Alexander Horstmann
Class, Culture and Space
The Construction and Shaping of Communal Space in South Thailand

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ALEXANDER HORSTMANN

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Printed with the support of the Research Institute for the Languages and Cultures of Asia and Africa (ILCAA).

Gedruckt mit Unterstützung des Forschungsinstituts für Sprachen und Kulturen Asiens und Afrikas (ILCAA).

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Printed on acid-free paper
Gedruckt auf alterungsbeständigem Papier

Die Deutsche Bibliothek – CIP-Einheitsaufnahme
Horstmann, Alexander:
Class, culture and space : the construction and shaping of communal space in South Thailand / Alexander Horstmann. – Bielefeld : Transcript, 2002
(Culture and social practice)
ISBN: 3-933127-51-3

© 2002 transcript Verlag, Bielefeld
Typeset: camera-ready copy from the author
Printed by: Digital Print, Witten
ISBN 3-933127-51-3

Preface

by **GEORG STAUTH**

In recent years the emergence of the 'Newly Rich' in Southeast Asian societies has been subject of intensive academic debate and empirical research. The majority of these studies have been located within the conventional perspective of structural analysis and change, and thus subject to its limitations. The idea that the rise of the new bourgeoisie in local societies and the accompanying expansion of the sphere of public communication would lead to the decline of authoritarian and military regimes has long occupied the attention of Southeast Asianists. It is important to consider the new class as part of the global challenge to local structures. However, it would seem difficult to postulate–as perhaps in Taiwan and in Thailand–a general trend towards a decline in authoritarianism and the pharaonic state. Religious fundamentalism and liberalistic movements among students and intellectuals were by and large interpreted as the cultural and political representations of a trend towards democratic change among the Asian Tigers. However, these movements were rapidly absorbed by the new middle class culture.

This study conducted in the Songkla/Patani border region between Malaysia and Southern Thailand may be regarded as a response to the conceptual deadlocks of conventional structural analysis. In particular, Horstmann's idea that the new middle class itself in relation to ethnic or religious impulses for cultural reconstruction and network formation could attain the status of a social movement in local contexts, is highly interesting and opens up the terrain for new types of combining social with cultural analysis.

There is a certain contradiction between the idea of a middle class social movement and what emerges from this study to the extent that the movements in newly emerging spheres of public communication remain intrinsically tied to contested local space. The author offers a fruitful solution in that he points to the process of symbolic struggle for local authenticity which seems to operate as a functional equivalent to conventional social movements in that it strives for the social recog-

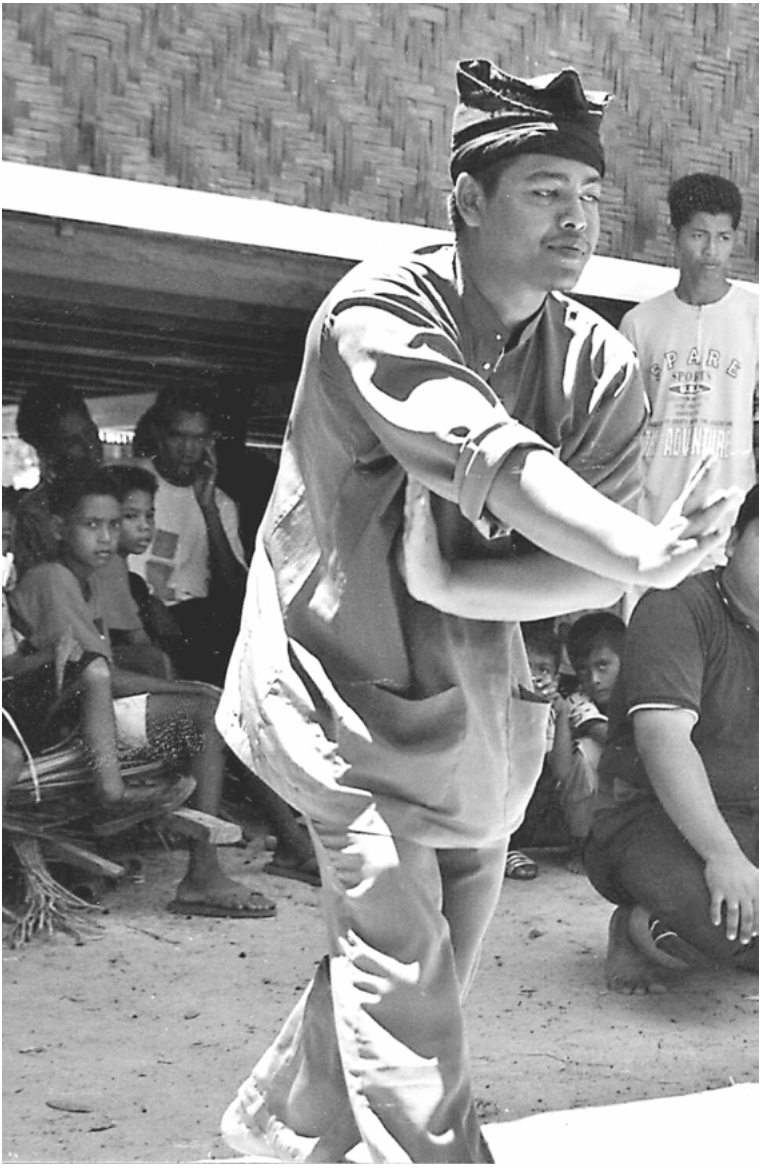
nition of minorities while at the same time leading to a rearrangement in the distribution of strategic social power.

From a German perspective, rooted in the theory of communicative action, it would seem appropriate to study local interaction with reference to a type of institutional dualism between state and civil society. However, in this study the author develops a different conceptual tool for understanding the broader sphere of structural influences. His perspective throws light on intrinsic logic of local cultural dynamics and power. In rejecting the perception of what would figure in conventional analysis as a traditional local community, he transforms local space into a strategic field of social analysis. Communal space turns into a stage upon which the relationship between religions, politics and life world, and specifically the religious, moral as well as the consumer cultural aspects of the new middle class are seen at work as they unfold. In line with his idea of a new social movement, Horstmann defines local space as an essential part of the new public, that is, as the space of symbolic competition, rather then the location of public speech. Interestingly enough, the movement unfolds by means of symbolic struggle.

While the concept of a local public delimits the conventional separations between the private and the public sphere, Horstmann speaks of a new field of social interaction where life style accounts for the rearrangement of individual and social interests. With this concept of social movement as a basis, the study inevitably throws light on the political processes of the local cultural field. It is undeniable, however, that the popular trend towards life style performance in local space is at the same time embedded in the global process of consumer culture and mass society. Paradoxically, then, globalization seems to be the intrinsic motive for the reconstruction of non-western ideas in local cultural practice.

The study analyses the Buddhist movement in Songkla and the Islamist movement in Patani as middle-class-based social movements with quite similar traits of self-awareness and community formation and at the same time the tendency to transform questions of life style into basic ideas for political and social legitimacy. This study makes visible the theoretical intransigence of 'space' with respect to social and cultural dynamics: symbolic competition over space–which easily turns into militant conflict–is a very specific and concrete category and, today more than ever, of general conceptual importance. This is not specific to Southern Thailand. However, a social cultural theory of space, such as that developed by the author, is of particular relevance to Southern Thai conditions, while on the other hand, as appears to be the case in this study, any cultural theory of locality cannot be taken seriously without a concrete description of the local context as such.

The question raised here is one closely and deeply linked to the problem of European self-perception and social theory: At certain stage of the study the question arises whether we can really differentiate today in a context of globalization between areas of strategic distribution of power by means of socially communicated space on the one hand, and socially contested localities on the other hand. The coincidence of both remains to be analyzed. Horstmann, in attempting to trace the dynamics of the symbolic and ideological, religious and ethical, of life style and idealistic struggles at the grass root level of a local society, develops with the necessary accuracy the tools to analyse the various components, forms and dynamics of the constitution of a new type of public sphere. Here, symbolic performance and representation of 'authenticity' rather then ideas and production of public speech seem to be at work. In showing the social impacts of this type of cultural transformation, this study is a strong contribution to the cultural sociology of space. The case studies presented in this volume relate to two places in Southern Thailand Songkla and Patani. In Songkla, there is a considerable portion of the new Muslim middle class escapes the rule of Islamic law and rigid rules of Islamic attire and lifestyle encountered in Kuala Lumpur or Penang. Driven by a nostalgic turn to secular liberties they frequent Thai and Chinese owned casinos and hotels. In Patani, a Muslim minority dreams of a golden age, of a Patani which was central to the expansion of Islam in the Malay Archipelago, surrounded by a moon landscape of Japanese-owned shrimps farms. Horstmann however attributes less importance to these nostalgic drives, believing perhaps such nostalgia could be read as the reverse side of movement and life style as he describes them. This is a conceptually informed contribution to the social analysis of the emergent middle class culture in borderline urban communities in Southern Thailand. In understanding the broader dynamics of local cultural drives, Horstmann contributes a pioneering study to local change in a time of intense globalization and a refreshingly new approach to research on contemporary Southeast Asia.



Performing the Malay Silat in Satun, South Thailand.

Preface and Acknowledgement

Many people and institutions have helped to realize this study, which is based on my Ph.D thesis at the University of Bielefeld (Horstmann 2000). The thesis was originally written in the context of the graduate school 'Market, State, Ethnicity' at the University of Bielefeld, the findings of which have been published in the volume *Integration through Diversity* (Horstmann/Schlee 2001). Both Prof. Hans-Dieter Evers and Dr. Georg Stauth provided more than the usual advice and moral support. I like to thank Hans-Dieter Evers for guiding me through his vast experience in Southeast Asian Studies and Prof. Solvay Gerke for her initial inspiration on the sociology of a middle class in Southeast Asia, which co-exists with an impoverished peasantry. Among the many people who helped me in Bielefeld, I like to single out Georg Stauth as a teacher of the sociology of culture and religion. I like to thank Dr. Suchart Sriyaranya for his gentle companionship during writing in Bielefeld. My gratitude goes to the German Research Foundation (DFG) for a generous fellowship, to the Friedrich-Naumann Foundation for sponsoring my participation in the Fourth Inter-ASEAN Seminar on Social Development in 1999 and to the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) for a post-doctoral fellowship in 2001. Further, I acknowledge the Asian Studies in Asia Participation Scheme grant from the Australian National University, which enabled me to organize a panel on border identity for the First Inter-Dialogue Conference on Southern Thailand in 2002. The Research Institute for the Languages and Cultures of Asia and Africa, Tokyo (ILCAA) provided me with just the best possible working conditions. I gave the thesis to competent readers in Thailand, Malaysia, Japan and Australia for feedback. Prof. Annette Hamilton (University of New South Wales), Prof. Sharifah Zaleha (University Kebangsaan Malaysia), Prof. Chaiwat Satha-Anand (Thammasat University) and Prof. Omar Farouk Bajunid (Hiroshima City University) provided stimulating comments. Their encouraging words urged me to go ahead with the publication. Obviously, I tackled questions that have not been dealt with before in the

literature on Southern Thailand (but see Stivens 1998 and Kahn 1991, 1992, 1995).

I like to thank Dr. Ryoko Nishii for her invitation to ILCAA, her kind assistance during my stay and I am extremely grateful to ILCAA and its director, Prof. Koji Miyazaki, for accepting my book in its Southeast Asian Regional/Cultural Studies research monograph series (No. A 818). I also like to thank Prof. Christian Daniels for his assistance in his position as head of the publication committee at ILCAA. Special thanks are due to Yui Kimijima for his kind assistance.

I like to thank Dr. Karin Werner and Transcript Publishers for their superb job. I thank Karin Werner for everything.

Giving Alms in Kelantan, Malaysia.

This study on the cultural competition of ethnic groups, their symbolism and negotiations of power in Southern Thailand is based on ethnographic fieldwork with a spectrum of people who have hitherto hardly been seen worthy of ethnographic attention. Academics, teachers and intellectuals are themselves very much involved in the refashioning and production of cultural identities on the golden Malay Peninsula. Sometimes, I thought that this spectrum of people was too involved in the social poetics and politics of cultural distinction. Thus, I make no excuse of centering on the narratives, educated people deploy in their everyday negotiations of power. This approach takes Bourdieu's concept of 'Distinction' (1979) as a starting point and looks carefully at the production of the many little essentialisms that result in the construction of the self and the other. In particular, I was puzzled

by the essentialist categories of Thai Buddhists and Malay Muslims and by the stereotypes and descriptions of their cultures, which, ironically resemble the essentialism of the nation-state and which seem to ignore the diversity and cultural complexity of the peninula at the Isthmus of Kra. This region has changed from a center of maritime trade, intercultural exchange and religious mission to a borderland, in which the people have become firmly incorporated into the space of the nation-state.

The focus on the educated middle class is violating a taboo. Social anthropologists and sociologists are expected to choose their village and to reproduce some of the myths and representations of Southern Thailand. But, following Herzfeld (1997), this cultural intimacy, which people like bureaucrats, artisans and teachers try to hide from the foreigner, is often the most interesting and revealing practice to be explored. Staying with my wife and our baby in Songkla and Patani, I found that some of the key codes which was structuring my fieldwork were the debates on morality, on family and the home, on sexuality and on gender relations. People were constantly talking about family and home. Debates on morality and the moral state of society obviously had an impact on notions of being a worthy person, of dignity and self-esteem. I noted the high emotions that have been linked to the organization of everyday life. This deployment of binaries of good and bad creates friends and enemies, people to be trusted and people of whom to be suspicious. The loss of comfort, moral security and the endless disruption together with the increasing presence of mass culture and cultural images of the West produce a melancholy, a discourse on authenticity, and nostalgia for the grandeur of the past, which seems so characteristic of the atmosphere reigning in Songkla and Patani as cradles of Buddhist and Islamic civilization.

During my 14 months fieldwork in 1995/1996, I became attached to the cultural complexity and beauty of the region and to the strong will (*hoa kaeng*) of its people. In following the cultural re-discovery of the people, I hope that I have not adopted the same longing for authenticity and nostalgia as my informants. I have to excuse myself for disturbing the private sphere and peace. I think that people are not used to speaking about themselves and their communication is often a discovery of the self. On subsequent visits, I became interested in religious networks, peasants and fishing households across the Thailand/Malaysian border. However, I kept being impressed by the escalation of identity politics and the emotions that were involved. I thought that I had to show the technologies of the self and the processes in which identities are negotiated. I found assistance in Herzfeld (1997) who argued that symbolism (social drama) should not be dismissed as mere

anecdote and from two friends, who helped me during the critical stages of the fieldwork, namely Khamnuan Nuansanong and Wae-Maji Paramal. Both are willy-nilly participants in the identity politics of Southern Thailand, embracing reformist ideas in Theravada and Islam, respectively. It is to them that I owe all.

I am very lucky to have Naomi and I have seen my two children being born and growing up during the writing process. Naomi and Sascha have been in the field and have contributed considerably to the final product.

It is a great loss for me that my mother could not witness the publication of this book. It is to her, Karin Anna, nee Rattay, that I dedicate this study.

Alexander Horstmann, Tokyo, August 15, 2002.

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Introduction

Visions, Claims and Utopias

Map 1: Southern Thailand, showing Songkla and Pattani in the Gulf of Thailand

The present study is concerned with the escalating competition in which cultural concepts vie for hegemony in the expanding local public sphere in Southern Thailand. The aim of the study was to assess recent forms of we-group formation, which seems to be centrally based on the cultural imagination and distinction of the educated middle classes. The transformation of society and culture in Southern Thailand has rarely been explored from this angle. Buddhist-Muslim relationships and identity politics in the 1990s can be interpreted as resulting from

the integration of Southern Thailand in national and global processes of change. The incorporation of the region into national and global spaces is a social process that leads to new forms of differentiation and distinction, not only for economic and political systems, but also for ethnic and religious communities (cf. Preyer/Boes 2001).

We want to turn the notion of globalization on its head by examining how the participation of the educated middle class is producing new zones of change and also new borderlines and new frontiers in social conduct. As the world-system expands, it incorporates new territories and new people. Southern Thailand is a boundary zone and a locus of resistance to incorporation. In this study, we explore how ethnic and religious communities in Southern Thailand are using social and cultural resources in local, national and transnational networks in their struggle for cultural distinction, thereby negotiating new borderlines and conditions of membership in local society.

Globalization is not a new phenomenon in Southern Thailand. The port on the Malaysian peninsula has been an important locus of education, cultural encounter and trade. It has produced a region of enormous cultural complexity influenced by India, China, Turkey and the Middle East. The incorporation of Southern Thailand into Thailand shifted the region from a center of the world to a border zone in the periphery of the nation-state.

The present study examines modernity from the angle of the educated lower-middle classes. This social segment comes about from the expansion of educational institutions, colleges and universities and the increasing plurality of education in Southern Thailand. We do not believe that globalization is a process that miraculously draws people from locals into a homogenous world, but, rather, it is a process that results from the initiative and creativity of people. The educated middle class are at once a powerful and a less-powerful group. They are powerful, because their educational capital provides them with a privilidged position in the cultural field. They are less powerful because their modest income limits their influence in the economic field.

Morality and Politics in Southern Thailand

It is from this context of accelerated change and the globalization of ethnic/religious codes that we re-examine the rise of ethnic and religious emotion in Southern Thailand: it is as women and men are discovering themselves in the numerous discussions with the researcher. The educated middle class is at home in educational institutions, comprising universities, research institutes, religious institutions, foundations, colleges, government schools, and Islamic schools. In addition,