

---

# 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-

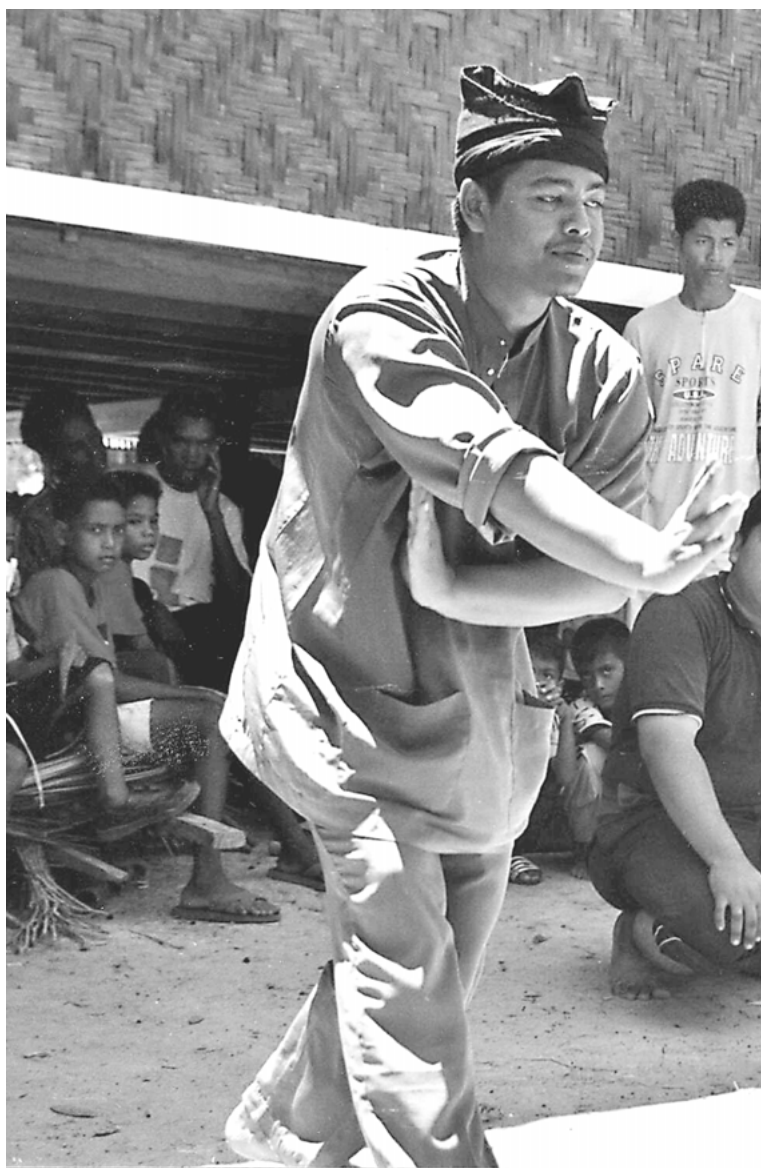
dition of minorities while at the same time leading to a rearrangement in the distribution of strategic social power.

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 than 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 than 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.