

RESEARCH AND CROSS-CULTURAL ENRICHMENT*

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PROLOGUE

I feel honoured to have been invited to address my fellow Humboldtians once again. (*Figure 1*) Over 10 years have passed since I gave my Keynote Address on the subject of “Why Germany?” at a similar gathering in 2008. Now an octogenarian, I shall follow the practice of my age group in indulging in reminiscences, taking an autobiographical approach and resorting to episodes. The present lecture will deal less with subject matter and has not been conceived as a research paper. It will concentrate on human relationships, notably those between scholars and researchers at the international level. It is my belief that research thrives on the strengthening of the bonds among people engaged in the pursuit of truth. I shall not conceal the fact that such a pursuit is sometimes hampered by bad faith, prejudices and dogmas, and by the end of the presentation, the audience might discover that I have an axe to grind.

* Plenary Lecture presented at the 1st South East Asian Humboldt-Kolleg, Bangkok, 19-21 December 2019.



Figure 1: 1st South East Asian Humboldt-Kolleg, Bangkok, 19-21 December 2019

WHY GERMAN?

The Thai secondary school in my times did not offer German as one of the second foreign languages, though English was compulsory. I won a Thai government scholarship to study Modern Languages in the United Kingdom, which meant that beyond English and French I had to master another foreign language. The choice did not present much of a problem: I was a music lover, very much interested in Western music. Schubert's "*Lieder*" were a world that I would love to explore; so the choice of another foreign language fell on German, as simply as that. The method of teaching German in Great Britain in those days was antiquated, relying mainly on translation, which did not quite suit a learner from a third country. I had to struggle very hard to master this difficult language. After taking a bachelor's degree in French and German from Cambridge University, I went over to study for a PhD at Tübingen University, graduating with a doctorate's degree in Comparative Literature. After a few years of administrative and planning

work at the Ministry of Education, I joined the newly created second campus of Silpakorn University in the province of Nakorn Pathom and have since remained a committed scholar of German. I continue to do research on German language, literature and culture, mainly from a comparative perspective, after my retirement.

Many people are caught in the belief that only native speakers have significant things to say about their mother tongue, and that foreigners can contribute very little in terms of original research. The rise of the teaching of a particular language to foreigners as an academic discipline (for German, it is known as “*Deutsch als Fremdsprache – DaF*” [German as a Foreign Language]) has its practical uses, but can be misleading in the sense that it appears to be the only domain in which non-German scholars are supposed to engage themselves seriously. I had been taught differently, and even think that in some respects, foreign scholars enjoy a *vantage point* from which they may see things that are overseen by native speakers, because fluency comes to them so naturally that they tend to take things for granted. In the lecture in German¹, whose English version bears the title, “On the Power, Powerlessness and Omnipotence of Language: From Oral Culture through Written Culture to Media Domination”,² which I was invited to deliver at the Goethe Institute in Munich on 6 May 2006 as the first lecture in the series “The Power of Language”, (*Figure 2*) I drew particular attention to the use of the *Konjuntiv I* (The first subjunctive), which I, as a non-native user of German, found to be unique. I gave my reasons, as follows.

I always approached this language with respect, and German grammar, as brain-racking as it can be, contains elements that its native speakers may look upon as a matter of course but strike us foreigners as something special. I mean, for instance, the usage of the first subjunctive form in indirect speech. Here is an antidote against lies, deception, propaganda and PR tricks. Let us take an example: "Sie sagten, Thaksin Shinawatra *sei* ein großer politischer Führer" ("They said Thaksin Shinawatra was a

great political leader"). This sentence contains an inherent potential for its own criticism. We do not hear the author of this statement directly. An assertion is reported, and in indirect speech. The first subjunctive form compels us to examine the credibility of the statement or, better, to form our own judgement. Yes, there is much wisdom in German grammar! Blessed are they who possess such mechanisms in their mother tongue which protect them against pure gullibility. Bereft of such blessings, the rest of us must indefatigably cultivate a critical use of language, an effort which has already proven itself to be a Sisyphean task in the case of Thailand.³

The above observation went down well with my German audience, and the co-organizer, the Professor of German as a Foreign Language at Munich University, asked for my permission to publish part of the paper in the journal, *Zielsprache Deutsch*, 34. Jahrgang, Heft 1/2007, conferring a title on it which went a little beyond my intention, namely, “*Lob der deutschen Sprache: Die Sprache zwischen Freiheit und Diktatur*”. (In praise of the German language: Language between freedom and dictatorship).⁴ I do not wish to argue whether that was an overstatement or not; my concern here is that cross-cultural perspectives are sometimes accepted by native speakers themselves, which brings me to the next chapter.



Figure 2: The Goethe Institute, Munich

THE INTERNATIONAL CHARACTER OF THE HUMANITIES

It has been decades since I started fighting an uphill battle for the rights of humanities scholars to make scholarly pronouncements on foreign cultures. Many Thai Germanists cling to the dogmatic notion that only Germans know things German. If one follows that logic to its bitter end, all departments of modern languages will have to restrict their activities to language teaching at an elementary level. The colleagues are perhaps oblivious of the fact that science and technology have long obliterated national boundaries in their scholarly and scientific pursuits. To be culture-bound needs not rule out a serious study of foreign cultures, and there are areas in which non-native scholars can make their contributions. In the field of “*Germanistik*” (German Studies), German academics themselves have long recognized the pioneering works of foreign scholars. The term “*Auslandsgermanistik*” (German Studies by non-Germans) is in no way a

discriminatory term, but on the contrary, it can be taken as a complimentary concept in that German language, literature and culture merit serious investigation such that foreign academics have to organize themselves into a well-established discipline, in much the same way as the Classics. Some German scholars are prepared to go even further in expressing their gratitude to the *Auslandsgermanistik* for having paved the way for the rebirth of the *Germanistik* in Germany itself. Eberhard Lämmert (1924-2015), the doyen of German Germanists, showed extreme honesty and humility in this respect, when he stated: “The reform of Germany’s own ‘*Germanistik*’ after the liberation of Germany from the Nazi terror would not have been possible without an alignment with the works of foreign Germanists and scholars who had benefited from the experience of exile”.⁵

I had the good fortune of being able to study “Modern Languages”, and specifically French and German, at a British university, (*Figure 3*) and I experienced first-hand how the enmity of the Second World War was transcended by scholarly pursuits of the postwar years. Most of my British teachers had fought the Germans in the Second World War, but in their teaching, they instilled in their students, and especially in me who came from the Far East, a love of German language,



Figure 3: Faculty of Modern and Medieval Languages, Cambridge University

literature and culture. I never heard any of my teachers utter a nasty word about “the Germans”. Teaching German was for them a labour of love, and that love was

contagious. I decided to go to Germany for my postgraduate work because of the solid ground work and persuasive teaching on the part of British academics.

In terms of academic excellence, Germanists of Cambridge University – I seek leave to report on the institution where I studied – have produced works that have proved to be pathbreaking, and these seminal endeavours have been translated into German. One has to think of E. M. Butler’s *The Tyranny of Greece over Germany* (1935) and W. H. Bruford’s *Theatre, Drama and Audience in Goethe’s Germany* (1950). Of more recent date, the work of Nicholas Boyle comes to mind, namely his Goethe’s trilogy”, *Goethe: The Poet and the Age*, of which the first two volumes have appeared, namely, Volume 1: *The Poetry of Desire* (1991), and Volume II: *Revolution and Renunciation* (2000). The latest contribution from Cambridge which must be considered as a “breakthrough” (as far as this is possible in the humanities) was Roger Paulin’s *The Life of August Wilhelm Schlegel, Cosmopolitan of Art and Poetry* (2016), (*Figure 4*) which convincingly reinstates the German Romantic poet, critic, translator and scholar on the pillar of international recognition that has unjustly been denied to him.

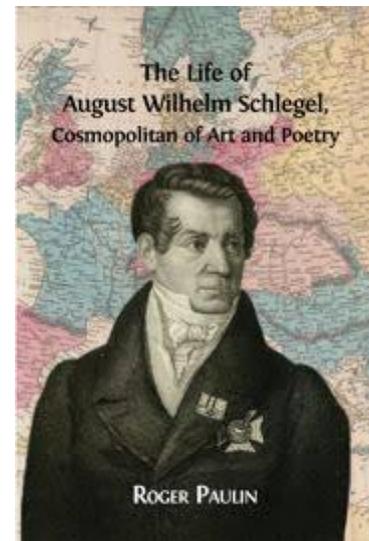


Figure 4: August Wilhelm Schlegel reinstated by a British Germanist, Roger Paulin

As far as scholarly cohesion at the international level in concerned, several international societies and associations have been active during the past decades. I have personally benefited from my involvement with the “*Internationale Vereinigung für Germanistik*” (IVG) (International Association for German Studies) and the “*Gesellschaft für interkulturelle Germanistik*” (GIG) (Society for

Intercultural German Studies), and can confirm that it is commonly agreed that the internationality of German Studies is beyond question.

Moving from German Studies to Thai Studies, I have myself ventured into the latter field as well, and can speak from personal experience that the internationalization of Thai Studies has borne fruit and that we Thai stand to benefit from this development. It must be admitted that some scholars from the West and from Asia know us “from the inside”, having spent long years in Thailand and lived here the way we live. In the case of the United States in particular, the movement known as the “Peace Corps”⁶ that goes back to the 1950s has been instrumental in preparing a solid background for those who later developed into leading scholars, for the young Peace Corps volunteers had sufficient opportunity to get to the roots of Thai culture through direct experience.

In terms of scholarship, Thai Studies abroad constituted, and at some institutions still constitute, a strong component of South East Asian Studies. Looking back to the postwar years, we Thai must recognize the great achievements of foreign scholars, particularly in the areas of linguistics and history. Tai linguistics owes a great deal to the pioneering work of William J. Gedney (1915-1999) of the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, who more or less founded a “school” of Thai Studies, whereby his pupils succeeded in continuing the master’s initiative. Apart from progress made in research in Tai linguistics, the “School of Gedney” has rendered Thai classical literature, including that of the Ayutthya period, accessible to the international scholarly world through translations and critical analyses. And in the field of history, Walter F. Vella (1924-1980), for example, gave a judicious account of the third reign of the Chakri dynasty in his *Siam under Rama III 1824-1851*. (1957) A non-partisan Thai will always remain indebted to Vella for having given due recognition to the work of this great patriot, the recognition that some

Thai historians may have withheld. Contributions from Germany have likewise been significant, particularly those of Klaus Wenk (1927-2006), a versatile scholar, at home in history, visual arts and particularly literature, ranging from the Ayutthya period to contemporary Thai literature, which he translated and commented with great critical acumen.⁷

Scholars of Thai Studies converge at the triennial International Conference on Thai Studies, which moves from one host country to another, thus demonstrating the interests on the part of the academic community worldwide. On the one hand, we Thai should be proud that things Thai are worthy of serious study by international scholars. On the other hand, the impetus coming from outside Thailand does prompt us to look at ourselves critically. May I be allowed to refer to my own experience in being invited to act as the first plenary speaker at the 5th International Conference on Thai Studies in London in 1993, at which I delivered a paper entitled “Literature in Thai Life: Reflections of a Native”?⁸ It was an opportunity for me to ask myself soul-searching questions, which otherwise may have been overlooked or taken for granted. I tried my best to explain how the oral tradition had proved to be the mainstay of Thai literature up to the present. – with its multifarious metamorphoses – and how written literature, after the fall of Ayutthya, capitalized on the treasure trove of memory and the power of improvisation in its restorative endeavours. There is something to be said for a challenge to engage in cross-cultural exchanges.

COMPARATIVE LITERATURE AND POSTWAR RECONCILIATION

By a stroke of luck, my university studies in Europe – I have always reckoned the UK as part of Europe and shall continue to do so in spite of “Brexit” – which began with Modern Languages, a centrifugal discipline characterized by a

decentering character, helped to prepare the way for comparative literary studies, which are commonly known as “Comparative Literature”. My teachers in the U.K. advised me to go to Tübingen where the most eminent scholar of Comparative Literature in Germany was teaching. I shall dispense with recounting my experience lasting 4 years at that small, idyllic seat of learning, but shall refer to my own current research on the “New Beginnings of German Comparative Literature after World War II (1945-1975)”. Working also with archival materials from the University Archive in Tübingen and the Deutsche Literaturarchiv, Marbach, I have made discoveries that transcend scholarly pursuits and border on philosophical and ethical considerations. When two statesmen, General Charles de Gaulle and Chancellor Konrad Adenauer embarked upon their common path of Franco-German reconciliation (more recently fortified by the Europeanists Angela Merkel and Emmanuel Macron), they were able to benefit from a prehistory of good will and constructive action that had been going on since the end of the war.

Tübingen, during my study years (1961-1965), functioned as the Headquarters of the French Administration with a garrison stationed there. But the French presence was never felt as intrusive or disruptive by the local people, as I could observe from my landlords and landladies. (I often helped French soldiers by translating menus in the local restaurants for them!) But such a peaceful co-existence was the result of French policy in the immediate postwar years. They took care not to act as the conquerors and not to treat their German counterparts as the vanquished. What an adroit move to appoint as head of the civil branch of the occupation forces a Germanist by the name of René Cheval (1918-1986), who was intent on ushering in as quickly as possible the process of reconciliation!⁹ He put his trust in education, and as a true Germanist must have espoused the ideal of “*Bildung*” associated with Wilhelm von Humboldt. His main concern was to use the German universities as the instrument of regeneration, with Tübingen as his

first experimental ground. He undertook as well as supervised the process of denazification, so that German universities would not have had to function under French tutelage, but could operate as *German* universities marked by a new international spirit.

Comparative Literature was the discipline that during the period between the 2 World Wars had flourished in France and exercised an immense influence on other European countries as well as in the United States. It was this particular discipline that, according to the French authorities, should serve to broaden the outlook of German academia and function as a safeguard against possible relapse into any form of insularity. Tübingen was the first university that had before the war an academic responsible for the discipline. The university hastened to recruit him back from the prisoners-of-war camp in Hannover, but before he was fully reinstated, a lot of chicaneries were going on within the German (*sic*) bureaucracy itself on account of his (falsely attributed) anti-Semitic leanings. (He happened to be none other than my teacher, and I myself and another pupil of his did put up a fight to protect his innocence by way of archival evidences.¹⁰ The Great Senate of Tübingen University, as recorded in the proceedings dated 29 July 1950, (*Figure 5*) was very explicit in its commitment to comparative studies and their concomitant creation of a chair for Comparative Literature. A certain sense of pride and consciousness of its role as a leader in German higher education can be detected from the following statement.

The fruitfulness of the idea to expand research in the humanities – hitherto caught up within national boundaries – in order to embrace supranational and comparative directions, and thereby to deepen it, can no longer be questioned today. The observation that all disciplines in the humanities are accelerating towards comparison is generally accepted [...] If therefore the Faculty of Arts is making a

request for a professorship in Comparative Literature, it is with a conviction that derives from scholarly reasons... as well as from a generally valid policy standpoint. That Tübingen University, in this case, is leading the way in rectifying a common German dereliction is in consonance with its tradition in facing up to new scholarly duties with seriousness and responsibility and in working for their mastery.¹¹



Figure 5: University Archive, Tübingen University (former University Library)

Earlier on, the French helped establish Chairs of Comparative Literature at two other German universities in the French-occupied zone, namely Mainz (with a German returnee from exile) and Saarbrücken (with a French academic, for there was no qualified German to be found). There is a moral lesson to be learned from the process described above: an enlightened victor would never fail to use education as the mechanism for an enlightened reconciliation, and a discipline marked by a cross-cultural outlook should prove to be the most effective, hence the re-introduction of Comparative Literature.

THINKING IN A NEUTRAL ZONE

When I was emphasizing at the outset of the essay that Literary Studies in general, along with Comparative Literature and German Studies, had always welcomed contributions from “third parties”, I must confess that I felt emboldened by a personal experience. The subject of my doctoral thesis (suggested by my teacher who dissuaded me from engaging in the work of an author already “over-researched”) was *August Wilhelm Schlegel in France, His Contribution to French Literary Criticism 1807-1835*¹², a very much neglected research domain, for the general assumption was that whatever influence Schlegel may have exercised was assimilated into the work of Madame de Staël. My supervisor, Professor Kurt Wais, was guided by a certain “hunch” that Schlegel may have played a much independent role among the French Romantics. It was to be my task to investigate the matter.

After 3 years of research, including intensive work at the French National Library, I delivered a manuscript of over 400 pages which more than confirmed his hypothesis. My discovery was that Schlegel was regarded as a highly original critic and thinker who could liberate the young French authors and critics, who constituted the pioneering group of the Romantic movement in France, from the dogma of “Classical” doctrine and could elucidate to them how Shakespeare and the Spanish “Golden Age” succeeded in creating innovative masterpieces from the native European soil. The motto, “Boileau or Mr. Schlegel” (*Boileau ou Monsieur Schlegel*) became the battlecry of the French Romantics. Half way through the reading of my youthful scholarly oeuvre, he decided to walk me to the then highly reputable publisher, Max Niemeyer Verlag, in Lustnau on the periphery of Tübingen, and tried to convince its director that the thesis should be published in

book form. He said to me that beyond the revelatory data that I had unearthed, especially from primary French sources, it was my attitude as a non-Western adjudicator of a highly sensitive matter that counted most. “Neither a German nor a Frenchman could have done it”, he told me emphatically. For me I did not have to overexert myself in any way in thinking “in a neutral zone”: it just came naturally to me, for I was favouring neither the French nor the Germans, although I wrote the dissertation in German. After my formal graduation in December 1965, the book was published in 1966, as Volume 3 in the series, *Forschungsprobleme der vergleichenden Literaturgeschichte* (Research Questions in Comparative Literary History), (*Figure 6*) of which several subsequent volumes were to follow. It was reviewed by several distinguished Comparatists in scholarly journals.

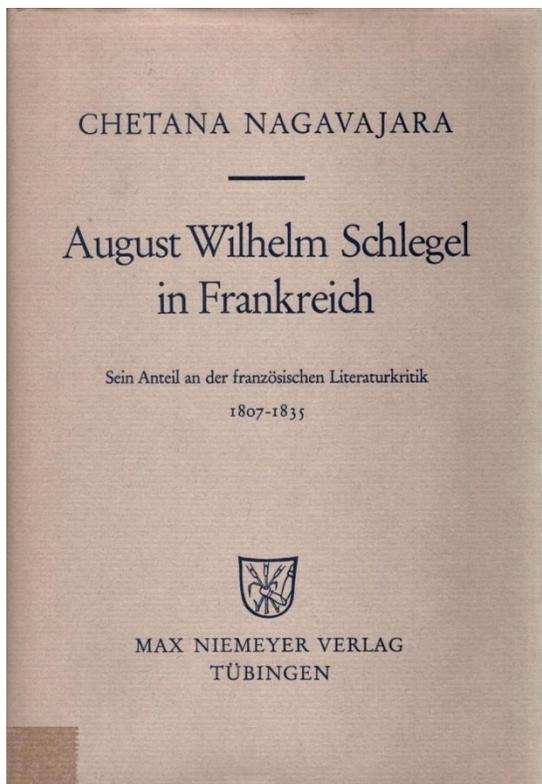


Figure 6: A Thai Comparatist mediating between German and French Romanticism



Figure 7: Kurt Wais (1907-1995), Germany's leading Comparatist and an inspiring teacher

Kurt Wais undertook to write an introduction which placed my work in the broader context of mutual enrichment of literary transmissions. But it is one particular sentence that is still ringing in my ears after more than half a century: “Nothing is more desirable than that *serenity of the soul* which he brings with him from his Thai homeland ...”¹³ (*Figure 7*) My teacher was looking at the “Land of Smiles” from a highly idealistic perspective; he was not congratulating me personally but was paying tribute to my native country too. What an honour! Had he lived to get to know Thailand today, would he had reacted in the same way? Be that as it may, that Introduction has proved to be an inexhaustible source of inspiration to me to engage unwaveringly in cross-cultural studies. Can impartiality or neutrality, not necessarily devoid of intellectual engagement and commitment, then be taken as a desirable scholarly quality?

The concept “neutral zone” can furthermore be interpreted in a constructive sense to mean transcending national attachments or characteristics. Again, I am speaking from personal experience. Being a Thai steeped in my own native tradition, but at the same time having to function as a teacher of Western languages and sometimes conditioned to think in those languages, whether in speaking or writing, I have to cross linguistic barriers back and forth so often that the “neutral zone” has become a nationless territory. The linguistic balancing act soon has to be applied to the subject matter, notably culture and literature. I shall deal with specific examples.

I once wrote an article in Thai entitled “The Elusive Enemy: A Viewpoint Concerning Contemporary Thai Literature” (1986)¹⁴, which caught the attention of most writers, critics and students of Thai literature and continued to be the focal point of lively discussions for a fairly long time. My main thesis was that Thai literature, which after the tragic events of October 1973 and October 1976 could within a decade reach great artistic heights, proved to be ineffective as an instrument of drastic political change, for imbued with the spirit of Buddhist philosophy, those young rebels became conciliatory and soon practised the “*dhana parami*” in forgiving, implicitly perhaps, the enemy of the people.



Figure 8: University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, a pioneer of International Thai Studies

The article has since made its entry into most anthologies and manuals of literary criticism in Thai academia. It was not an original essay written in my native tongue, but was based on a lecture given in English at the South East Asian Studies Summer Institute (SEASSI) at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, in 1985. (Figure 8) That means that at the originating point of the work, I was thinking in English on a Thai subject matter. But my compatriots did not find that the Thai version smacks of foreign flavour at all. I must maintain I am not here lapsing into any self-indulgence. The popularity of the essay (that provokes both assents and dissents) induced me to come up with an English version (which is not translation) under the title, “The Conciliatory Rebels: Aspects of Contemporary Thai Literature”, published in *Manusya: Journal of Humanities*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (1998).¹⁵ So my thinking on this subject finally ran its full circle, starting as a lecture in English, then metamorphosing into an article in Thai, and finally returning home to

its “original” (not native) language, which is English. I did not change its substance along that circular journey, but did pick up a number of new ideas and insights along the way. A cultural enrichment of sorts, perhaps!

Two more examples should help illustrate the potential of this type of “neutral zone”. In 1992 I contributed an article under the title, “Wechselseitige Erhellung der Künste in der thailändischen Kultur”, to a *Festschrift* for a colleague at Aachen University in Germany in the volume called, *Europa provincia mundi: Essays in Comparative Literature and European Studies Offered to Hugo Dyserinck on the Occasion of His Sixty-fifth Birthday*.¹⁶ The catchphrase “mutual illumination of the arts” in Thai possesses somehow or other a greater poetic ring than its Western counterparts, and seems to have found a responsive chord in the Thai intellectual circle, perhaps by accident. The English version follows the German original fairly faithfully. In Thailand, especially, the essay seems to have aroused a consciousness of, and, an attentiveness to, the constant “dialogue” between the various arts themselves. I made it quite explicit that I borrowed the original concept of “illumination of the arts” from the German scholar Oskar Walzel (1864-1944), expanded it and applied it to Thai arts and Thai artistic phenomena. In writing the original essay in German, I was in no way trying to express my indebtedness to German aesthetic thinking, but was doing a colleague at a German institution an honour. Writing in German was no impediment to analyzing the world of Thai art, and the subsequent Thai and English versions managed to find adequate expression for that content. Again, another instance of the universality of the core idea!

The last example concerns a paper in French which I presented as the Keynote Address at the Conference of University Teachers of French in South East Asia with the emphasis on the topic of “Literary Theory and Criticism in France”,

19-22 February 2001, in Bangkok. I offered to deal with an alternative to the main theme of the Conference, namely with a subject that had, for many years, occupied my mind, partly as a reaction against the blind adoption of fashionable Western cultural and literary theories by Western-trained Thai scholars, who willy-nilly tried to apply those theories on Thai subject matter. The point I was trying to prove was very simple, namely that research in Thai Studies, if carried critically to a certain point, would yield insights that could be formulated into theories. I called these in Thai “theories from the native soil” and illustrated my point with concrete examples. Expressing my ideas in French proved to be a kind of filtering process, whereby I had to do my best to describe Thai experiences in such a way as to allow theoretical ideas to emerge from them. The lecture “*À la recherche des théories indigènes*” (“In Search of Indigenous Theories”) appeared in French in the *Bulletin de l’Association thaïlandaise des professeurs de français* in 2002. Three other versions followed: the Thai version appeared in *Report of the Research Project “Criticism as an Intellectual Force in Contemporary Society”* in 2003; the English version was taken up in *Dedications to Her Royal Highness Princess Kalyani Vadhana Krom Luang Naradhiwas Rajanagarinda on Her 80th Birthday* in 2003; and the German version was published in the journal, *Weimarer Beiträge*, 2/2003.¹⁷ The said lecture in French was conceived as a kind of summative position on any part. Earlier endeavours had preceded it in essays on specific aspects of indigenous theory formation, such as the lecture, “An Aesthetics of Discontinuity: Contemporary Thai Drama and Its Western Connection”, published by the University of Hawaii in the volume, *Literary Relations East and West* in 1990. Even at that stage, a German scholar welcomed it as a theoretical milestone that proved the transnational validity of a theory drawn from the context of a specific national culture¹⁸. Another theoretical point that aroused great interest on the part of both Thai and foreign colleagues was my analysis of the instrumental

composition of the Thai classical orchestra, with the emphasis on the unique role played by the second xylophone (*ranad thum*), which reflects our Thai mentality, whereby leadership is exercised by those *apparently* assuming secondary or even subservient positions.

I humbly submit that theoretical thinking and theory formation can cut across national boundaries, are not the privilege of any specific scholarly culture, and that the servile adherence to Western models on the part of many of my colleagues is a self-imposed intellectual incarceration.

TIME AS THE MOST PRECIOUS GIFT

We often speak of “community of scholars” in order to emphasize the importance of mutual intellectual and scholarly enrichment, certainly with the implication that a real scholar does not operate in isolation, but engages in constant contacts and dialogues with colleagues. In the old days, the word “colleagues” may have a narrower sense of people of the same profession working closely in the same place. The internationalization of academia has changed all that, and the advent of digital media has revolutionized the meaning of collegiality to include scholars cooperating with one another without ever having a chance to enter into a face-to-face relationship. I belong to the generation which enjoys the benefit of internationalization based on real human contact. After graduation, I continued to broaden my collegial relationship through memberships in scholarly associations, conferences/seminars/congresses, visiting scholarships/professorships, research stays, study visits and, last but not least, private visits. Thai academia at present is so absorbed in the “publish-or-perish” subculture and the ranking craze inherited from the West that it sometimes forgets that the international community of scholars can only thrive on the basis of human relationships, or human warmth, even!

From personal experience I maintain that profound intellectual or scholarly exchange is a dialogic culture that best comes alive in real-life situations. Written communication, whether personal or formal, is supportive of that interpersonal relationship. Real contact with real people and cultural environment can be enriching. I was lucky to be invited as a research fellow of the International Research Centre “Interweaving Performance Cultures” of the Free University Berlin¹⁹ during 10 consecutive years from 2008 to 2018, each year with a six-week residency. The opportunity to meet practitioners as well as scholars from all corners of the globe and to imbibe the cultural riches of Berlin itself was an incomparably rewarding experience, and to be able to reflect on the knowledge and wisdom gained from such an exposure has made an “Indian summer” of my retirement.

May I now be allowed to be more personal and specific? When I was turning 60 in 1997, colleagues and students embarked on a *Festschrift* designed to analyze and evaluate all aspects of my critical and scholarly activities, with contributions from Thai colleagues and former students, plus a special volume entitled *On Culture and Criticism: Dialogue with Chetana Nagavajara*,²⁰ containing 3 contributions from 3 senior scholars, one German, one German-American and one Thai. (*Figures 9, 10 and 11*) The senior Thai colleague Ekavidya Nathalang (b. 1930), an educationist who had known me from my student days, gave an account of my process of maturation, an equivalent in discursive mode to a “*Bildungsroman*”. Reinhold Grimm (1931-2009), the colleague from the USA, a German-born Germanist and Comparatist who had spent his professional life mostly on American campuses, undertook to present his appraisal of my publications in Western languages. The most exhaustive treatment of my entire scholarly output in Western languages came from Eberhard Lämmert, generally recognized as the “doyen” of German Germanists, who occupied the Chair of

Comparative Literature and German Studies at the Free University of Berlin and served one seven-year term as President of that university. In his contribution appearing in 3 languages, namely German, English and Thai, he detected a system of thinking in my scholarly activities, which he characterized in distinct chapters. I must confess that I was, so to speak, bowled over by his assessment, because I had never realized that I had any system at all. Growing up with folk theatre whose hallmark is improvisation, I reacted perhaps instinctively to problems which with I was confronted, *improvising* my responses along the way. But Professor Lämmert could read me in a way that had been unknown to me.



Figure 9: Reinhold Grimm (1931-2009)



Figure 10: Eberhart Lämmert (1924-2015)



Figure 11: Ekavidya Nathalang (b. 1930)

From that moment on, I began to reflect more on my own ways of thinking and my methods. My teacher Kurt Wais pinpointed the main strength of the Comparatist in me based on my youthful work; Herr Lämmert's analysis was multi-dimensional, because he was dealing with my scholarly products spanning several decades. A man of his stature, extremely busy both as scholar and

administrator (who chaired several boards and commissions after his retirement) was willing to spend hundreds of hours reading the publications of a younger South East Asian colleague, an act of incomparable magnanimity. What he gave me was *time*. And I am prepared to generalize a little that *the most precious gift that a scholar can make to a colleague is time*.

He did it again in 2009 when Tübingen University asked him to deliver the laudation at the conferment of an honorary doctorate to me on 13 July 2009. Naturally, Professor Lämmert must have spent hours and hours updating his information, for between 1997 and 2009 I had published a fair number of contributions in Western languages. I was fortunate enough to be able to record my deep gratitude to him in the form of a contribution to the Festschrift for his 90th birthday, entitled “*Herr Lämmert hat Zeit*” (Mr. Lämmert has time), published in 2014 in the volume, *Vielfacher Blick*.²¹ Within the limited space that the editors allowed me, I recounted our first meeting in 1981, and how our friendship developed during the subsequent 3 decades, during which he was always ready to act as my mentor. Less than a year after his 90th birthday, he passed away. The professional and personal relationship with Professor Lämmert was an intellectual enrichment of a special kind for me, for his open-mindedness and wise counsel counted a great deal in my professional development. In deep gratitude, I dedicated 3 books to him, the first, *Fervently Mediating: Criticism from a Thai Perspective*, on his 80th birthday in 2004; the second, *Auf der Suche nach einer grenzüberschreitenden Wissenskultur*, on his 89th birthday in 2003; and the third, *Bridging Cultural Divides*, on his 90th birthday in 2014.

I have not been able to do justice to the kindness I have received from colleagues worldwide and to name them all. I am now more convinced than ever that I made the right decision over half a century ago to embark on the studies of

Modern Languages, for the mastery of the respective foreign languages has opened the door to those cultures and has brought me and my foreign colleagues closer to each other, intellectually and perhaps spiritually too. I am not the only one to benefit from such collegiality: my students and my Thai colleagues have also been the beneficiaries of these professional relations. When our research team on criticism extended an invitation to Reinhold Grimm to come to Thailand for a series of lectures, he prepared himself so well, and his lectures were of the level of keynote addresses destined for international gatherings. He said to me that I once said to him, “You take us seriously”, and that proved to be a source of inspiration to him.

“We take each other seriously” may be the principle that propels mutual intellectual enrichment to ever greater heights.

REFUGEES AS YOUR BETTERS

Civil wars, often proxy bloody armed conflicts, supported either overtly or clandestinely by superpowers, are the hallmarks of the 21st century, while unresolved ethnic hostilities left over from colonial times do persist. Refugee problems, still not struck at their roots, have reached unthinkable dimensions, and are merely being temporarily alleviated by humanitarian efforts on the part of certain civilized nations. Being a Germanist, I am aware of the sacrifices hitherto made by Germany in spite of the risk of internal security, with the German Chancellor herself having to put her political popularity at stake. The principle of “Welcoming Culture” (known in German as “*Willkommenskultur*”), (*Figure 12*) whose provenance lies more in the domain of ethics than political machination, and which, in the case of Germany, can probably be seen an act of atonement for its bad “*karma*” or deeds of the past.



Figure 12: German Chancellor, Dr. Angela Merkel, protagonist of “Welcoming Culture”

My own country has been involved with refugee problems too, particularly as aftershocks of the Indo-China Wars. More recently, Rohingya refugees from Myanmar reached our shores, and it took some time for the Thai people and the Thai Government to find reasonable ways to deal with the crisis, while human trafficking and other forms of dehumanized treatments had been perpetrated. Again, humanitarian considerations weighed heavily on our conscience, as I have tried to demonstrate in an earlier paper, “The Others as Our Betters: Case Studies from Thailand”, by referring to a poem on the Rohingya by a distinguished Thai poet, which in turn reminds me of another touching poem by an African poet.²² The experience of Thailand goes deeper than an expression of compassion and brotherhood among human beings. It can be taken as a geopolitical issue. The supreme example is the Chinese immigrants to Thailand, whose migrations have taken several centuries. Various reasons have been given to explain the integration of the Chinese into the indigenous population, such as religious tolerance, the easy-going nature of the local Thai, and the “welcoming culture” of the hosts whose guiding principle has always remained: “Our doors are always open, but the house is ours”. This should not be misinterpreted as a condescending gesture of a “helpful hand” on the part of the Thai. The fact remains that many or most Chinese

immigrants, after one or two generations, no longer consider themselves as outsiders, and the hosts no longer treat them as such either. Every manual of Thai history celebrates the valour and the sacrifices of King Taksin, son of a Chinese immigrant and a Thai mother, who spearheaded a liberation campaign that, within a decade, helped regain independence from the Burmese conquerors. The ruling monarch of the subsequent dynasty has, for over two centuries, been performing an annual commemorative ceremony before the statue of King Taksin in order to express gratitude to this great son of a Chinese immigrant.

But these immigrants were not refugees; they were immigrants who travelled a long distance to the “land of smiles” in order to seek their fortune through hard work. It was a different story with *the Mon*, who were “refugees” of sorts. The Mon are an ethnic group that originally inhabited mainland South East Asia, founder of the Dhavaravati Kingdom (5th to 11th century), which was distinguished by high civilization, both in material and spiritual terms. They had their ups and downs during the course of history, with the Thai from the North and the Khmer from the east edging them towards the West, where they had to contend with the Burmese. From the 16th century onwards, they had to flee the Burmese to seek refuge with the Thai, who more than welcomed the Mon to help them resist the Burmese. The two peoples were linked, not only through political interests, but also culturally, the hosts themselves being prepared to learn from the “superior refugees”. Without a steady territorial identity, the Mon were – to adopt the well-recognized German epithet – a “*Kulturnation*”, conscious of their own worth which they were ready to bequeath to the Thai hosts. In the arts – visual, musical and culinary – the Thai absorbed the artistic supremacy of the “immigrants”, who soon became one with them through intermarriages. Mon monks were respected both as scholars and practitioners of Buddhism, and in the reform of Buddhism which led to the foundation of a new order, King Rama IV in the late 19th century

appropriated much from the Mon. (*Figure 13*) Cultural enrichment transcends social and political status. Our present-day perception of “refugees” needs drastic revision, and we can learn from history.



Figure 13: Buddhist temple in a Mon community on the “Kred” Island, Nonthaburi, near Bangkok

IDEAL COEXISTENCE: TECHNOLOGY AND HUMANITIES

Thai academia is being plagued by a crisis, attributable to a total misconception perpetrated by the rise of “the corporate university” in the West. Marketing mechanisms adopted into the operation of the universities have misled politicians as well as university administrators into turning higher education into a propaedeutic for various employments in order to suit the market. The humanities suffer most from such a misguided policy redirection. Gurus of the contemporary world have exhibited a total lack of critical acumen, and even worse, of basic understanding of the structure of modern society. The original German concept of “*Industrie 4.0*” has been taken over uncritically as the new philosophy of life, whereby politicians, including the leader of the junta and now prime minister, are

wont to invoke the magic formula “Thailand 4.0”, confusing an instrument or a means to achieve technological and industrial excellence with a desirable way of life. This is no stuff that an ideal society can be made of.

I have tried my best to draw the attention of the adherents of “Thailand 4.0” to the fact that countries in Asia that have achieved leadership status in technology and industry do not neglect the humanities at all. My attendance at the 5th World Humanities Forum in Busan, Korea, in October 2018, has been an eye-opener. (Figure 14) Participants, especially from Korea, Japan and Taiwan, are highly competent humanities scholars who discoursed on their respective subjects with much confidence. I noticed too that many of them represented the discipline of *Religious Studies* which seem to be in the ascendency in those technologically advanced countries. This is a subject that transcends sectarian divisiveness, as it seeks to probe the viability of all religions, an act that unites and rather than divides. I am moreover reminded of the work of the Dalai Lama, *Beyond Religion: Ethics for a Whole World* (2011)²³, which seems to point in the direction of a common goal that even transcends particular religious attachments. The humanities in the 21st century should certainly move in that

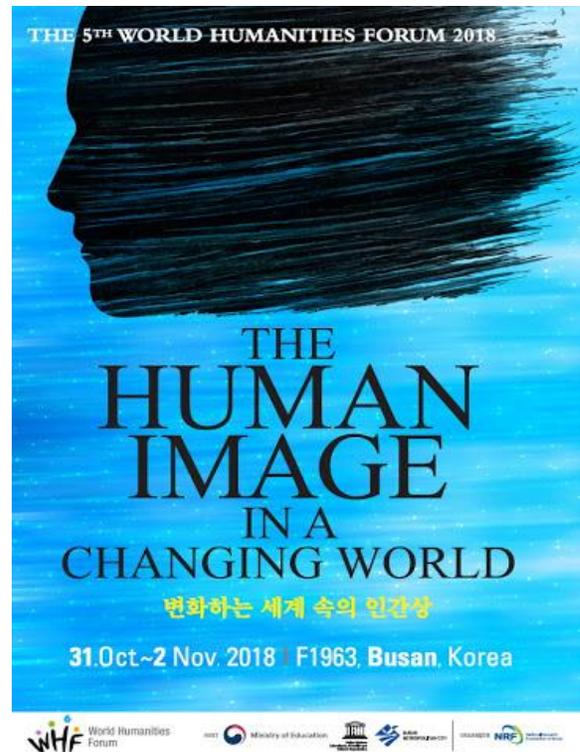


Figure 14: A foremost technological country as a vanguard of the humanities

direction. The latest development in Western academia is also encouraging. There has been an increasing demand in Germany for the study of Sanskrit, and the statistics in 2015 listed 14 universities offering courses in Indology and Sanskrit.²⁴

So one of the world's most advanced technological nations has a place for such an esoteric discipline! Technology and humanities can coexist, and the supreme goal in life is certainly not the deification of technological achievements, which are to serve humanity and not to dominate it.

RESEARCH MANAGEMENT AT ITS MOST HUMANE: A HAGIOGRAPHY AND AN OBITUARY

As I am addressing a professional gathering of Humboldtians, I take leave here to describe the policy direction and the management mode of the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation, which I consider to be a guarantee of its international success for over half a century. Its operation is characterized by minimum bureaucracy and maximum freedom for researchers to embark on their own conceptions of the search for knowledge, wisdom and truth. Any discipline imaginable is admissible, and the Foundation will go out of its way to find competent evaluators for the research proposals. There are no deadlines for the submission of proposals, which means that an applicant can apply at any time during the year, as and when he/she feels himself/herself ready. The applicant can choose his/her own host institution and the German research partner. But there is one area in which the Foundation refuses to give way to laxity, namely quality. When it gives the latest statistics of Humboldt alumni who have won the Nobel Prizes, it does so with a certain degree of objectivity and humility. Good research depends on good researchers, what could be a more simple formula? The Foundation is explicit about its mode of operation: "We support people, not projects. After all, even in times of increasing team work, it is the individual's ability and dedication that are decisive of academic success." The Website's

section “About us”, should attract potential applicants. A human-centred philosophy has functioned as a guarantee for humane research management.

I must apologize for deciding to end my discourse on research and cultural enrichment, not with a big bang, but with a whimper. I am writing a short *obituary* of the highly regarded research organization, *The Thailand Research Fund* (TRF), created in 1992 by an Act of Parliament to ensure its viability and independence. The Thailand Research Fund had been a beacon of hope in the Thai research landscape. Without being directly influenced by the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation, TRF too adopted the human-centred approach. It promoted individual researchers at the doctoral and post-doctoral levels, while middle-level and senior researchers were encouraged to embark on team research. Within 2 decades, the level of research quality (partly measurable by way of internationally accepted criteria) has increased significantly. One of its virtues was to stress the importance of basic research, which provided a firm basis for subsequent applied research. The humanities, social sciences, fine and applied arts were not left in the cold. The academic community was satisfied with the way it was treated by TRF. Even some far-sighted politicians were happy to lend support to it. I had the information from the horse’s mouth, so to speak: a former Prime Minister told me that during his term of office, he directed the Budget Bureau not to tamper with the requests from 2 agencies, namely the Royal Household and TRF. Research was being given the same respectful treatment as the affairs pertaining to the monarch. An unprecedented policy direction!

But every organization has its ups and downs. TRF was no exception. One Prime Minister wanted to accelerate the improvement of manpower through higher education by investing heavily on sending Thai students to Western institutions, with a special emphasis on doctoral training. The then TRF Director aired his view

that this could be counterproductive, as substantial public money had already been used to accelerate doctoral programmes at Thai institutions and that the results had been encouraging. The Prime Minister was furious at anybody who dared to raise his voice against his own grand visions. His immediate reaction was: “TRF shall be abolished!” Before his august order could be translated into action (which would have required another Act of Parliament”), the Prime Minister was deposed. Old-fashioned Thai still believe in the results of “good *karma*” and “bad *karma*”!

One survival does not necessarily entail a second one. The government under the military junta was persuaded by the pundits of “Thailand 4.0” to take drastic actions to strengthen the competitive capacity of Thailand in the global community by way of “structural changes”. The most effective change would be to forge a new unity by amalgamating all relevant agencies under one ministry, to be called “The Ministry of Higher Education, Science, Research and Innovation”. Hasty legislations were rushed through the appointed Lower House and the appointed Senate, regrettably with no operation plans. TRF ceased to function as a research support organization as from May 2019 and was (in popular parlance) “kicked upstairs” to act as the secretariat of the Grand Policy Board, with the responsibility of policy formulation. It had been functioning very well as a research granting agency, and its staff of 180 has now to be retrained in policy formulation. I was invited to one of its consultative meetings to propose reorganization measures and could not resist opining that policy formulation needs a “lean” organization of not more than 8 staff members (instead of 180), who must be highly experienced. The other organizations of the new Ministry, except perhaps for the former Ministry of Science, are finding themselves in utter chaos as to what to do. The legislations themselves, emanating from different individual organizations, do conflict with each other. At the time of this writing (February

2020), the problem of reorganization has not been solved, and that certainly affects research funding.

I have posited research not merely as a tool to achieve a specific end, but research as culture. And culture is man-made; so people can enrich each other, at various levels and with various modes, through meaningful contacts. That my experience has also been international can perhaps be ascribed to my training as a Modern Linguist, engaged in research in languages, literatures and cultures. In the final analysis, I do not think that digital technology is necessarily detrimental to human relationships, as long as we know how to use it. My experience, however, does confirm that human-centred mode of operation remains the best way to further cultural enrichment.

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¹⁴Chetana Nagavajara. (1986). “The Elusive Enemy: A Viewpoint on Contemporary Thai Literature”. *Book Path*, August. Reprinted in Chetana Nagavajara. (1987). *The Endless Road of Critical Culture*. Bangkok: Thianwan Press. (in Thai)

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