Ipoh cave temples and other religious sites in other parts of Malaysia and beyond. How do the cave temples, for example, interact and collaborate with each other and with temples in various parts of Malaysia? How do Buddhist and Taoist cave temples maintain their ties with their ancestral monasteries (zuting 祖庭) in China? How do Muslims perceive these cave temples in Muslim-majority Malaysia? It is important to note that cave temples do not exist in isolation but are situated within, and therefore influenced by, the course of socio-political change in colonial and post-colonial Malaysia.

Furthermore, this volume could be stronger with better chapter organization and editing. For instance, the introduction, chapter 1, and chapter 2 could be merged into a single chapter. In addition, the English translations contain numerous typographical errors, punctuation mistakes, and grammatical inconsistencies. For example, “glossary” is misspelled as “glossory” (List of chapter[sic]); “yinglian 楹聯” (couplets on the pillars) is mistranslated as “autograph of Tao couplets” (p. 64), and “sanjiao dian 三教殿” (hall of three religions) is mistyped as “hall of three regions” (p. 259). Lastly, the book does not have a bibliography, so readers are forced to search through the many footnotes to learn more about the sources cited.

Despite these minor quibbles, this volume is an informative and well-researched contribution to the study of Chinese religions and Malaysian history. It is hoped that it will inspire further research on the temple caves in Perak and in Malaysia in general.

Jack Meng-Tat Chia
Department of History, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, National University of Singapore, 11 Arts Link, AS1 #05-27, Singapore 117573; email: jackchia@nus.edu.sg.


In 1977, Benedict Anderson first focused attention on the then new Thai middle class, arguing that the success of the 1973 uprising
against military rule in Bangkok had depended on its support. By
the time of the massacre of students at Thammasat University in
1976, however, the same now anxious middle class, fearing economic
decline and the loss of its status, provided tacit support to a successful
rightist coup. Since that time, much has been written of the politics
of the Thai middle class, but little of its attitudes, its anxieties and
its aspirations. In this book, Sophorntavy Vorng helps to fill that gap.

A Meeting of Masks begins with the challenging task of defining
the Bangkok middle class. Its author considers educational prestige the
most important factor defining that middle class. Yet she notes that
a wide variety of secondary factors, such as occupation, individual
income or family income, may also contribute to middle-class status.
Sophorntavy therefore opts for “a non-linear model incorporating
multiple variables of class and status” (p. 29). While this approach
makes for a complex definition with untidy boundaries, it fits well
with the older status hierarchies in Thailand, which drew distinctions
between individuals on the basis of an even wider set of factors.
It may thus better represent the reality than more straightforward
definitions taken from social science literature. In a work of
ethnography, it proves effective.

Sophorntavy pursues the link between older status hierarchies and
middle-class attitudes, employing the concepts of kalathesa (time
and place), khaorop sathanthi (respect for place) and ru thisung
thitam (knowing high and low) to link the etiquette of the middle
class to the court culture of the past. She argues that using these
terms, which frequently came up in her discussions with middle-
class informants, best allows an analysis both of the interaction of
local and global frameworks of space and of the way in which new
status hierarchies overlay older hierarchies. For Sophorntavy the
Thai middle class is thus embedded in both global and local status
hierarchies, which largely shape its members’ thinking and behaviour.
She places particular emphasis on the role of local culture, including
the use of personal pronouns, levels of speech, the wai and other
status markers in Thai society.

Like Anderson, Sophorntavy attaches importance to the recent
origins of much of the Thai middle class; for both scholars, that
newness leads to anxieties. However, whereas Anderson investigated the political consequences of middle-class anxieties, Sophorntavy is more concerned with the social consequences. The middle class’s social anxieties, she argues, are rooted in uncertainties regarding the expected behaviour of its members, and they are often compounded for those new to urban lifestyles. Knowing how to dress, where to shop, what to eat and how to comport oneself in such a way as to gain acceptance as a member of the middle class can be quite complex. Since status hierarchies are linked to Thai Buddhist culture, appropriate behaviour also includes a moral component. To address the resultant anxieties, an entire genre of “how to” books on proper middle-class behaviour has emerged. And yet, we might note, the most common model for behaviour is other members of the middle class. Perhaps, ironically, independent thinking is therefore discouraged in the class whose members we might otherwise expect to defend social and political freedoms. Here, again, Anderson and Sophorntavy appear to share common ground, in that the ultimate anxiety, concerning loss of their newfound middle-class status, leads members of the Bangkok middle class to defend status hierarchies jealously.

Sophorntavy also outlines the competitiveness inherent in the strong focus on social hierarchies and in the economic competition in a neo-liberal climate that sees members of the middle class competing with one another in hopes of achieving “hi-so” (high society) status. Members of the middle class see nothing immoral in employing connections to circumvent legal obstacles to advancing their interests. Although we might also deem this mentality ironic, in light of middle-class frustration with politicians or rural voters who do the same, it should not be surprising that self-awareness and status-oriented behaviours are often at odds.

In closely examining the attitudes, behaviour and thinking of the Bangkok middle class, especially in regard to status hierarchies both local and global, Sophorntavy’s work will be of interest to social scientists across a wide range of disciplines. Indeed, we might wish that she herself had considered the implications of her work more broadly. The book’s conclusion is quite brief, and serves more
as a summary of previous chapters than as an effort to tease out
the implications of those chapters’ findings. The powerful role of
the rapidly growing middle class in shaping Thai society has thus
far received insufficient study, and Sophorntavy’s book marks an
important contribution to our efforts to understand it.

James Ockey
Department of Political Science and International Relations, University of Canterbury,
Private Bag 4800, Christchurch 8140, New Zealand; email: james.ockey@canterbury.ac.nz.

REFERENCE

Aspects of the October 6 Coup”. Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars

DOI: 10.1355/sj33-2l

Heritage and Identity in Contemporary Thailand: Memory, Place and

Heritage and Identity in Contemporary Thailand is a hard book to
review, chiefly because of the difficulty in categorizing it. It is not
really a monograph, in spite of Ross King’s being credited as the
sole author. All of the chapters are in fact based on dissertations
and writings by Thai scholars who are acknowledged accordingly
at the beginning of each chapter. The chapters not only utilize
content provided by selected Thai scholars but also offer their
perspectives. It is precisely this collaboration that means that the
volume is not simply another outside gaze at Thailand through a
Western lens. At the same time, the manuscript is not an edited
collection, since it represents a single narrative — that of King. He
admits at times going beyond the task of editing the contributions
to the book to the point of rewriting some parts. Accordingly,
King acutely displays his own awareness of the impossibility of
categorizing the book.