

## The Making of Consumers in Southern Thailand

This chapter will consider the people of Southern Thailand in terms of becoming consumers rather than being consumers. As in Goffman-esque society, social relationships constitute a stage upon which the social player presents a performance. Social success hinges on the presentation of an acceptable image. Image-management and image-creation become decisive in the organization of everyday life (cf. Goffman 1959, 1974). Conceptualizing segments of the middle class segments as communities of practice, our central preoccupation is with the inter-subjective appropriation of the label middle class.<sup>1</sup>

### The Stuff of Middle Classness

The appropriation of the label ‘middle class’ involves everyday lifework to ensure the continued upward mobility. These three portraits of young parents in Southern Thailand show the fragility of making the right choices. For instance, the juggling of home and work in the life worlds of our informants shows considerable stress and anxieties about the entry into modernity and its costs (Stivens 1998a). The parents live with a fear of falling. That is, the everyday life of the families does not only include hope for betterment and consumption of better goods than before, but also include anxieties, sorrow and even a dread of the future. Why is this so? It is a fundamental fact of everyday life that the families have to deal with social insecurity. They know well that there is nobody who could help them after falling, or halt the momentum of downward mobility. In the following, I would like to draw on my empirical data to analyse the everyday lives of our informants, covering home and work, domesticity, family, and, most significantly middle class space.

## **Nongyaw and Sompong: The Family is one of Nature's Masterpieces**

'The Family is One of Nature's Masterpieces' is written in one of Nongyaw's many photo albums. The photo albums feature the exceptional rather than daily life: the development of the children, family vacations and the graduation of the couple. The photographs, looming large on the grey walls, keep a record of rituals, ceremonies, and the family. The photo-album illustrates the care, time and effort that the couple and parents are willing to invest in the development of their children. The well-being of the family is very much in the centre of the couple's concern, being intrinsically linked to the local state. This prosperity is realized through a livelihood that is based on the expansion of the local state. Nongyaw and her husband, Sompong rent a townhouse in one of Yala's mushrooming townhouse settlements. For Nongyaw and Sompong the house is the centre of the private sphere and of family life. The house signifies protection, recreation and privacy. Thus, they are thus saving hard to become home-owners. Coming from a humble rural background, both Nongyaw and Sompong like to see themselves as a new generation. On their initiative, we paid several visits to Nongyaw's father in the Yala countryside and to Nongyaw's roots in the rural hinterland.

In her father's house at the district level, photographs again abound, although the choice of the photographs is more limited. There are large photographs in black and white showing in particular every graduation ceremony of no less than six children. There is a Chinese altar (Nongyaw's mother was Chinese): there is also a painting of the Thai King and of a famous Buddhist monk from a local temple. Nongyaw has grown up in a Thai, Buddhist village.

Nongyaw and her husband, Sompong put emphasis on their university education, which allowed them to leave the village for the city. As her father not without pride pointed out, he spent the little money he had to pay for the education of his children. Nongyaw entered the primary school of the local temple, followed by the government secondary school at the Tambon. Later, she passed the entry examinations and gained a bachelor's degree in liberal arts at the Prince of Songkla University. Nongyaw and her husband place great value on social security, which secure employment offers. In addition, they enjoy concessions on their rent and kindergarten fees. Because her husband is frequently absent due to his work schedule, Nongyaw has the added burden of doing her job and raising the two children, as well as cleaning the house.

Nongyaw explains that she and her husband are prepared to work to improve their livelihood. She says that two incomes are necessary to sustain their level of consumption (although she likes to have a break). Therefore, they have to invest in a child-minder who is looking after their small child. The family spends a large proportion of their income on education (and some families even go in temporary debt). The investments reflect the priority that the family places on education.

Among a number of tutorials, Nongyaw's daughter attends a special class in classical Thai dance. While Nongyaw does not speak much English herself, she wants to prepare her children for the future. Nongyaw is also booking piano lessons, which are now becoming available in the booming private schools.

Nongyaw enjoys watching soap operas, which she likes to discuss with her friends. Nongyaw is interested in children's songs and books to help her out with her children's education beyond the materials provided by the school. She is creating boundaries to the social other, saying that peasants do not pay enough attention to health and children's development.

Nongyaw and Sompong have to cut expenses in order to realize a couple of middle-class dreams. Their proudest possession is a Japanese car. As Nongyaw puts it, having a car is crucial, because otherwise they would have to depend on uncomfortable public transport. Unable, to pay a large sum, Nongyaw and Sompong pay for the car by instalments. They rarely go out to a restaurant (instead, they get their food from food stalls). Nongyaw buys a new dress every 3 months to wear to the office.

According to Nongyaw, she and her husband have a harmonious relationship. However, she complains that she is lonely with the children as Sompong's work involves long sojourns away from home. Nongyaw explains that the family has to be cared for, nurtured and protected from the 'bad' environment and bad influences from other children.

Nongyaw believes in the modernization of the country, loves the King of Thailand, the royal family and actively participates in the image-making government campaign concerned with the beauty and quality of life in Yala. In Nongyaw's version of correctness, loyalty to the nation-state and the Thai royal family is part of the duties of a good citizen. Nongyaw is a close aid to the mayor of Yala. She is organizing a public relations campaign for a model municipality.

Nongyaw believes that it is her duty to prepare her children for competition in their potential future careers, to nurture their talents and to urge them to be Thai patriots with a will to preserve Thai culture. Nongyaw's daughter performed her Thai dance on the occasion

of the jubilee of the Thai king, also playing the monarch's classical and jazz compositions.

Nongyaw and her husband participate in the important events of the Buddhist calendar and maintain a friendly relationship with the local *wat* at her parent's home. Nongyaw regrets that the leading role of the Buddhist *wat* is declining. Nongyaw and Sompong are used to visiting *wat* Chang-hai and to washing their children in the sacred water of the saint Luang Por Tuad.

Nongyaw is optimistic about the efforts of the Thai government to achieve the standards of a modern country. She is ready to put her faith in the hands of the national leaders and believes that the mayor of Yala is a powerful and generous patron. She thinks that she and her husband are part of the efforts of the state to build a model city and to improve the quality of life of the urban population.

In a sense, Nongyaw escaped from the demanding manual work and poverty of the countryside. The family's livelihood depends on the welfare of the local state and felt the financial crisis intensively.

Nongyaw has an ambivalent relationship with her past. On the one hand, she wants to leave her past life in the village behind: on the other, she has nostalgic memories about harmonious village life. She believes that young people lack sufficient orientation and therefore turn to drugs. After some time, Nongyaw told me that she perceives the distribution of drugs as a real threat that makes her determination to look after her children well even stronger. Nongyaw sadly claimed that Thailand is now a poor country. Her wages arrive late and the cost of everyday life is higher.

Nongyaw has a strong notion of social order, which she wishes to defend. Thus, she argues that in a time of crisis, the warmth of the family acquires a special importance. She believes that she can trust her husband and opines that trust is crucial for any relationship. She states that the 'going out' of her colleagues is a bad habit and very dangerous to their families.

The family is one of nature's masterpieces. As long as Nongyaw and her husband can maintain their life aspirations, they can fulfil their definition of happiness. Nongyaw seems to be the more dominant and more outspoken person in the relationship with a clear plan about her future. Her loneliness is overcome by her focus on her children.

### **Varunee and Boonchu: The Family as a Castle**

Varunee and Boonchu have bought a house on instalments. The double glass and the thick walls protect their house from the noise outside

and the polluted air of the roadside. Nevertheless, the location of their house on a main road is convenient for their clients. The house functions as general office of an American insurance company as well a home. Inside, the air-conditioning ensures a constant cool temperature in the first and second storeys. As Varunee observes, the cool temperature is pleasing to her clients.

Varunee and her husband are living in Hatyai and work as professionals in the booming insurance business. Varunee met her husband during a student club excursion. She settled in Southern Thailand after her marriage to Boonchu, who comes from an old Chinese family in Patani.

Varunee sadly pointed out that Boonchu's mother did not like to agree to the marriage, because of her Thai origins. In her husband's family, Chinese used to marry Chinese: only in the current generation is this marriage pattern beginning to change.

Boonchu and Varunee both have Bachelors degrees, Varunee' being in accounting and Boonchu's in management. Varunee recounts that she was chosen by Boonchu during their student days. Varunee and Boonchu work and live together. Boonchu is the head of sales representatives in Hatyai. Varunee is his helping hand, his secretary and his accountant. As a working couple, their working life and the private sphere are blurred, because their income and bonuses depend on the number of new clients whom they can convince to buy insurance.

Varunee has no income of her own, but controls the accounting. She also controls what she calls home affairs; that is, she is simultaneously a mother, a housewife and a close aide to her husband. After long hours of working, she has also has to clean the house, because, she says, her husband likes the house to be tidy for himself and especially for his clients. She always accompanies her husband when they pay their clients a visit, because, conversing with other families, Varunee and her husband represent a warm family themselves and speak to the other couples, as woman to woman and man to man.

During the economic boom, Varunee and Boonchu were able to acquire a large number of new clients. As the advantages of the insurance are spread by word of mouth publicity, so potential clients appear. With the economic downturn, the number of clients is decreasing rapidly, threatening the insurance business. The couple does not know whether they will continue to sell insurance in Southern Thailand, because they must fear that the company will have to close some offices.

Varunee and Boonchu pass on a new philosophy about life to potential clients. Varunee suggests that only a minority with a proper level of education understands the importance of insurance. Varunee and her husband regard themselves as experts who inform other people

about the various conditions of and opportunities for insurance. As pointed out by both Varunee and Boonchu, the idea of the life insurance reflects new patterns of the organization of life and life planning.

Varunee explains that the couple could ill-afford to take a break from a tight working schedule. Varunee gives her son to one of Boonchu's aunts to take care of, although, as she puts it, she has a bad conscience doing so. Varunee does not like the idea of a maid, because both Varunee and Boonchu dislike the idea of somebody sharing the private sphere of the home. Varunee believes that she would then have to look after the maid, which she finds unsettling. The couple prefer to stay in the context of kinship to organize baby-sitting.

Because their son is an only child, Varunee and Boonchu pay a lot of attention to him. Because the 'ideal' family has two children, Varunee feels there is a deficit, which is pointed out to her by Boonchu's mother. However, the couple argues that they are able to offer a good education and a bright future for their only child. Their only child is of great importance to them. She reads a good deal of literature related to her son's development. She told me that during pregnancy she had a nightmare that her baby may be abnormal and she is therefore very happy to see him in the best of health. Thus, the hopes and aspirations of the family are coupled with anxieties about the future.

Boonchu used to go to the English speaking Club in Hatyai and converse in English with foreigners. Varunee has studied Chinese and is giving classes in Chinese at a private school. Because Boonchu was brought up with Chinese customs, the Chinese language is important to Boonchu.

Boonchu actively participates in the Chinese festivals, the Chinese New Year, and the Lim Gor Niew celebrations. He showed me a photograph of himself participating in the Nine Emperor Gods' festivals in Hatyai, himself participating in the festivals. He is also a member of many Chinese cultural associations. Boonchu added that his informal contacts in the Chinese associations as well as the Chamber of Commerce help him in his business career. Varunee and Boonchu are keen patriots and identify with the destiny of the Thai nation. Once, we had been invited to a lecture on the economic development of Southern Thailand in the City Hall. When they heard that Thailand had impressive export and economic growth patterns, Varunee and Boonchu were very pleased.

Boonchu told me that he, as a head of the company, travelled to Bangkok, Europe and America. Boonchu acquired a sense of professionalism and Western leadership style during his seminars.

Varunee is nervous about being seen with another man. Boonchu likes to joke that Thai women are the best in the world and Varunee

does not know where he goes with his colleagues in the evenings. Boonchu also has a habit of drinking whiskey, a habit that Varunee overtly dislikes. Her critical comments are a little rebellion about his consumption of large quantities of alcohol. Until now, however, she has not challenged the gender roles in the family. However, she may do so in the future, because she is not prepared to tolerate Boonchu's drinking or womanizing.

### **Somjai and Narongrit: Managing a Family**

Somjai and Narongrit have realized their dream of a home in Patani. While Narongrit is working in Hatyai with a telecommunications company, Somjai and Narongrit stay in their house in Patani, which means that Narongrit has to commute every day.

However, because his family comes from Pattani, Narongrit feels at ease there. Somjai was the manager of the new condominium 'gold village' (*mubaan muang tong*) and sold the townhouse and shophouse units to merchants, civil servants and teachers. She had just been appointed manager of the sports club when she became pregnant with her second child and had to give away the job to a friend.

At this point, she planned to join the telecommunications company and to move to Hatyai. Somjai and Narongrit rented a bungalow in a Hatyai suburb and rented their house in Patani to somebody else. Somjai was known as a very able and disciplined manager of the *mubarn* and a close aide to her Chinese boss.

However, because her pregnancy was making her feel sick, Somjai decided to postpone her plans and to stay at home. Then Somjai had a miscarriage. This was a very difficult time for Somjai and she would not appear again in public for some time. She was not prepared to go through this experience again, but Narongrit asked her to try, because he would love to have a second child and a comrade for their daughter. Thus, Somjai became pregnant again and she had a difficult pregnancy. She could talk about her experience to the neighbouring families in the *mubarn* and to her doctor in a private clinic, but she could not discuss her sorrows with her female friends, because she was afraid of losing face. Somjai says that it is rather difficult to discuss personal problems with friends, because everybody is in a sort of competition and compares themselves to one another. Somjai rather hates the idea that other people are talking behind her back.

Although Somjai does not hold back with her opinion, she will follow her husband and will accept his decision. She prefers Hatyai to Patani, because of Hatyai's better infrastructure and shopping

possibilities. In particular, Somjai liked the atmosphere in the *mubarn* and the chatting with her neighbours. However, she willingly followed Narongrit when he wanted to return to their house in Patani, because, she explained, the tenant of their house did not take care of it, and they had better look after the house themselves.

In their leisure time, Somjai and Narongrit like to stay at home. Indeed, they hardly leave their house. Narongrit's brothers and sisters are frequent visitors. Narongrit was brought up in a very strict manner; his father was an officer in the Thai army who he had hardly knew. Possibly to compensate for a cold childhood, Somjai and Narongrit would like to build a warm family (*krobkrua thi obunjai*).

While Somjai is ready to accept the authority of her husband, she does not stand for her husband going out or drinking alcohol. In return, she is willing to take care of the household and to look after their daughter.

Somjai does not like to associate with the Muslim population. She believes that the Muslims cannot be trusted. She also thinks that the Muslims have bad habits. She points out that her neighbours are Thai like themselves and that they help each other out in need. She is afraid that something may happen to her daughter.

Somjai only permits her daughter to go in her parents' car or to play with her little friends in the garden of their house. She cannot stand the idea that women are selling their bodies. She also feels very concerned about male promiscuity, but thinks that this is happening in a world apart, not in her life world.

### **Sida and Sarunee: The Islamic Family**

Sida and Sarunee are torn between traditional and modern lifeworlds. Sida and Sarunee live in Sida's father's house. Her father is a guru and a representative of the local mosque. Sida confirms that her father is a follower of the traditional Patani ulema. He converses in Melayu only. His house is located in a Muslim milieu. While Sida's father is a religious man, he eagerly supports the non-religious careers of his children.

We join some friends to visit the young couple and stay for a Malay-Muslim dinner on the floor of the living room. More friends are arriving. The house is open to kin, neighbours and friends. Sida's father has just come out from the local mosque. Before he is served by his wife, he waits until we have finished eating. Sida is a nurse in the public hospital. She shows me the photographs of her recent wedding. The bride and groom wear traditional Malay clothes. Music and dance were

not permitted. Explaining the marriage ceremony to me, Sida points out that only the husband is asked to confirm to that he will take care of his family.

While Sarunee received his training in Kuala Lumpur, he is employed as an engineer in Bangkok. Sida dislikes Bangkok, which is a foreign country to them. Kota Baru and Kuala Lumpur are like home. Sida stays in Pattani to help her parents and enjoys her work in the hospital, although she can see her husband only on the weekends.

Sida has worn the veil since childhood. She argues that the veil helps and protects her to be a good Muslim and to be firm in her belief. Sexuality is not to be judged negatively, as long as it is between husband and wife. Sida and her husband do not want to have more than two children. Sida would give up work and would support her husband if her husband would asked her to do so. Yet, the couple depends heavily depends on two incomes and Sida also would not like to lose her work and her friendships with her colleagues, Buddhist and Muslim.

Sida invited us for *Hari Raya*. However, the celebrations in the kampung have been kept low key, however, contrasting with the colourful celebrations in Malaysia. I was told that the Muslims in Patani keep a low profile or joined their sisters in Malaysia. Sida has joined a group of young educated Muslims that aims to support Islamic education in the countryside. I have accompanied the young women and men of the group on their trips to the villages. The men speak to the villagers about the value of Islamic education. As Sida points out to us, the villagers lack teachers, materials, and money. Sida believes that she has a responsibility to help other Muslims who are less fortunate. In addition, the group has a wider aim to support Islamic education along the new standards of Islam as well as keeping the Malay language and the Jawi script alive.

## Juggling Home and Work

Normative, patriarchal family ideology allows women to imagine themselves to be on a normal life-trajectory, in which they must work to acquire status as girl, young woman, married woman and mother. In doing this work, “the woman becomes of her own accord a key producer of middle class life and of her husband’s and children’s middle class life in particular” (Puru-shotam 1998: 136).<sup>2</sup>

In our sample, this work is naturally subscribed to women. Women have to cope with long working hours, and, after coming home late, have to clean the house. As one informant, a bank employee says: “My husband, a Chinese, likes to have the house shining. Just have a look at

my hands.” Nongyaw travels from the child-minder to the kindergarten and to work and, afterwards, to the supermarket. She also has second thoughts about giving her child to a child-minder, because she thinks that by doing so, she is not a good mother. It is remarkable that middle-class families do not look for maids to help them in the maintenance of their tight schedule. However, as the women point out, reliable maids are hard to find in Southern Thailand, because the demand for maids is recent. Moreover, maids would add to a long list of costs. The women further objected that they would not like the idea of having somebody else living in the same house. There is a middle-class discourse on the problems with maids. One has to take care of the maid; the maid disturbs the private sphere; the maid cannot replace the mother and so on. Varunee and Somjai rely on kinship relations and give their child to a poorer relative. Relatives can hardly refuse their moral obligations to look after the children of their richer relatives. The juggling of home and work, the burdens of women as working women and housewives and the unremitting struggle in a competitive economy are necessary in order to guarantee continuous ability to pay for the participation in a consumer lifestyle, consuming education, identity and modern life.

## Moral Panics

The couples aim to fulfill the demands with which they are addressed as parents by the discourses of the governments, media and religious movements that centre on the family. The couples build walls around themselves in order to protect the family from harmful influences. Our informants had clear criteria to define good people and to distinguish them from bad people (*khon dii*, *khon mai dii*). The qualities that are attributed to good and bad are markedly gendered:

Somjai needs to know her husband's every move and would not tolerate him going out in the evenings without her being informed. Going out at night is associated with commercial sex.

Varunee complains about her husband's bad habit of drinking alcohol. A good husband does not waste the money meant for the mortgage. A good husband is the breadwinner.

Nongyaw is upset about the husband's long absences from home. A good husband stays at home. He is a family-man, as Nongyaw puts it.

For Narongrit, his wife should bear the difficulties of her pregnancy to give him a child.

For Sompong, Nongyaw is responsible for the welfare of the children.

For Sarunee, Sida looks after the household and prepares the meal in the evenings. In a life-world which is known for insecurity, prostitution, and pollution, the notion of being *khon dii* is upheld.

It is easily understood that women are more involved than men in the discourse of *khon dii* who contrast their life worlds with a world of loose relationships, minor wives and mistresses. Many female informants have expressed a strong fear of infidelity and HIV/AIDS, whereby going out is related to prostitution.<sup>3</sup>

There is a discourse of middle class women about prostitutes. Here, the *khon dii-mai dii* separation finds its strongest expression in distinguishing between good women and fallen women. Apart from the habits of going out and leaving the wife behind, women are especially nervous about extramarital affairs.

The horror scenario for women is a divorce. They can ill afford a separation from their husbands which would involve the loss of everything. Thus, the fallen women are perceived as a threat to the integrity of the family. Women feel concerned that their husbands cannot resist the offers of easygoing women. The fear is so real that women put up with the long absences of their husbands, cope with their multiple roles as mothers, housewives and working women, and, reluctantly, even tolerate drinking in order to guard their husbands within the bonds of the family.

Therefore, gender arrangements in middle-class life worlds are tight. Women adjust to the normal family ideology and do not question their role in it as long as the image of the family can be sustained and the hope of upward mobility is kept alive. The only reason that justifies separation of the couple is work. The women in our sample were careful to sustain the image of a good woman and accordingly, avoided being seen with men other than their husbands. As Stivens (1998a, 1998b) points out, sexualization of women in the discourses of the media and religious movements is prevalent and has no small part in the process of polarization of good and bad women.

The field of gender relations and a woman's place is increasingly politicized. In this regard, the heavy attack of the Islamic resurgence on the promiscuity of Thai men is getting additional momentum through the AIDS epidemic. Moreover, as we have seen before, the Thai family is read as being in crisis. It is this argument in which Malay-Muslims claim moral superiority. While the sexual division of labour is most pronounced in their families, and no claim on egalitarian rights is made, women do not have to win the affections of their husband. In contrast, there is a keen awareness in Thai and Sino-Thai families of the so-

called crisis. Thus, the demonstration of the intact family in friendship groups is part of the everyday work of middle classness.

As a result of the steady making up of an image, the families find themselves in isolation. While women in particular are looking for female spaces in friendship groups, gossip in friendship groups and working relationships is often found oppressive. This is because it is not sufficient to have upward mobility. The fruits of the labours also have to be shown off and demonstrated in public spaces. Thus, the nightmare of one informant that her child may be abnormal is not least due to the fear that she could not present a healthy child to her friends.

The women find themselves in a vicious circle, in which they observe each other's development, in which they compare each other's progress, and in which they find it increasingly difficult to share their sorrows even with their best friends. Because work, home and child-rearing often occupy most of the family time, loneliness with pressing problems is not uncommon. The story of Somjai is a case in point. Instead of seeking assistance from close friends during her pregnancy, Somjai relied on other neighbours in the *mubarn* or on the aid of her doctor. As the breadwinners of a normal family, it is unthinkable for women not to work. This means that unemployment would have drastic consequences for the level of consumption and, indeed, on the self-perception of the normal family.

### Practices of Consumption: Housing

Purushotam (1998) writes that social bodies are located in corresponding socially recognizable spaces. This was also my approach to social spatialization. The space that is recognizably middle class, "... gives to the actors embedded in such spaces the self-awareness of their middle class position" (Purushotam 1998).

The concept of the habitat describes the spatial distribution in the urban landscapes and is most clearly expressed in housing. Construction, real estate and speculation are some of the visible dimensions of an anarchic capitalism and the expansion of markets.

With the emergence of a new estate with disposable incomes, the demand for suburban, middle class housing has risen and has encouraged potential landlords to join the real estate business. Housing both describes the spatial settlement and a dominant *genre de vie*—a form of life: housing is the visible marker of the arrival and expansion of a new social group as a result of modernization: the *mubarn jat san*, the *akarn-panit*, and townhouse, which find their origins in the classical Chinese shophouse, providing business facilities and accommodation and de-

fining a life form in which Chinese settlers claimed spaces and created the urban markets.

One's social identity is to a great extent anchored in these territorial units. While villages remember a golden and harmonious village past, the new forms of housing are to be distinguished from the traditional neighbourhoods. While the people in the traditional neighbourhood share goods and services and leave the doors open, privacy and the privatization of possessions is the governing principle of the modern *murbaan*.

The habitat is not only a form of housing, but the very foundation of a life form. Bourgeois homes in Thailand have changed radically in the past few decades, and a totally new world has been created inside the walls of the home, which now has a dual function as stage and shelter. The *murbaan* imposes itself on the social environment as a purely spatial structure and as a social image. Housing is part of a lifestyle experiment that is made possible through globalization and mass consumption. The nurture, improvement and decoration of one's house is an identical everyday practice. The home-owner appropriates the living space and forms it according to his own needs. The inhabitants give their individual touch to the built environment, thus expressing their social status as well as their cultural affiliation. It is as if the families have to add their identical practices to an otherwise meaningless town-house. Larger solidarities are expressed through the addition of an ethnic emblem. Chinese altars, pictures of King Chulalongkorn, pictures of Buddhist abbot Luang Por Tuad, and calendars with pictures of the royal family are added to the hi-fi stereo and TV sets and the identification, in which the old is linked to the new. The *murbaan* provides a social integration to the inside and a feeling of a 'we-group'. It is a dominant life form and spatial structure, imposing itself on the urban social system. The changing attitudes to the home also mirror the changing attitudes to family and nature and the changing perceptions of childhood.

The increasing importance of anonymity and privacy in the *murbaan* underlines the design of spaces by the new middle class and contributes to the making of an exclusive middle-class milieu. Thus, housing is thus a showcase for spaces of representation. The new homes represent a new living arrangement: the withdrawal into the new intimacy of the nuclear family. It is now possible to retire from the company of others. The increase in privacy is a result of the social reshuffle and the arrangement of social space. Thus, the new home thus separates public from private, servants from family and children from their parents. The campaign for bright nurseries reflects the changing perception of

the meaning of childhood and of the meaning of parent-child relationships.



Reclining Buddha, Wat Sathing Phra, Songkla, South Thailand.

### Changing Meaning of Childhood

Child-rearing, like gender arrangements and sexuality, is not just a matter for parents; instead, it is the concern of the collective. As Mulder (1997) has shown, 'Thai schools are producing the child the Thai nation desires'. What Mulder does is to explore the public world, that is, the ways in which schools propagate ideologies, nationalism, self-images and religious ideas. In a Foucauldian manner, then, Mulder is interested in the production of the docile body in the Thai school system. In the context under discussion, education is seen as a field of intense contestation. Here, I want to mention once again the arbitrariness of public private dichotomies and to explore the spaces of children's socialization in both the home and the schools, because we can assume that schools affect the household and vice versa.

The intensive care, the efforts, interest and time that parents invest in the rearing of their child is a strong identifier of middle-class mentality.

Chua (1999: 21) has pointed out that children's education is both symbolic and functional: "Children's education is both an investment in their future and a symbolic display of the parents' ability to pay" (Chua 1999: 21). Generally speaking, parents observe the development

of their children closely and monitor their behaviour. A new child-rearing ideology has become general. The creation of specialists in relation to this indicates the rise of a new class and the creation of new needs: childminding for busy mothers, private tutorials in piano and English, and private lessons in Thai classical dance and classical music. Naturally, parents aim to provide the best education available for their children. There is a sense of competition from a very early age. In Southern Thailand, the educational landscapes are differentiated along public government schools, Chinese private schools and *pondok*.

The resources of kinship are limited as a result of new housing and living arrangements, so nursery schooling from an early age conveniently combines day care with education. In reality, preparation for university entrance examinations begins for parents with the nursery school.

The examination includes a long interview with parents and children. The interview deals with questions of child-rearing, living conditions, and occupational status. Thus, the parents, as well as their children, are assessed.

Once admitted, children learn their ABC and how to sing the national anthem or to play educational games. Everybody likes to have their children admitted to the demonstration and elite schools. However, because admittance is restricted, parents feel depressed when they learn that their child is not able to pass the entrance examination. The failure of their child adds to the anxieties of the parents and may raise the troubling question why are they beset by misfortune and what have they done wrong?

The fact that children are frequently in a state of exhaustion reveals the ambition that parents place on their children's education. The parents have understood that their mobility is due to their level of education. Accordingly, they may spend their tight resources on the children's education. Nongyaw hires a special teacher who gives tutorials in classical music and dance. Her daughter Pimai demonstrated to me her talents in Thai classical dance; she is going to take lessons in piano and English. Chinese children are taught Chinese customs and rules of behaviour. As for Malay children, they will learn Thai rather than Bahasa Melayu, go to a Christian school in the mornings and to a *pondok* teaching Islamic studies in the evening. Private tutorials in Thai or maths complete the day. Daughters in all families are accustomed to housework from an early age. Thus, gender roles are subscribed to girls and boys from early childhood.

Projects of child-rearing must be seen in articulation with the reproductive process in which they are socially and materially embedded. The consumption of information on children's development in the

forms of books and magazines, tapes with children's songs, and governmental brochures highlighting the baby's happiness, is informed and organized in close affinity with global transactions. The articulation combines local strategies of appropriation and global images.

### **Making up Domesticity: Emancipation and Subordination**

First, practices in a number of fields show that dealing with insecurity about the right life model is a fundamental fact of everyday work on middle classness. People have only a vague image of the correct way of life. They have to deal with the specific political and economic conditions of Southern Thailand and thus are part of the overall social transformation. Their life planning is fed with considerable hope, aspiration, and ambition. However, as pointed out by our informants, the lifestyle experiments also include strong anxieties. Paradoxically, modern consumption in the fields of gender arrangements, sexuality, home, domesticity, child-rearing, and work is an experience of emancipation and, simultaneously, subordination (on this point, see Purushotam 1998).

### **Consumption: Life-Spaces of Self-Definition**

Jonathan Friedman (1994: 16) envisages an approach that focuses on the ways in which reproduction is socially constituted from the vantage point of consumption: "By maintaining the general framework of reproduction we are able to situate consumption properly in a larger social field where it can be said to make sense in terms of the social strategies of a particular group."

In modern forms of consumption, people appropriate the world in their own smaller space of existence and, importantly, take sides in a social struggle in an ongoing process of identity formation.

### **Nongyaw and Sompong: Thai Love Thailand**

Nongyaw and Sompong enthusiastically embrace the propaganda of the Thai state aimed at promoting Thai culture. Tutorship in classical Thai dance and Thai traditional music illustrates nicely the efforts made for hierarchical distinction and the reproduction of Thainess in a minority situation. Their love for the Thai King also mirrors the dependence of their own life project on the modernization of the Thai state. The defence of Thai national identity involves distrust of Malay people who do not participate in the etiquette of the Thai state and are

situated in a group of people “who are against us”. Those people “do not respect the members of the royal family”, are said to be “fanatically religious”, they do not “speak the Thai language”, “they do not perform the Wai”, “they do not pay respect to the Buddha image”, “they do not obey Thai teachers”. Nongyaw and Sompong believe that love for the Thai nation should be part of the school curriculum. Nongyaw and Sompong have a strong notion of good and bad people. *Khon di* help the Thai leadership to fulfil their development programme. Nongyaw and Sompong want to bring up their children to become competitive and patriotic citizens. Lifestyling reflects the appropriation of a world and is an expression of being *Khon dii*.

### Varunee and Boonchu: Success and Ethics

Varunee and Boonchu in their practices of consumption aim to demonstrate success. Success is associated with hard work, discipline, order and tidiness. Varunee and Boonchu measure their success in terms of their house, their plot of land and their car. Hard work and professionalism are contrasted with the Malays, who are said to be ‘lazy’ and ‘ignorant’. Varunee and Boonchu keep up a social order that they regard as taking care of Chinese values. Boonchu upholds the myth of the Chinese settlers who have built up the Thai economy and have created wealth. In this nostalgia for the good old times in which people used to live in harmony, modesty and simplicity are part of the Chinese-Thai worldview. This nostalgia for the community is compared with contemporary Southern Thai society which is read as being in crisis. Desire and corruption are seen as factors responsible for the crisis of Thai families, divorce and prostitution. Varunee and Boonchu aim to build a harmonious family, where modesty, wealth and harmony prevail.

A similar worldview is shared by Narongrit and Somjai. The family institution, its reproduction, the investments for the family’s future and its protection is the base for understanding the practices of consumption and, sometimes, abstinence from consumption.

### Sida and Sarunee: Following the Word of the Prophet

Sida and Sarunee borrow from the discourse of orthodox Islamic intellectualism. Practices of consumption are firmly embedded in a religious framework. In this framework, correctness in leading a life according to the guidance of the Prophet has priority. Islamic media, books, tapes and videos are consulted to distinguish good and bad and heavenly and hellish worlds. Veiling is a statement of obedience to the

rules that are set by the discourse of the Islamic resurgence. These authoritative codes are followed in food and dress. Islamic lifestyling involves strong practices of distinction and a demonstrative effect on the Thai-Chinese. Taboos on pork and alcohol are followed, and are contrasted with the alcohol and drug addiction in the worlds of the 'unbelievers'. The strongest boundary concerns gender and sexuality. Sexuality is limited to the intimacy of the couple and compared with the 'sexual promiscuity' of the Thais. Practices of consumption are embedded in a religious framework and contain a hefty attack on the lax lifestyling of the Thais.

### **What are Collective Identities for?**

As in other local contexts in the non-Western world, the cultural re-orientation in Southern Thailand is intimately linked with the making of consumers and lifestyles. I have aimed to shed light on the inner life of the new consumers. Preoccupied with mobilizing the scant resources they have, the middle classes in the making suffer from a fear of falling. The new consumers are in a process of learning; their aim is to get access to what they regard as a modern life project. Their participation in global life forms is perhaps more desired and imagined than real. That does not mean that processes and shifts in consumption pattern are not important. As Friedman (1994) argues, reproduction is socially constituted from the vantage point of consumption. The socially determined habitus needs to be understood in that larger social context.

### **Consuming Thainess, Contesting Thainess**

Practices of consumption 'make sense' in terms of the social strategies of social groups. Strategies of self-definition as a cultural form ask for cultural distinction and ethnic boundaries. From this angle, practices of consumption can be read as statements that relate to the cultural images of the state, the media and religious movements. In particular, in Southern Thailand, practices of consumption help to reproduce or contest the hegemonic concept of Thai culture. Lifestyles such as clothing and eating are linked with ethnic identity. New habitual forms are important signs that are put into public spaces as ethnic emblems. Lifestyles and practices of consumption are social strategies to define the cultural self. The main argument is that strategies of consumption are embedded into larger communal spaces and frames of reference and representation that are shaped by the state and locally-based social movements. Therefore, lifestyles are used to communicate loyalties

and identification. Lifestyles are communicators of cultural boundaries, in which cultural images of Thainess are either consumed or contested. As such, the lifestyles of cultural segments of the middle class should not be confused with a growing homogenization of lifestyles, in which local signifiers are replaced by Western symbols. Rather, competing constructions of the family show that lifestyles and new habitual forms are important to processes of distinction and social integration. They are important to processes of distinction, because they are powerful signs that are put into public spaces and negotiated there. Lifestyles greatly contribute to make distinction visible, and public. As we shall see later, lifestyles are very important to the construction and shaping of communal spaces. They are important to processes of social integration, because they are part of a cultural whole. Thus, lifestyle is integrated into metha-cultural systems of communication, in which the families and cultural segments of the new middle class debate about constructions of the family and good life. Doing so, they understand each other well. Thus, all families bring their cultural baggage into the public spaces. As consumers of cultural images, they all participate in bringing in the private as micropolitics into the extended public spheres. It is here that the organization of everyday life is linked with the new quality of the extended public life, which is the main subject of the following chapter.

