of Siam-Ratchaprasong as a protest site (due to its role as the contemporary architectural manifestation of the interconnected interests of the monarchy, business sector, and military), and the increasing insignificance of Rattanakosin, is only part of the picture. For a more complete understanding of the Siam-Ratchaprasong's symbolic potency, I argue that it is also necessary to take into account the cultural construction and perpetuation of prejudice and inequality in everyday social relations, as well as the hierarchical positioning of rural and urban people, places, and spaces that I have described here.

Within this process, meanings and values attached to the traditional seat of power and the old city centre concerning *sakdina* and status-appropriate behaviour deserve acknowledgement as influential and enduring concepts that continue to have relevance in modern life, albeit in distinctly elaborated forms. Hence, rather than positing a clear break between old and new city centres, or the replacement of the former by the latter, my analysis emphasises the importance of history and continuity, as well as the subtle nature of cultural transformation, as expressed in everyday social relations. Simultaneously, it is worthwhile recognising that with the presence of venues such as the Bangkok Art and Culture Centre, Wat Pathum Wanaram, Sra Pathum Palace, Erawan Shrine, and so on, Siam-Ratchaprasong is indeed more than just a district of shopping malls (ibid.: 218). However, in the course of research,

I found that an ethnographic approach, which prioritises emic notions of space and locality, demonstrates that much of the significance of Siam-Ratchaprasong lies in its position at the intersection of pervasive discourses, beliefs, and practices surrounding consumption, identity, and status relations. This points to the usefulness of focusing investigations on shopping malls and other spaces of consumption in the area.

Thus, on one level, it may appear that the UDD demonstrations are protests against the excesses of a privileged, materialistic elite, as embodied by Bangkok's shopping mall culture. However, on a more nuanced level, the indication is that for many, the struggle is about inclusion – about sharing the benefits of neoliberal capitalism as represented by urbanisation and the city – rather than about challenging the dominant market system in a straightforward fashion. This notion is also supported by Sopranzetti's (2012) findings concerning motorcycle drivers who are supporters of the Red Shirt movement. According to Sopranzetti, the motivations of these motorcycle drivers to participate in demonstrations draw on frustrated consumerist ambitions and obstacles to aspirations for upward mobility, in which 'a quest for democracy, access, and social democracy is conceptualised through a language of capitalist consumption and new desires' (Sopranzetti, 2012: 362). In essence, then, the mobilisation of Red Shirt supporters is driven by their marginalisation, and the hope to partake in a fair share of the advantages of the modern capitalist system, rather than the desire to completely overturn it.

This marginalisation, based on prejudices that I have explored here, places a discontent rural and urban working class at the bottom of the social hierarchy, along with the concomitant limitations on fulfilling desires for more opportunities, respect, and recognition. This resentment is paralleled by the sense of outrage expressed by many PAD and PDRC supporters, many of whom hold the view that the urban and rural poor are ignorant, uneducated and gullible villagers, whose political mandates are worth little, if anything at all. In this light, the 'breaching' of central Bangkok – the Siam-Ratchaprasong hub – by the Red Shirt movement, and its partial destruction upon the said demonstrators' departure, can be seen as an amplification of the symbolic significance of the everyday division of space in Bangkok and its – now literally – incendiary dynamics. Within this class-based segregation of space, shopping malls repre-

sent something more than globalised 'non-spaces' lacking distinctive characteristics in the Castellan sense (2010). They are the spatial foci of a matrix of physical and social boundaries, constructed and imposed by a variety of actors, which articulate the morass of conflicts, of which ethnic and class prejudices are a fundamental component.

Many of the economically disadvantaged constituents of the Red Shirt movement are among those who are typically kept out of elite spaces, or who alternatively, do not dare enter them. Events such as the May 2010 arson attacks on CentralWorld Plaza therefore punctuate the important role of spatial politics in cities. The distinction between urban and rural Thai society – Bangkok and *bannok* – is an undoubtedly potent social differentiator. Structural disparities underpin urban–rural differences, but as I have argued, these simultaneously generate, and reinforce, powerful and pervasive cultural conceptions of urban superiority and rural inferiority.

Yet, life on the urban side of the 'divide' presents its own challenges, and one of the major difficulties with urban–rural divide analysis is that it does not always take into account the everyday challenges facing supposedly comfortable middle-class Thais in Bangkok. Within this system of elite privilege and entitlement, wealth and connections are often more important for success, rather than a person's own merit and ability. The outcome of this is the monopolisation of power and opportunities by a small minority, while the majority of the population experience major barriers to upward mobility and the fulfilment of aspirations. The result is an inflammatory politics of resentment that at the same time, points to issues of common interest far broader than those which divide the competing factions.



## *The Value of a Person*

### **Status Competition in the City**

Over lunch one day with Nueng at Zen, a popular chain of Japanese restaurants, she expressed how glad she was that we could talk about the things that troubled her at work and within her household. This was something that she was unable to discuss with most of her other friends, because it was ‘important to keep up an image’. She went on to say that she hated the fact that high society in Bangkok was so ‘fake and superficial’, and how difficult it was for her to be nice to people that she actually disliked very much, all for the sake of ‘making good connections and keeping up appearances’. She also didn’t like socialising with her husband’s friends because she felt that they were too *hi-so* for her, and she felt inferior to them.

Nueng further lamented the fact that in Bangkok, people from different social strata do not mix at all, whereas in the countryside there was less hierarchy, and people socialised more freely. According to Nueng, this was why her mother and her sister preferred to live in their rural hometown, rather than living with her in Bangkok. Muk, a Sino-Thai woman whose family was involved in property development, expressed that in Bangkok:

Everybody is competitive. Everyone lives by looking at other people. We look at other people more than we examine what we ourselves are as human beings. But people in the provinces, they have an easy, relaxed life. They live in the provinces so they don’t have to have a life where they must compete with everybody else to get into a higher position like people have to in Bangkok’.

As Muk’s comments indicate, for many residents of Bangkok, the rural provinces represent a world where there is little need to compete with others in order to get ahead in life, and where people enjoy a

greater degree of equality. Missing from these idealistic representations are the crushing struggles to earn livelihoods, the poorer standards of healthcare, and the low levels of formal education. Also missing is acknowledgement of the prejudices that rural Thais face, or the social and economic marginalisation they experience. There is similarly little mention of the huge numbers of domestic migrants who travel to Bangkok to take advantage of the opportunities to be found there, or to pursue ambitions that would otherwise remain unfulfilled in villages or small towns.

Often, the contrast between the urban world and the rural world is framed in terms of differing degrees of societal competition (*kan khaeng khan*) and the need to maintain 'face' (*na ta*). Despite the fact that the majority had spent very little time in the provinces, there nevertheless exists a widespread conviction amongst many in Bangkok that, in provincial areas, people are more willing to help others and are less fixated on money and status. Prejudice, belittlement, and downright treachery, all hidden behind a veneer of cordiality, are said to be part and parcel of the game of status competition as it is played in Bangkok. So is the proverbial 'cold shoulder', meted out to those who would not make good connections or with whom association would detract from one's status. These frustrations are expressed in a striking set of discourses rooted in the challenges of middle-class life in Bangkok.

Muk further commented that in the city: 'everyone competes so that they can have "face" in society, so that you can be recognised in a big society. But in a rural community everyone is simple, easy going, there is not so much competition, you don't need to do anything to have face'. Andy, the Hong Kong-Thai man whose brother was a celebrity, observed:

Here, rich people just tend to stick together. And when they go out, they go out together. When they do things they do things together. And ... they're very fake. When you have money, when you have status, you become very cautious of everything. You're really cautious of people attacking you, or trying to cheat you, because they probably did the same to other people to get that money, right? They have to be, to stay alive, to get up there. Having high social status, you have to deal with other things, too. You have people looking at you, and you lose your freedom ... if you are in that position, there are many people

around you, and you can't always decide whether or not people come to you because they need something from you.

Ratni, a student, felt that in Bangkok, people seem to:

make friends with that person not because she is a nice person but because her father is this, [or] that. You get into a place because you know this person or you know that person. I think in the country, in other provinces, it may be different. [In Bangkok] people judge each other on their class, their outside, and people befriend you because they believe you belong to a certain class.

Although such sentiments were extremely common, there were some informants who noted that the anonymity of Bangkok meant that there was less chance to notice or be interested in other people. The people they did know were educated at a similar level, were almost all engaged in white-collar employment, and enjoyed a reasonable amount of disposable income. In contrast, status divisions could be seen much more clearly in the countryside, where the difference between those who have power, position, and wealth, and those who do not, is much more marked. Additionally, in the country, people were more likely to notice and gossip about those who acquired more material goods than others (for instance, if someone in the village bought a refrigerator or a television).

Moreover, they felt that there also appeared to be less space to flout social hierarchies in the country. For example, a civil servant, village head, or teacher would expect people to conform much more strictly to social conventions according to their respect. One rural migrant told me about how an old schoolmate insisted on being referred to as '*ajarn*' (teacher) after she graduated from a provincial university and found employment as a mathematics teacher in her rural community. Another informant, a Bangkok resident who had visited an Isan village to research a travel guide, recalled her astonishment when encountering an elaborate parade, complete with dancing and drums, performed by the members of that village for the entertainment and pleasure of junior civil servants. The junior civil servants were also presented with gifts of food from the villagers. A young civil servant trainee I met in Bangkok described the inferior treatment he received in the city as a lower middle class, albeit upwardly mobile, rural migrant, as opposed to that which he

experienced when he returned to his hometown (where his father was also a civil servant).

Perhaps the sheer size and anonymity of the city makes it more of a struggle to differentiate oneself from the masses in order to achieve upward mobility and the benefits of high social status. As one of my informants reflected:

Outside of Bangkok, being a head teacher or a principal in a school is already something that's considered quite prestigious, and can give you status in the province. So it doesn't take a lot to have status there. And once you do, it allows you to do just the same things as in Bangkok, whereas you would have to work a lot harder to get it in Bangkok.

In contrast, for middle-class people in Bangkok who seek upward mobility, the very fact that there are so many others in the same position makes the process of acquiring the things that are essential to enhancing social status and class position – wealth, connections, and prestige – a formidable one.

### The Struggle for Opportunities

A great deal of resentment about living in the city revolves in particular around the pervasive culture of using connections in everyday life. For instance, when I asked Kor, a Sino-Thai student at Bangkok's Suan Dusit Rajabhat University, about his thoughts on the use of connections (*sen sai*) in Thailand today, he responded with the adage: *Kha khong khon yu thi khon khong khrai*. It is a twist on the traditional expression: *Kha khong khon yu thi phon khong ngan*, which translates: 'The value of a person lies in the results of his/her work.' The newer version means something like: 'The value of a person depends on to whom that person "belongs"'. In Bangkok, it has now become more apt to say that a person's worth lies in their connections, or rather, the influence of their patrons, rather than in the work that they produce.

According to Hanks, the patron-client relationship is based on the concepts of merit, power, and hierarchy. In brief, Thais perceive all sentient beings, from heavenly deities, to humans, to the lowliest insect, to occupy varying positions in an enormous cosmic hierarchy (Hanks, 1975: 198). One's position within this hierarchy is commensurate with the amount of good karma that he or she has accumulated from past existences. This hierarchy translates into a social order, with the king at

the very apex, and 'each person pays deference to all who stand above and is deferred to by all below'. In return for obedience and service by those who stand lower in the hierarchy, a 'patron' provides whatever resources appeal to and benefit the 'client'. In the process, the patron gains a helper, increases his/her store of merit, and raises his/her standing in the hierarchy. Examples of patron-client relationships include the relationship between the king and his officials, between these officials and their own subordinates, between entrepreneur and employee, parents and children, older and younger siblings, and so on (*ibid.*: 199–200).

While this is not necessarily a new phenomenon, it has certainly intensified in recent times. Writing in the late 1970s, Juree reported that most people felt that they did not have enough connections or social ties, something phrased as 'not knowing anybody' (Juree, 1979: 158). In later research, Basham found widespread resentment concerning the use of connections to access education and employment, as well as the added development of the increasing use of cash payments as a substitute for connections, something that has intensified resentment even further (Basham, 1992: 16). As Kor's comments indicate, the importance of connections in Thai social life does not appear to have diminished. Today the use of connections and cash payments continues to pervade many different areas of life, from cutting through bureaucratic red tape, to obtaining employment or education, avoiding a traffic fine, or paying lower prices for desired goods and services.

What Scott (1979: 305–308) has called 'petty corruption' is rampant in Thailand, especially amongst lower ranking officials with low incomes. This can be divided further into 'speed payments', which are bribes that expedite a decision without changing it (e.g. paying a clerk to issue a driver's license more quickly), and 'distortive payments', which change the decision and contravene formal government policy (e.g. paying a clerk to issue a license when someone is not legally entitled to it). Scott also distinguishes between bribery, which is a positive inducement towards a certain outcome, and extortion, which is when an official demands an illegal payment and backs up the demand with a threat of punishment (see also Pasuk and Sungsidh, 1996).

Use of connections also – still – has deep implications in terms of access to and control of economic and political power. Hewison argues that one noteworthy fraction of the bourgeoisie class in Bangkok is a

vastly wealthy, interconnected network of powerful Sino-Thai families based in banking and finance. Connections allow them not only to control the banking and finance sectors, but also other significant sectors of the Thai economy and including major companies (Hewison, 1989: 99–114). Thus, McVey observes that: ‘for those playing the power game, whether bureaucrats or entrepreneurs, the state’s rules do not set boundaries as much as they set the price’ (McVey, 2000: 14). She further elaborates that in the political sphere: ‘cash rather than reputation becomes openly the measure of one’s worth’ (ibid.: 16).

The use of connections in Thai society has strong parallels with the Chinese *guanxi* networks, which Yang defines as: ‘the cultivation of personal relationships and networks of mutual dependence; and the manufacturing of obligation and indebtedness’ (Yang, 1994: 6; see also Ong, 1999: 116–117). Yang found popular attitudes towards *guanxi* to be a mixture of pejorative, both positive and negative, morally neutral, and pragmatic (ibid.: 49–64). Basham’s informants similarly acknowledged that the exigencies of everyday life forced most people to utilise whatever connections they have available (Basham, 2001: 128). Furthermore, Pasuk and Sungsidh observe in their study of corruption and democracy in Thailand that: ‘forms of payment to officials are still rationalised as *sin nam chai*, the “gifts of good will” from the public to the people in power’ (Pasuk and Sungsidh, 1996: 188).

I found corresponding attitudes amongst my own informants, which support the findings of these respective authors. Many people held the view that as long as it operated within a system of patronage, Thai society would never ‘advance’ towards being truly fair and democratic. Others thought that it was acceptable to use connections or cash payments for the sake of convenience, as long as one wasn’t intentionally impeding or harming another. Yet more felt the use of connections to get ahead was unavoidable, regardless of the consequences for others. As Dao explained to me:

If you have connections, it’s really easy to have a good life in Thailand. If you don’t it’s a struggle. You’re not only struggling against overcoming basic tasks in life, you’re struggling against all those people who have the connections, who get in the line before you as well ... so that’s why everyone wants to make connections and wants to know somebody, otherwise it’s a real disadvantage.

According to Maem, a student from Chulalongkorn University:

I used to think it was bad. But now that I've seen a lot more, in work, [I think] it's necessary. It's the way things work ... it's easier to talk. It's easier to convince them to help you, if you know that person.

I also found the following sentiments, from Fon, an IT professional, to be common:

I have mixed feelings about it. On the one hand, I hate to see unqualified people that work at places where they shouldn't. Or people who are malicious in nature, who shouldn't be in certain positions, but they are. On the other hand, I get the feeling of a rush, when I can use a connection to just cut across red tape ... it's convenient. I mean, maybe if the things were more realistic here, in terms of the rules, and ways of handling these matters, I think that things would be much better.

This opinion is reiterated by Chom, a car accessories dealer from Bangkok: 'If you use connections you do take advantage of others who don't have connections. It happens very, very often, probably because of selfishness. I've done it myself, when I've had the opportunity, when it's necessary. Convenience is the main benefit.'

Using cash or connections may well be the most pragmatic response to Thailand's undeniably frustrating bureaucratic quagmires. Perhaps this is like the 'chicken or egg' scenario, where the quagmire exists in the first place so that one must use connections or pay officials money in order to wade through it. I had had plenty of experience with this myself when attempting to secure a research visa, which required many phone calls, tiring trips from one side of the city to another, and waiting for hours at the immigration bureau. In such cases, it is quite understandable why people feel they must resort to 'informal' approaches in order to get things accomplished.

I gleaned from discussions with informants that *good* connections are not always necessary to secure employment in a labouring or 'unskilled' job, such as a domestic worker, cleaner, motorcycle taxi driver, security guard, street vendor, or construction worker, although connections may still factor in. At least a quarter of the teachers I came across at one educational institution were from the same class at university, and prior to that, the same province not far outside of Bangkok. One of these individuals, Arm, had come to Bangkok to join the police service, but



didn't have the right connections to get in. Arm was eventually successful, however, in using his connections to become a teacher.

Positions in embassies or government ministries are highly coveted due to the prestige involved and the chance to make more good connections. One particular case described to me was that of a public relations manager of an ambassador who came by his job as a result of his important family name and excellent connections. Likewise another person, despite having been educated at two of the best universities in Thailand, could only secure her job at a government ministry through her father's connections. A mutual acquaintance related that forty people were accepted every year to work at the ministry, and that she knew, as a result of sources inside the administrative department, that thirty-seven of those forty had used connections to attain their jobs, including the woman who had used her father's connections to get in. As Toi, a tour guide from a village in Nakhon Phanom who had lived in Bangkok for a few years, divulged:

If you have an important family, or if you have a famous surname, then you don't even need to pass any tests. Other people don't even need to bother to try. It's not a fair society. For example, if there is a job and they are taking ten people, if out of those ten positions, there is someone with an important surname; they will definitely have an advantage over everybody else.

Many of Bangkok's insular business circles are similarly impossible to infiltrate without the right connections. Networks must constantly be maintained through the proper socialisation outlets, including attending events, associations and clubs, parties, and functions. Even for those who are already affluent and well connected, cultivating connections requires ongoing effort. Internships with big companies are highly sought after as places for up and coming youngsters to make outstanding contacts. Needless to say, winning places in these competitive internship programs requires excellent connections to begin with. Additionally, a large number of Bangkok's business organisations are run by tightly knit family groups, most of them Sino-Thai. These insular circles are impossible to infiltrate without the right contacts. As an example of losing such networks, there is the case of Fon's family, which had experienced downward mobility as a result of heavily financial losses in the aftermath of the 1997 economic crisis. Illness in the family had added to their problems. A corollary of their diminishment in wealth and status

was that invitations to social functions dried up, denying them crucial opportunities for making and maintaining the connections needed to remain in elite circles.

### **Education and Success**

Given the strong significance of connections for gaining access and opportunities, success often hinges upon the prestige and social ties formed during early education. Elite institutions like international and private schools in Bangkok are crucial places for making social contacts and connections, and form the basis of the elite circles of friends and acquaintances that an individual will move within in adult life. As a result, competition for entrance into elite schools is incredibly intense. Thus, the focus is not just on the quality of education as the informant Muk candidly explained, when discussing with me her choice of educational institution for her nine-year-old daughter, Nina. Nina was enrolled at a private Catholic school in Silom, close to their family home in Sathorn. The cost of such an expensive school was not a problem for Muk and she felt that the best way to secure Nina's future was to place her in the most prestigious school possible, where her classmates would be the offspring of entrepreneurs, politicians, high-ranking bureaucrats, aristocrats, heads of companies and corporations, or executives and professionals. Muk said: 'I don't really care what kind of education she gets in school. The most important thing is for her to make good connections'.

Muk's remarks indicate that education is important not only as a status marker, but also in terms of the networks created through schooling. Via such networks, class-based divisions in education correspond directly with elite privilege, access, and opportunities. When Nina is a little older, she will almost certainly attend an international school such as Ruamrudee International School (RIS), International School Bangkok (ISB), or Bangkok Pattana School (BPS), where the affluent send their children for schooling. Muk herself had attended an international school when she was younger. She had also attained her Bachelor's degree at Chulalongkorn University, before studying for a Master's degree in the UK.

Ratni recalled that one of the rare fights between her parents occurred because her father wanted to keep her in Lampang, but her mother wanted to send her to an exclusive school in Bangkok. Her mother eventually won out:

My mother really believed that I *had* to go to excellent schools, make good friends. ... If you are upper [class] you would go to a prestigious, private school. You wouldn't go to a government school. So you'd come out of there full of high society friends, who in turn would give you high society jobs, a high society spouse.

Another informant explained to me:

These days it's very important to get your child in the best school as possible. So people use connections to get them in. If you don't have connections, then you use money. Which school the child goes to affects their future, because they will have more opportunities if they get into a good school.

The 'contribution' fees often demanded by school officials are common knowledge in Bangkok. These contribution fees, called *bae jia*, or 'under-the-table' money, vary depending on the prestige level of the institution. One woman who was a former student of an international school explained:

With 'under-the-table' money, for Thai schools you'd have to pay something like a hundred thousand or maybe up to three hundred thousand baht [USD 3,000–9,000]. I think it exists pretty much in all schools. For a lower level school [you pay] in the ten thousands ... that's a lot for working-class families. So you either have the money or you have connections. If you have the connections, maybe you wouldn't have to pay.

When I asked what kind of connections they would have to be, she replied: 'Friends of the head teacher or the principal. Just knowing a teacher ... would be enough to get you in, but you'd still have to pay'. Entry into the best schools can be very expensive; one person reported that a family friend who had just enrolled her three children in an international school had paid 4.5 million baht (approximately USD 137,000 at the time) in 'contribution' fees. The *bae jia* system ensures that those of similar levels of wealth are channelled into the same kinds of institutions, thereby creating a lasting basis for class segregation from an early age. At the same time, it also offers a significant avenue for upward mobility – albeit only for those who are able to acquire the cash or connections necessary to put their children in good schools.

Those who do not have the right connections, and cannot afford tuition fees and *bae jia*, send their children to government schools. Under

these circumstances, the possibilities for success, meeting the 'right' people, and hence, substantial upward mobility, are low, as is evident from the following remarks by an informant who went through the international schooling system:

If you're in a good school you know upper-class people; if you're in a middle school you know middle-class people; if you're in a low, bottom school, you know poor people. It's already exclusive just by the amount of money you need to pay, tuition fees, the amount of money you pay to get in, so from a starting point, you already exclude people who are not from the same social status as you. And then your school affects university, university affects your job, so if you start off high you stay there. If you're in the middle, okay you can maybe move up or move down, depending on whether you're clever or not. But if you're in the bottom it's really hard to work your way up to being in the top [class].

This informant had attended high school together with Thai and Bhutanese royalty, and children of the Chearavanont and Chirathivat families, who own and run CP Group (a multibillion dollar agribusiness corporation) and Central Group (the leading group in Thailand's retail industry), respectively. One of her classmates even owned one of only two Lexus cars in Thailand at the time. She reflected that: 'Money and power is a really common thing for them ... these were kids who could afford everything that they wanted'. Yet, there are wealth and status divides even within the international school scene. The informant observed that while all the students come from privileged backgrounds, those who come from aristocratic or extremely successful business families (like the Chirathivats and the Chearavanonts) stood out from the rest.

Needless to say, the best schools and universities, and hence, the ones which confer the most prestige, are all located in Bangkok. The only education more distinguished than what the top educational institutions in Bangkok produces is a degree from a good foreign university. Such a degree communicates that a person's family is wealthy enough to be able to meet the high tuition fees of the institution and the cost of living in a foreign country. Several decades ago, a foreign degree was almost a prerequisite for a higher civil service position, and also functioned as a qualifying status symbol for membership of the bureaucratic elite;

foreign educations were extremely expensive and scholarships normally awarded to the children of civil servants, or higher-level government employees (Evers, 1979: 182). Moreover, foreign language skills serve as an indication that one went to a school with an excellent language curriculum (something which is rare outside of elite schools) or that one has studied abroad, indicating that one comes from a family with wealth and status.

Most upper-middle and upper-class Thais I knew could speak fluent English. Some could also speak another European language such as German or French. Two of my informants, Tun and Ice, had had elite schooling and attended university in London. Neither worked but, each received 'an allowance' of around 50,000 baht per month from their families (with additional expenses provided, if necessary). They drove luxury cars and lived in condos in downtown Bangkok, all paid for by their parents. Another member of their group of friends, Ek, was a business analyst earning forty thousand baht per month, educated at University College, London and Imperial College, in the UK. He was from a political family with an instantly recognisable surname. In addition to his corporate job, he had opened a boutique in Siam Square with some friends.

As a relatively expensive private university, attendance at a private university like Assumption (ABAC) is probably a more reliable indicator of family wealth than attendance at Chulalongkorn or Thammasat, which are public universities. Sasin Graduate Institute of Business Administration (Chulalongkorn University), which is both exclusive and expensive, is also very well known as an institution of elite education. I found that many informants with foreign university educations or who had attended top-tier international schools and universities in Bangkok such as Chulalongkorn or Thammasat, identified as upper class or upper middle class. At this level, class situation is not based so much on salaries or even occupation, but rather, on the distinctions of family wealth and status, excellent educations, extravagant lifestyles, and exclusive social circles.

However, there are exceptions to the correlation between elite education and class background. Places at prestigious universities such as Chulalongkorn or Thammasat are generally geared towards privileged students (due in part to their access to private tutoring, which allows them to achieve better test scores). Nevertheless, some bright students

of non-elite backgrounds are also able to win places at the two latter universities on the basis of good test scores. Two examples are Dan and Mint, who are colleagues in the community relations department of a well-known hospital in the city centre catering to wealthy Thais and expatriates. Both speak fluent English, and Dan is also proficient in German. Their lifestyles and tastes are quite cosmopolitan. As a result of their educations and language skills, they were able to gain employment in positions which bring them into daily contact with influential foreign and local members of the community. This, in turn, provides them with opportunities for making good connections. Dan and Mint are examples of individuals who have moved up from lower-middle class backgrounds as children of small business entrepreneurs, and managed to accomplish a more established middle-class status. Their cases demonstrate the importance of prestigious educations for achieving success. The limits on, or the achievement of, their further upward mobility, will depend on the opportunities and social circles provided by the connections created as a result of their educational and career accomplishments. The point remains, however, that for those already from elite backgrounds, such opportunities come much more easily as a matter of course.

### **Privilege, Authority and Entitlement**

Ultimately, life in Thailand is a struggle for those without wealth, status, or connections. Dao's experience of studying abroad had opened her eyes to exactly how privileged the elite in Bangkok are: 'It made me see life in a much more different way. I think the upper middle class and upper class in Thailand are very, very privileged, more than others, and they don't know what real life is about – that it's hard, and you actually have to work for things, and things don't come to you easily'. I asked her whether she thought other Thais who have lived in foreign countries brought back similar perspectives. She responded: 'Most people I know who went abroad are much more down-to-earth than people who stayed here. Abroad everyone's just more equal. Even if you're richer than another person, you're still equal'. I agreed, saying: 'It doesn't make you special'. She replied: 'Yes, but here, it's not like that'. Another person added: 'The ones who have never been overseas, are more materialistic and superficial, they look at wealth and the way people dress up. This is especially the case with younger people.'

During the course of fieldwork, I became acquainted with numerous individuals who had studied abroad and returned to Thailand to be confronted by the injustice of elite entitlement in Thailand. One such person was Arun who after completing his degree at a prestigious American university, and finishing an internship in Bangkok, now worked at a leading Thai banking organisation. The reason he was able to meet with my research assistant and me on a workday in the middle of the week was due to a conflict with a superior at work. The general consensus was that this particular superior was not running his department well, and the whole team's performance was suffering. However, no one had dared confront him until Arun approached him to point out the problems and offer assistance. The superior was irate at Arun's 'insolence', but the bank was unable to officially dismiss him, due to Arun's family's high social status. With no other department willing to work with him, he was relegated to an unattached, but paid, position of 'leisure' within the organisation. His account reflects how uncommon it is for authority to be challenged in Thai society. As Arun remarked:

When they say, 'You don't know what is low and what is high', I tell them: 'I [do] know, but that which is low for me is not the same as that which is low for you.' It's almost social brainwashing. Everything from the perceived family culture, to the education system of not questioning teachers, and this whole defeat of the self and accepting one's social position. Born a farmer, always will be a farmer, which really does kill development, innovation, self-drive, and self-respect as well.

Another informant similarly commented: 'People who insist on *ru thi sung thi tam* feel that they themselves are *sung*'. The following was also a common perspective:

What is the right time, the right place, and the right or wrong way to behave, is constructed. Actually, it is defined by society. In Thai society it's taught that people who are seniors are *thi sung*. I think that's okay. That people who are seniors or who are older are *thi sung*. [But] for the most part, people who [are] respected by others, people who others are *krengchai* towards, are people who are rich.

In contrast, he reasoned that education (*kan sueksa*), knowledge (*kh-wam ru*), or ability (*kh-wam samat*) should be the most valued sources of status and prestige, and not clothing, accessories, or material assets.



These opinions are by no means isolated ones. At the same time, however, it can be a challenge not to outwardly conform to social norms, even when they didn't necessarily agree with them in private. Were they to do so, the fear of being seen as morally 'improper' or uneducated, are powerful deterrents. In Arun's case, his challenge to authority caused considerable repercussions in the workplace. Yet, at the very least, his family's status was able to insulate him from the worst effects. But those who have neither wealth nor status – say, for instance, the migrant labourer in the factory or the waitress in the restaurant – would suffer the consequences dearly if they were seen to be insufficiently deferential. For this reason, the UDD demonstrations and the Red Shirt movement in general take on a particularly striking tone of defiance against the status quo that is unusual in the context of everyday status relations.<sup>1</sup>

Another example of this kind of differential treatment, was recounted by Arun who preferred to be mostly self-sufficient, relying on his medium-level income from his job as a banker rather than his family's considerable wealth. The fact that he did not drive an expensive car was probably part of the reason he was pulled over in the first place for a traffic violation – it is common knowledge that cars like BMWs and Mercedes are rarely pulled over for breaking traffic laws, no matter how blatant the indiscretion. At the time, Arun had only just arrived back in Thailand, and didn't know the roads very well – something which led him to make an illegal turn and drive in a bus lane. Arun was expecting to get a ticket, but the officer, emanating self-important machismo, proceeded to scold him quite thoroughly, before asking for his driver's license.

When Arun handed him his license, the officer studied it for a moment before returning to his patrol car to radio a colleague. When the call finished, he went to Arun's window and returned the license in a spectacular display of fearful and apologetic obeisance littered with the word *than* (a form of address reserved for very distant superiors), even

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1. My main objective in this chapter (and in the book as a whole) is to draw attention to the resentments and struggles of Bangkok's middle classes, and the reasons for their political mobilisation in the current crisis. The book is therefore primarily a study of urban Thai middle class identity and culture. Yet, even though it is outside the scope of the present work, the issue of challenging authority by the lower-class supporters of the Red Shirt movement is an important one that deserves future empirical investigation.

offering to give directions in case Arun was lost. The reason? Arun happens to bear the surname of one of the most notorious military dictators Thailand has ever seen. Having just returned to Bangkok after many years studying abroad, it had not even occurred to him to save time by dismissing the impertinent traffic cop, not with a bribe, but with his name. According to Arun: 'I totally didn't expect that. I thought it was so screwed up. Those who don't have social or financial status don't get away with anything, and those that happen to be a certain status, get away with murder. Which, people do, in Thailand. It happens all over the place but I think it's just a lot more in your face in Thailand.'

Privileges accorded the elite can be as simple as being able to access a reserved parking spot for an individual driving a Mercedes. Despite the fact that parking spots are a scarce commodity in Bangkok, the Siam Paragon shopping mall has a whole floor of parking spots for V.I.P. members of their loyalty club, and yet *another* floor of parking for those described as 'super V.I.P.s'. May, a prosperous hair salon owner, shared the following experience: 'If I drive my normal car in, nobody will take much notice. But if I drive my Mercedes Benz in, the attendants will drop everything and hurry to come and assist me'. She continued, 'Actually, people are all the same, no matter what car they drive. But in our society, people are divided into different levels because of this'. Arun related another story in which he saw a woman driving a Mercedes become angry when a security guard was too slow to move rubber cones out of her way in a parking lot: 'She jumped out of the car, and said, "Why are you being so slow, do you know who I am? Do you know who my husband is? Move the cones, bloody hell, you're useless!"'

Inside the shopping mall itself, being wealthy or famous can also produce better service. This is also the case in restaurants, hotels, clubs, and other public places of consumption, which operate not so much along the lines of a 'first come, first served' basis, but rather, provide the best treatment to individuals who occupy the higher position in the social hierarchy. These privileges also permeate other aspects of life, causing a great deal of resentment on the part of those less advantaged. Kaew, whose family was quite prosperous in its own right, having owned and operated a precious jewellery factory in Silom for decades, once expressed her frustration at the partiality shown by the police to a certain millionaire who lived nearby. The occasion was the Thai New

Year holiday, and the millionaire had invited guests to celebrate this at his home. Police had come to assist the powerful man with the logistics of the celebration, by blocking the road so guests could park in front of his house. The roadblock had prevented Kaew and her family from accessing their home by car, and she angrily recalled: ‘What right do they have, even though they are rich? Why do the police have to do so much for them? I felt it was unfair. I parked and asked the policeman why they had to go to such lengths. Was it because they had money? He didn’t answer me’.

Hence, on the one hand, such things as *furniture*, designer labels, shopping malls, emulation of the *hi-so*, the intricacies of climbing the social ladder, and being included in the most exclusive social circles appear to be rather superficial practices. On the other hand, the advantages they procure are not trivial in the least. Connections and cash payments can bring the convenience of cutting through red tape, a good parking spot, an excellent education, a sought-after job, or the best service. Economic and political power can be gained through infiltrating exclusive social and business networks and making the right connections. At its very extreme, the privileges of the rich, famous, and powerful extend to being judged by a different legal standard compared to those without similar resources.

### How Much is Too Much?

As we were chatting one evening, one informant asked me:

Have you heard of this case? Where an MP’s son shot somebody in a club, point blank, and he was still acquitted? He didn’t get sent to jail, because no one dared to come forward to give information. Those that did were intimidated and changed their stories.

The informant was referring to the high-profile 2001 murder case whose protagonist was allegedly Duangchalerm Yoobamrung, the son of veteran politician Chalerm Yoobamrung. Even though Duangchalerm was eventually acquitted, it is still widely believed that he is guilty of the murder. Indeed, several people I knew offered this incident as an example of abuse of power. Another person said: ‘According to them, there’s not enough evidence. Just like, twenty to a hundred people saw it! He thinks he’s above the law, let’s say’. He continued, ‘I think that’s a norm

in Thailand ... if you have money, and if you have a lot of connections, then, pretty much, you can get out of ... ' He trailed off. 'Murder's probably the highest degree, I think. But they'd still manage to get out of it'. In 2012, Duangchalerm again became the centre of controversy when the news emerged that he had been appointed as a police lieutenant under the Metropolitan Police Bureau with one of his responsibilities being, ironically, to instruct shooting courses.

Similar cases have hit the headlines and caused considerable controversy in recent years, include an incident involving the son of a former Miss Thailand, Sawinee Pakaranang, and businessman Kan-anek Pachimsawat. In an act which earned him the nickname of the 'Bus Stop Killer', Kanpitak 'Mu Ham' Pachimsawat rammed his Mercedes Benz into a bus stop in July 2007 following a quarrel with a bus driver, killing one person and injuring several others in Bangkok's Watthana district. He was charged with premeditated murder, attempted murder and physical assault and sentenced to just over ten years in jail in 2009. While Kanpitak was still free on bail in 2013, his punishment was reduced to a two-year suspended sentence after the Court of Appeals deemed him to have been suffering from bipolar disorder and consequently not in control of his actions. After public prosecutors and a plaintiff petitioned the Supreme Court, he was finally jailed for two years in September 2015.

Another famously high-profile case involved Orachorn 'Praewa' Thephasadin Na Ayudhya. Despite being sixteen years old and too young to legally drive at the time, she had been given a Honda Civic by her family and proceeded to crash it into a minivan at high speed in December 2010, sending the van over the safety barrier of the Don Mueang elevated expressway, and nine people to their deaths. Indicted and charged with driving without a license and reckless driving causing death, Orachorn was initially sentenced to two years in prison on top of a three-year suspended jail term. After a series of appeals, the sentence was finally reduced to a two-year suspended sentence, including the requirement to perform forty-eight hours of public service each year for four years, the latter of which she so far has failed to complete. She was also banned from driving until the age of twenty-five. The case outraged the public, who felt that Orachorn's lenient sentencing was a result of special treatment conferred due to the family's famous, high society surname.

Less than a year later, an incident occurred involving the heir to the Red Bull energy drink fortune, Vorayuth ‘Boss’ Yoovidhya, who was 27 years old at the time and grandson of the founder of the empire, Chaleo Yoovidhya (who had died six months prior to the incident). Vorayuth allegedly hit and killed a police officer with his 32-million baht Ferrari at the speed of 100 kilometres per hour. Rather than stopping, he dragged the policeman another 200 metres, before turning into his family’s estate in Thong Lor. Vorayuth was freed on bail but failed to appear for an indictment hearing, citing illness while on business in Singapore as an excuse, causing the authorities to issue an arrest warrant. The episode provoked a great deal of controversy concerning inequality in Thailand and the ability of the wealthy to flout the law – the Yoovidhya family’s estate is estimated to be worth around USD 7.8 billion, making them around the fourth-richest family in Thailand.

In another incident drawing attention to societal double standards, on 13 March 2016, car import company heir Jenpop Weeraporn forced his Mercedes CSL through a highway tollgate barrier. Two hours later, he crashed into the back of a Ford Fiesta at an estimated 250 kilometres per hour, killing the two students inside. Jenpop only sustained minor injuries. Footage of the crash was caught on another driver’s dashboard cam and was widely shared on social media. An alcohol test was not administered in the aftermath of the accident. Two officers in charge of the investigation were found guilty of breach of conduct. However, with the exception of Mu Ham’s eventual two-year jail sentence, little of the public outrage translated into any concrete repercussions for Jenpop or any of the other drivers involved in these cases. Today, Vorayuth is said to be living abroad, and has still not returned to face the criminal charges against him, although a panel probing conduct of the officers from Thong Lor station responsible for investigating the incident has found flaws and irregularities in the case.<sup>2</sup>

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2. See: ‘Thai Police: Enough evidence to convict wealthy man in Mercedes accident.’ *Asian Correspondent*. 3 April 2016. <https://asiancorrespondent.com/2016/04/thailand-police-enough-evidence-to-convict-wealthy-man-in-mercedes-accident/>; Thitiphol Panyalimpanun. ‘Thai public fed up with “special treatment” for the rich.’ *Asian Correspondent*. 24 March 2016. <https://asiancorrespondent.com/2016/03/thai-public-fed-up-with-special-treatment-for-the-rich/>; ‘Thai police: Flaws and irregularities found in Red Bull heir hit-and-run case.’ *Asian Correspondent*. 4 April 2016. All articles accessed on 11 April 2016.

In an article about the three high-profile cases, the online satirical news outlet *Not The Nation* (Thailand's version of The Onion) proposed the three be sentenced to a demolition Derby death match in an effort to bring some semblance of justice to the victims' families. The punch line of the article is a fictional quote from deputy Prime Minister at the time, Chalerm Yoobamrung, father of Duangchalerm: 'This bloody, vengeful spectacle of three rich kids killing each other will show the world that Thailand is a democracy, and that powerful connections and money won't save you from justice here', he said. 'Unless', he quickly added, 'You shoot a cop in the face at a nightclub. That's totally different' (*Not The Nation*, 2012). The dark humour expressed in the satirical article strikes a raw nerve in the chronic, inflammatory issue of patronage and abuse of power. It also highlights the impotent nature of the public and media outrage generated by the incidents.

As Fon observed of those with wealth, status and power in Thailand: 'Basically, you're free. The higher up you are, the more you can act with impunity'. I asked him: 'Free in what sense?' He responded: 'Free as in, you can do whatever the hell you want. Because the people who end up judging you, will ultimately be of the same or lower class'. I then asked: 'But why would a person with high status be beyond the law, what do they have that gives them that kind of freedom?' He replied:

I think [it's] just their ability to ... *give*. For example, you could give, say, a million baht to a judge. To bend the verdict in [one's] favour ... it happens all the time the time in Thai society. So, if you're of a lower class, you can't get away with a traffic violation. If you're higher, you can ... get away with murder. And it's just a matter of whom you know that can pull the strings, or whom you can pay to pull the strings.

Another person reflected on Thaksin Shinawatra's rise to power:

When he started out he wasn't from a high class or status, all he had was his wealth, and he used that to buy people who were corruptible, and bring himself power, and connections, and 'face' ... if you have a lot of money, you can run to be in the council, in your district, you can run to be an MP. Money can be used to get you positions of power, and positions of power translate into seniority in society ... the power, the 'face', the connections, employment, opportunities, everything is all connected, so, once you have something, then you're somebody and you have everything. You have power. Money and power. So if you

have power, then everyone respects you. Because power here can cut corners. It can crush people.

For those who are at the wrong end of the social hierarchy, the complete opposite is the case. A double standard exists for lower-class individuals without the wealth to pay bribes or the connections or influence to avoid legal repercussions. This can be the case even when the individual is not at fault. Nga, a *somtām* restaurant operator, revealed:

If we don't have connections it's not possible to achieve much. Even for the smallest things. Like for example, when the police come to eat at my restaurant, I don't charge them for it. It's not so much about needing them as connections, but so that they let my customers park around here without giving them trouble. But say for example if there was a really bad situation, like an accident or something. If you are in the lower class, there is nothing you can do. Even if it isn't your fault, all you can do is wait to get thrown in jail. It's unfair for the people who don't have any money or status. It's not right. Compared to people who are *hi-so*, we are always the ones who are in the wrong. Always.

Essentially, the ambiguity which surrounds the use of connections may be a partial reason why abuses of power are tolerated to the extent they are. People were resentful about the use of connections by others, or pessimistic about what the use of connections said about the 'state' of Thai society, but almost everybody agreed (no matter how grudgingly) with the necessity and benefits of using connections at one time or another. As an example, May provided a personal experience:

If someone wants to work at a company, a middle- or upper-class person, and they know someone who works there, a good friend or a relative, then for sure they will easily be able to get a job there. But if someone is in the lower class, and they don't know anybody, they will not get in for sure. They don't have any resources or opportunities. It happens all the time. Let me tell you a story. My sister was in a hurry to get somewhere, so she got on a motorcycle taxi, and a car hit them. At first the other driver, a young guy, said they would take full responsibility. But the relative of the driver at fault went to talk to the police, to organise the bribe they would pay to get out of trouble. That evening when I walked into the police station to try and sort everything out, the supervisor and everybody ignored me, they didn't even *wai* me. Personally, I did not want to use connections. But when I saw this



happen, I called someone I knew and scheduled another meeting at the police station. When I walked in the second time, everybody in the room raised their hands and *wai*-ed me. In the end, that guy had to pay for the damage to the vehicle, the hospital bills, everything. So if you ask if it's necessary to have connections in Thailand, I say yes, 100 per cent.

Ratni added: 'If I got arrested and I knew a high-ranking policeman I would call him. Connections get you to where you want ... wealth also leads you to where you want. I think I have come to accept it. It's the way Thailand is. It's really hard not to play by the rules'.

The entitlement of powerful people to favours and kickbacks as a result of their positions and the franchise nature of government positions is common knowledge. Civil servants are generally expected to supplement their low official incomes with 'irregular' payments – much as the *chao* (princes and nobles) and *nai* (leaders, bosses) did in the past with the practice of *kin mueang*, which literally means, 'to eat the country' (see also Pasuk and Sungsidh, 1996). Essentially, the traditional term *kin mueang* has become a euphemism for corruption nowadays. Fon reflected:

My mother remembers the days when corruption was just blatant. You could walk up and give a government official a suitcase full of cash. And, you know, it would not be illegal. So you could just, you know, give a government official a 'gift'. And it would be acceptable practice, and it would be legal. I think that it all comes down from the ... older feudal days. Where you would give something to the lord who owned your land, and in turn the lord will make sure that you remain safe. Extortion, if you will. But, I don't know, Thais see it as a system of protection.

The problem is that those in positions of power and influence are able to manipulate the system to successfully serve their own interests, often at great disadvantage to others. Viewed from this perspective, the lines between *kin mueang* and corruption, patronage and exploitation, privilege and impunity, are very fine ones. Basham (2000) suggests that so-called 'corrupt' activities on behalf of politicians and public servants are not normally deemed 'corrupt' if they don't violate what he refers to as 'the doctrine of reasonable greed'. Accordingly, much of the middle-class backlash against the Thaksin regime and the successive pro-Thaksin

administrations which followed might be interpreted as anger over the excessive abuse of money and connections to amass yet more wealth and power, although the charge is problematic in light of the pervasiveness of the use of connections at all levels of society. As Pasuk and Sungsidh point out, 'public opinion remains far from clear or coherent' on definitions of corruption (Pasuk and Sungsidh, 1996: 188).

This raises important questions. For instance, how much is 'too much'? And is it hypocritical condemning corruption whilst simultaneously using connections (couched in a language of necessity and disadvantage) to gain advantages? As we have seen, many individuals feel their only avenue for mobility is making use of monetary payments and connections to obtain sought-after opportunities for education and employment. Hence, the difficulty of solving the problem of 'corruption' in Thailand is inflected by the fact that in many contexts, such actions are often viewed as either harmless or morally neutral. On one end of the spectrum lies payment of a small bribe to avoid a traffic fine, or to bypass a bureaucratic hurdle. On the other end of the spectrum lies abuse of the legal and political systems by those with the most power and influence. Although the middle classes are, by definition, much more comfortable than the lower classes, they, too, are resentful about a hierarchy that esteems wealth and connections over all else. Predictably, those who already have wealth and status receive the lion's share of privilege, whilst others must compete intensely for the opportunities that do come their way. Many simply lose out. In this light, it is not unsurprising that such intense frustrations have been instrumental in the mobilisation of many individuals in the political crisis.



## Conclusion

Thailand is on the threshold of major transformations. The social and political upheaval that has occurred since 2005 has revealed intractable tensions that pervade the very fabric of Thai society. Corruption and patronage, class and ethnic prejudice, and the monopolisation of privilege and opportunities by a small segment of society, all lie at the core of a seething discontent that has taken form in various political movements and caused unresolved turmoil.

The 1932 revolution catalysed major changes by breaking the power of the nobility and introducing bureaucratic and militaristic elements into the class structure. Nevertheless, the locale of Rattanakosin has remained a potent material and symbolic embodiment of monarchical power well into the early decades of the twenty-first century. The legacies of *sakdina* and Indic-Khmer sources of royal influence have continued to imbue social life in Thailand with hierarchical status distinctions, which are encapsulated in discourses like *kalathesa*, *khaorop sathan thi*, and *ru thi sung thi tam*. After the Sarit era, the Thai class structure again expanded to include a powerful business elite and a 'new' middle class. No longer a city of canals and shophouses, Bangkok became a sprawling agglomeration of multi-laned thoroughfares, twisted streets, condominiums, slum communities, suburban estates, markets, hawkers, convenience stores, and shopping malls.

Yet, even as Bangkok became more dense and convoluted, urban life continued to be organised around centralised nodes. By all indications, modern sprawl made centralisation even more important. Shopping malls, in particular, became the vital foci of modern life in Bangkok – no doubt a result of their multifunctionality as 'one-stop complexes', where people not only shop, but also work, run errands, or spend leisure time alone or with family and friends. One of these hubs, Siam-Ratchaprasong, became dominant, with its symbolic potency based on material wealth and the modern economy. Yet, its ascension did not represent displacement of the

old social order but an elaboration of it. It provided a new range of foreign idioms to augment the potency of Bangkok's elite, whose power came to draw on the symbolism of both of Bangkok's 'ruling' centres.

Today, 'status-appropriate' behaviour in accordance with *kalathesa* is largely about being 'appropriately wealthy' – with all its ensuing moral implications. Older notions of 'face' and prestige have come to be closely associated with the deployment of the external markers of material wealth. Moreover, modern urban spaces, such as those of prestigious new shopping malls, are now subject to similar codes of conduct as those demanded by the *kalathesa* of the traditionally sanctified spaces of temples, government offices, and royal buildings. People do not necessarily think in terms of *khaorop sathan thi* when it comes to malls, but attitudes towards, and behaviour within, prestigious malls – many of them located in downtown Bangkok with Siam as its centrepiece – clearly feature echoes of this orientation.

The new dominance of Siam-Ratchaprasong's idioms represent immense change in everyday social relations, and in the way people define themselves and one another, alongside perduring, yet evolving, notions of hierarchy. The implications of this newer, hybrid system can be seen in the nature of interclass relations and in the deeply embedded, often unapologetically prejudiced attitudes of many in Bangkok, toward rural Thais. Although as the capital city, Bangkok has long been dominant, the increased emphasis on wealth has exacerbated an already existing hierarchical relationship between city and countryside, especially between Bangkok and the poverty-stricken Isan region and its predominantly ethnically Lao people.

The city's many manifestations – including, the Central Thai dialect, pale skin, elite education, a sophisticated urban lifestyle, and material status markers – are positioned above all else. As a result, many rural Thais are treated as inferior in day-to-day social interactions, and either physically rejected, or expected to exclude themselves, from the most elite spaces in the city. Structural class gaps reproduce and reinforce social and cultural hierarchies, to the effect that the urban and rural poor are not merely 'different' in comparison to the city's elite populace, but are demonstrably considered to be inferior. It is not difficult to see why tapping this considerable bed of working-class resentment has been such an effective political strategy. These deeply ingrained prejudices

also provide an explanation for why primarily urban middle- and upper-class voters have so readily rejected the crushing electoral mandate of the lower-class majority.

However, one of the major difficulties with the urban–rural divide analysis is that it does not always take into account the everyday challenges facing supposedly comfortable middle-class Thais in Bangkok. Emic understandings of an urban–rural divide are certainly significant in everyday life and clearly have an important role to play in the political conflict. Nevertheless, they do not capture the whole picture, and the urban–rural class ‘divide’ becomes considerably more ambiguous when taking into account the fact that many ‘urban middle class’ people are actually white-collar rural migrants. In other words, the individuals who comprise the group that might be considered ‘middle class’ in Bangkok come from a wide variety of diverse backgrounds and concomitantly, may have numerous common *and* competing interests.

These different groups include rural migrants and individuals who are often the first generation members of their families to attain tertiary education, and also include those who possess prestigious foreign educations and family backgrounds of affluence and social standing, exclusive tastes, and cosmopolitan lifestyles. Even within elite circles there exists a great deal of heterogeneity, as can be seen in the distinctions between ‘old’ and ‘new’ money, or between aristocratic and business families. Furthermore, understandings of class and status divisions by individuals can be highly subjective. In this sense, my aim has not been to argue conclusively concerning class and status differentiation in Bangkok but, rather, to problematise taken-for-granted categories such as ‘urban elite’ or ‘urban middle class’ and to shift understandings of how people view society as divided, and how they see others as ‘higher’ or ‘lower’ relative to themselves, like a modern-day *sakdina* of wealth, education, and influence.

In addition to catalysing Thailand’s modern economic development, the Sarit-era policies paved the way for many Thais to attain tertiary educations, earn higher salaries, and move into white-collar employment. Yet, as I have argued, the changes engendered by the capitalist economic and social transformations also exacerbated and elaborated power relations that were already in place, creating new and ever more complex social divisions and modes of inequality. The May 2010 Red Shirt protests which paralysed Siam-Ratchaprasong and the arson attack on

CentralWorld Plaza shopping mall come to mind as a particularly poignant example of the working-class response to their disenfranchisement from Thailand's economic progress and the shopping malls which ever-so-redolently symbolise modern consumer capitalism. This dramatic incident reverberated on an everyday level in the exclusion of rural and lower-class Thais from neoliberal urban spaces, and the authority that comes with having a command over such spaces through the mastery of transformed, modern notions of *kalathesa*, or 'time and place', to include material status markers and familiarity with *hi-so* consumption habits and lifestyle.

In the course of my analysis I have emphasised the dynamic nature of status practices and cultural hierarchies in Bangkok. I have also shown how they were structured – and will continue to be – by the cultural, historical, and political currents that shape Thailand. More change is yet to come, as the roles and forms of its most important institutions shift dramatically. For the time being, it remains to be seen whether or not the transition to a new era will result in greater, or lesser, equality, in a country that is still riven by schisms and instability.

Thai society is divided along a wide variety of complex lines, including, but not limited to, that which differentiates between urban and rural, or middle-, upper- and working-class Thais. However, fundamentally, there are issues of common interest that run much deeper than those which divide these individuals and groups. In this book, I have traced the frustrated lower- and middle-classes' struggles within a system of patronage and elite privilege and entitlement, in which wealth and social networks are often the most important ingredients for success, and not one's own abilities. Power, opportunity, and impunity are concentrated in the hands of a tiny segment of society.

In order to establish a genuine foundation for future reform, public debate needs to engage the pervasive use of monetary bribes, the exploitation of connections, and the cycle of unfairness and inequality these practices perpetuate. For such dialogue to be possible, critique of authority needs to be accepted and encouraged, rather than suppressed. The further fading of existing power structures such as those embodied in *kalathesa* and modern expressions of *sakdina* may warrant a glimmer of hope. Yet, unless these issues can be openly addressed, political unrest is likely to remain a continuing part of life in Thailand.



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