

**The 11<sup>th</sup> International Conference on Thai Studies:  
Visions of the Future  
Bangkok, Thailand  
26-28 July 2011**

The Research Institute for Languages and Cultures of Asia, Mahidol University organized the 11<sup>th</sup> International Conference on Thai Studies on 26-28 July 2011. Held every three years, the International Conference on Thai Studies is a well-established forum for researchers across disciplines to share knowledge and perspectives on Thailand, Thai culture and society and the connection between Thailand and the world. In 2011, the 11th International Conference on Thai Studies marked the 30th Anniversary of two special occasions: first, the inauguration of the Thai Studies Conference, initiated in 1981 in India by a small group of Thai and Indian scholars, and secondly the founding of the Research Institute for Languages and Cultures of Asia, a unit of Mahidol University devoted to research and studies on diverse linguistic groups and cultures of Asia.

Perhaps no better way of reporting the success of this conference is to re-publish, here, the closing remarks of Professor Dr. Robert S. Bauer delivered on 28 July 2011. Professor Bauer's contribution to the study of Asian languages is legendary and his remarks reflect the universal appreciation and congratulations of all for the outstanding efforts made by organizers, supporters and participants alike. It is without doubt that the 11<sup>th</sup> International Conference on Thai Studies will be positively remembered for its own engaging vision of the future.

**Remarks on the Contributions  
of the 11<sup>th</sup> International Conference on Thai Studies:  
Visions of the Future  
26-28 July 2011**

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In trying to come up with one word that could best sum up this 11<sup>th</sup> *International Conference on Thai Studies*, the first “word” to enter my mind was simply “Wow!” which was followed by an exclamation mark. On one level the word “wow” seems fairly appropriate, because I think this conference must be one of the biggest, if not *the* biggest in terms of the number of participants, that I have ever attended, and I have attended some big conferences in China, by the way; however, without any question, this conference has also been one of the very best organized that I have ever experienced.

I would like to take this opportunity that my current task gives me to personally thank Professor Somsonge Burusphat, her colleagues in the Research Institute for Languages and Cultures of Asia, and the Institute’s administrative staff and students for all of their extraordinary effort, help, and support that has enabled them to put together this excellent conference and make it so brilliantly successful. By organizing and holding this conference over these past few days they have provided a fantastic forum for all of us who share an interest in Thai studies to come together to present findings from our research and exchange ideas and knowledge with each other.

In reading the abstracts of the conference papers and attending the plenary and panel sessions over the past couple of days, I have been absolutely amazed by the vast range of academic areas that are represented in the papers that have been and are being presented at this conference; these areas span a very wide gamut and include the following in alphabetical order: anthropological, archaeological, biological, communicational, cultural (multiculturalism or cultural diversity),

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diplomatic, ecological, economic, governmental, health-related, historical, legal, linguistic, literary (literary criticism, figurative language, popular fiction), traditional-medicinal, musical, pedagogical, political, religious, and social. Of course, for each of these areas there are many other, finer subdivisions. For example, as for the linguistic area, in which I can claim to have some interests, we heard papers on bilingual lexicography, Thai dialectal geography, Chinese dialects spoken in Thailand, ethnic minority languages spoken in Thailand, the impact of Down Syndrome on children's Thai speech production, the use of Chinese-based characters to write the Zhuang language, and many others. The last area just mentioned, i.e. social, could be further subdivided into a number of other areas, such as defining Thai identity, ethnic identity, gender-related issues, and so on.

More importantly in the context of Thai studies, I noticed that some scholars here have not shied away from tackling some quite politically-sensitive issues for Thailand; for example, Bangkok's turbulent events of May last year, the ongoing violence in southern Thailand, the Thai-Cambodia border conflicts, linguistic and cultural identity among ethnic minority groups living in Thailand, democratization and the Thai military, and the use (or misuse) of the *lèse majesté* law.

Conference papers have focused on the local, national, and international levels of research problems, as well as their historical, contemporary, and future aspects. In sum, this conference has been enriched and diversified by the myriad issues that have been presented and discussed in the various plenary and panel sessions.

It could go without saying, but I'll say it anyway: Only wealthy nations have adequate resources that can be channeled into supporting and sponsoring high-quality research that covers such a wide range of research studies and projects and that has the potential to produce benefits for their societies. The success of this conference is directly related to the resources that have been made available to researchers through various national and international funding bodies, such as the Thai Research Fund.

In listening to and reviewing the papers from the plenary sessions, I note that on the first morning of our conference Professor Craig Reynolds examined the inextricable link between religion and power in Thailand and the importance of the Jatukhamramatheap amulet. I might also mention here that there was at least one

other paper on the interesting topic of Thai amulets that was entitled “Thai Amulets: Symbol of the Practice of Multi Faiths and Cultures” presented by Associate Professor Sophana Srichampa.

On the second morning of this conference we heard from Professor John Hartmann and Professor Ratanaporn Sethakul in “The Disappearing Past: Hidden Histories and Vanishing Environments” about how old place names in Thailand have been changed in such ways that their original links to the landscape environment have been lost, and in addition, the environment itself has been changed through man-made efforts which have further blurred the origin of some place names.

Gerald W. Fry, who observed that he is starting his 6<sup>th</sup> decade of carrying out research work in Thailand, expressed his concerns about the misrepresentation and distortion of Thailand by Westerners and local “experts” in his presentation entitled “Representing Thai Society and Culture Accurately and Fairly: The Challenges of Doing an Interdisciplinary Comprehensive Reference Book on Thailand”. He talked briefly about two things that caught my attention: first, the *Roshomon effect* – that is, how different people who have looked at the same phenomenon ended up seeing and interpreting completely different things. And second, *historical amnesia*, i.e. forgetting – sometimes deliberately – past events. He also said that to ensure quality control of his research work he requires at least three independent sources to verify facts, and I think this is both fair and admirable. At the end of his presentation he mentioned that he had gone back to the village he had lived in 45 years ago. He found the house was still there, as well as some of the same people. But he saw much more inequality than he had witnessed in the past. He also stated that two of the most unequal countries in the world today, according to the British magazine *The Economist*, are Thailand and Brazil. I myself have been reading that it is this inequality that has been causing sociopolitical problems in Thailand and that it does not bode well for the country’s future.

This issue brings us to the subtitle of this conference, namely, “Visions of the Future”, and I think William Klausner, the discussant for the papers by Hartmann and Ratanaporn and Fry from the second day’s plenary session, was able to introduce both historical and forward-looking perspectives. He noted that Thailand’s economic, sociocultural, and spiritual landscapes have been transformed. He had lived in an Isaan village 56 years ago and reflected on the radical changes that have

transformed village life; for example, that methods of indirect conflict resolution have vanished there, along with the tradition of reciprocal labor. He concluded his “*anecdote*”, as he put it, with the statement that “whatever one says today about something will have to be revised tomorrow”. Preserving the past and learning from the past help us to envision the kind of future we want. As Thai society transforms its traditional ways and modernizes, Klausner advises Thai society not to throw out the baby with the bath water, that is, there is a need to come to an accommodation between various opposing forces and create a synthesis of traditional Thai values with democratic institutions, individualism, transparency, and other concepts and developments associated with modernism.

At this morning’s plenary session entitled ““Thainess” in the Face of Universal Human Rights Protection and Linguistic Identity” we heard two presentations on this very important but quite controversial and emotive topic: Dr. Coeli Barry talked about protecting diversity from the negative impact of Thainess or sameness on ethnic minority groups by implementing a “Human Rights Protection Mechanism”. She proposed that diverse linguistic policies could allow for the reading and writing of other languages in addition to Central Thai. Emeritus Professor Suwilai has sketched out for us Thailand’s tremendous linguistic diversity that has been created by the dozens of languages spoken within the nation. However, as she has demonstrated, many of these languages are seriously endangered and are in the process of dying out. Working within minority communities, she and her colleagues have introduced language-revitalization programs to strengthen some of these endangered languages. She has also been involved in developing bilingual-education programs that teach both Thai and Pattani Malay in minority communities in southern Thailand. As she has told us, the positive results from her work in these communities have been especially heartening and encouraging. She has advocated a humanitarian approach to the promotion of linguistic and cultural diversity that redefines Thainess which has been too narrowly based up till now and has done so in such a way that it not only embraces diversity but also preserves Thailand’s unity.

The discussant for this plenary session, Professor Gothom Arya, proposed broadening the strait-jacket notion of standard Thainess by introducing and developing the more inclusive concept of diversity. We should recognize that our sense of belonging exists on more than one level, i.e., the regional, national, and

world levels. We need to move from recognizing a person as having only a singular identity to having inclusive, multiple, and overlapping identities.

This conference has been the stimulus for over 300 national and international scholars in Thai studies to conduct research, write research papers, submit abstracts of these papers to the Conference Organizing Committee, and then come from places around Thailand and the world to gather here in Bangkok to present their papers at this extraordinary forum. Scholars have broached new and old, provocative and challenging ideas that have been influenced by frankly-conflicting and contradictory developments within Thailand's increasingly globalized society. In doing so we have been able to receive comments and suggestions which can help us improve our research methodologies, analyses, and interpretations of our findings. Hopefully, the exchange of ideas and the intellectual stimulation we gain from being here and interacting with each other has measurably advanced scholarship in Thai studies.

As Professor Somsonge told us at the Conference Reception on Tuesday night, the first Thai Studies Conference was held in India in 1981, so this 11<sup>th</sup> Conference marks the 30<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of its founding. Since then, it has been held on a regular basis every three years. The next and 12<sup>th</sup> conference will be held in 2014. The locale of this next conference was decided at the Business Meeting that was held last night. As for the details about the organization of the next conference, Professor Phillip Hirsch of the University of Sydney will make an announcement to officially invite interested scholars to come to the University of Sydney in 2014 to participate in the 12<sup>th</sup> International Conference on Thai Studies.

Finally, I would like to thank all of you for your kind attention to my remarks and observations on this conference.