

BOOK REVIEW

CLASS, CULTURE AND SPACE: THE CONSTRUCTION AND SHAPING OF COMMUNAL SPACE IN SOUTH THAILAND

Alexander Horstmann, New Brunswick (U.S.A.) and London (U.K.):
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Compared with other regions of Thailand, South Thailand has been a somewhat neglected center of research for many decades. Thomas Fraser's classic ethnographic study of the fishing village known as Rusembilan and Louis Golomb's work on ethnicity in the region, supplemented by some political science investigations by Ladd Thomas, Astri Suhrke and others, were conducted in the 1960s and 70s. In the 1980s Muslim scholars in Thailand including Surin Pitsuwan, Arong Suthasasna, Hasan Madmarn, and Chaiwat Satha-Anand contributed major studies that placed the Malay Muslims of South Thailand in their political, religious and cultural contexts. Thai anthropologist Chavivun Prachuabmoh developed models for understanding gender and ethnicity among Malay Muslims, while Uthai Dulyasakem focused on educational institutions in the region. Studies lagged on South Thailand, however, in comparison with those on Central, North, and Northeast Thailand.

Fortunately a new internationally-based group of scholars have been engaged in revitalizing the importance of South Thailand in cultural, political, ethnic, and religious studies. A Singaporean anthropologist, Saroja Dorairajoo, who under the direction of Stanley Tambiah at Harvard, completed a Ph.D. dissertation of an ethnographic study of a fishing village in the coastal province of Patani is one of the new cohorts to initiate research in South Thailand. Dr. Dorairajoo organized a well-attended international conference in Patani in 2002 that highlighted the importance of this region for Thailand. At this conference Ryoko Nishii a Japanese scholar presented her ethnographic research on the coexistence of Buddhist and Muslim rituals in a village in the south. Many

other Thai and non-Thai scholars were in attendance who presented their research from the region.

The first book in English that has emerged from this newly flourishing scholarship in Southern Thailand is an illuminating ethnography by the German scholar Alexander Horstmann who demonstrates that ethnic and religious identity in southern Thailand is primordial/circumstantial, national/transnational, and is local, parochial, and territorialized as well as nonlocal, cosmopolitan, and deterritorialized in various social, political, and cultural contexts in what he designates as "communal space." Earlier studies from the 1970s and 80s demonstrated that primordial identity politics were the basis of irredentist movements in the 1970s and 1980s. The Pattani United Liberation Organization and other separatist and Islamic movements were active during the 1970s and 1980s, which reinforced primordial tendencies linking Muslims with the grandeur of sixteenth century Pattani, the center of Islam in that region of Southeast Asia. Horstmann's recent analysis of the social and cultural space of middle class Muslims and Buddhists illustrates the highly variegated spectrum of ethnicity and identity construction in this fluid border region of Thailand. His focus on the middle class in this border region reflects the approach of the postcolonial theorist and anthropologist Arjun Appadurai in describing an ethnoscape that conjoins the elements of mass media and transmigration. Horstmann describes Southern Thailand as an ethnoscape that produces conditions of postmodern identity constructions as well as primordial religious and ethnic tendencies.

Following fourteen months of field work Horstmann focused on a number of individual family case studies among the Malay Muslim, Thai Buddhist, and Chinese populations of South Thailand. He finds that despite the development of cosmopolitanism among the middle class populations in this ethnoscape that combines international media and transmigration, the everyday interaction among these populations still tends to reinforce narratives of "us" versus "them." Horstmann notes that while the postcolonial school has "underlined the hegemonic and dominant location of national culture with regard to minority cultures," his case study of local level politics understands Thai-ness as an important site of social struggle." He indicates that the top-down nation-state constructions of Thai nationality have been losing force in South Thai-

land. The educated middle class among the Buddhist and Muslim populations have been influenced by transnational religious developments. The middle class Thai Buddhists have been inspired by the universalistic Buddhist reformism espoused by the famed **Buddhadhasa Bhikkhu**, whereas the Muslims are integrating the revivalist conceptions into their local discourse as it emanates from the media in the Middle East and Southeast centers of Islam. These middle class cosmopolitans in the Southern Thailand communities channel these global trends into local discourses. Aside from the Muslims and Buddhists, Horstmann also focuses on the Chinese in these communities. In his collection of narratives, he finds that the Chinese immigrants often maintain a form of dual identity selectively choosing between a Chinese and Sino-Thai identity in their relationships with others. As the Chinese travel and meet with other Chinese from Malaysia and other southern towns in Thailand, a multinational Chinese community has developed that focuses on ritual festivals, business and other communal activities.

Horstmann found that new forms of global Islam have reinforced older ethnic and religious affiliations that centered on ancient Pattani as a center of Islamic thought and culture. During the 1990s the Muslim minority community became more active in national affairs in Thailand. Wahda (Unity), a Muslim political group organized and supported Muslim candidates for local and national offices. In some respects, the relationship between Saudi Arabia and the Islamic discourse of that region has been influencing the local variants of Islam. Religious leaders who have studied in Saudi Arabia have introduced these forms of discourse into southern Thailand. On the other hand, more modernist and moderate global forms of Islam have been perpetuated by some local university cosmopolitans who have studied in Egypt and the United States. Traditional Imams are losing ground to the more literalist and Shariah-oriented forms of Islam emanating from the Middle East. These networks of Muslim religious leaders and their networks compete for influence in the ethnoscape of Southern Thailand. However, Horstmann notes that the middle class Malay Muslims are becoming increasingly bilingual as a result of the penetration of a Thai educational curriculum in the region. Many of the Malay students draw on the Thai media along with the Islamic media to develop multiple identities. These media con-

sumers access national television news, Internet sources, cable, local and international print media, local and transnational radio programming, satellite and video resources to re-imagine new forms of identities in the cultural space, which are sites for the continuous flow of images and ideologies in southern Thailand.

These new re-imaginings of identity have also been a feature of Thai Buddhist culture and politics in southern Thailand. Horstmann describes how middle class cosmopolitans based in Songkla and Ligor focus on the global reformist teachings of Bhuddhadhasa to accentuate their identity. These teachings provide the basis of local and translocal networks for the Buddhist in the region. Bhuddhadhasa's reformist Theravada Buddhist formulations emphasize the moral relationships between the individual and the community. He has revitalized interpretations of Nibbana as a spiritual tradition that can be attained within this life rather than a future life. This has had a strong appeal among the cosmopolitan middle class Buddhists. The teachings are also anti-consumer and anti-Western in their overall orientation. This parallels the Islamic reformist forms of moral discourse within the Muslim communities. In both forms of moral discourse, Thailand is viewed as a society invaded with capitalist consumerism and excessive forms of individuality fomented by Western culture. Horstmann records the narratives invoked to romanticize the home (baan) and local foods, local wisdom and culture that are juxtaposed with global forms of consumption and behavior.

Despite these re-imaginings and hybridization of identity among the Chinese, Muslims, and Buddhists in southern Thailand, Horstmann acknowledges that both circumstantial and primordial aspects of ethnicity and religion are maintained. Identity politics draw essentialized conceptions into focus among these populations. The old forms of stereotypes of Buddhists, Muslims, and Chinese tend to persist among these communities. Whether these new forms of identities will continue to become reconstructed and evolve in variant directions will be the basis for future research in this fascinating ethnoscape identified by Horstmann. He, along with the new international group of scholars focusing on South Thailand will undoubtedly enable us to understand the importance of this region in Southeast Asia. We look forward to these developments.