

บทบาทของคนธรรมดาสามัญในการส่งเสริมความสัมพันธ์ไทย-เยอรมัน  
THE SMALL MAN'S CONTRIBUTION TO THAI-GERMAN  
RELATIONS<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

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To mark the 160 th anniversary of Thai-German relations, the author proposes to depart from the role of high diplomacy in order to examine the contribution made at the level of “the small man” in sustaining and enriching those relations. By way of what he calls “imaginary dialogues”, which may not happen in real life but are constructed by third parties, he demonstrates by analyzing concrete examples as to how the common people and professionals are able to engage in fruitful exchanges, covering a wide range of experiences and activities in such areas as Buddhism, philosophy, ethics, aesthetics, the arts, language, education, and last but not least, food. Temporal and spatial divides are obliterated in this dialogic dynamism, as ideas travel far and wide, as exemplified by one telling phenomenon, German Romanticism. The author concludes by citing his personal

experience as a mediator between the two cultures that culminates in his ardent effort to turn his German legacy of scholarly conscientiousness into moral rectitude once back in his Buddhist homeland.

Keywords:

High diplomacy Buddhism  
the small man dialogue  
German Romanticism

## บทคัดย่อ

ในวาระของการครบรอบ 160 ปีแห่งการสถาปนาความสัมพันธ์ระหว่างไทยกับเยอรมนี ผู้เขียนขอเสนอให้เล็งการเน้นบทบาทของการทูตระดับสูงดังที่กระทำกันอยู่ และให้ความสำคัญกับบทบาทของคณาจารย์ในการสนับสนุนและสร้างความมั่งคั่งให้แก่สัมพันธภาพนี้ ด้วยวิธีการที่เรียกว่า “ทวิวิจน์ในจินตนาการ” ซึ่งอาจจะมิได้เกิดขึ้นจริงแต่เป็นการสร้างความเชื่อมโยงโดยบุคคลที่สาม ผู้เขียนวิเคราะห์ตัวอย่างที่เป็นรูปธรรมเพื่อแสดงให้เห็นว่า คณาจารย์และนักวิชาการสามารถที่จะสร้างการแลกเปลี่ยนอันก่อให้เกิดมรรคผลได้ ซึ่งครอบคลุมประสบการณ์และกิจกรรมในวงที่กว้างมาก อันรวมถึงส่วนที่เกี่ยวกับพุทธศาสนา, ประเพณี, จริยธรรม, สุนทรียศาสตร์, ศิลปะแขนงต่างๆ, ภาษา, การศึกษา, และที่ไม่อาจมองข้ามได้ คือ เรื่องของอาหาร เวลาและถิ่นที่ห่างจากกันไม่เป็นอุปสรรคอันใดต่อกระบวนการที่เปี่ยมด้วยพลวัตของทวิวิจน์ ทั้งนี้เพราะกระแสความคิดสามารถเดินทางได้ไกลมาก ดังจะเห็นได้จากตัวอย่างที่น่าทึ่ง นั่นคือ กระแสความคิดที่มาจากกลุ่มกวีและนักคิดโรแมนติกของเยอรมัน

ผู้เขียนให้ข้อสรุปจากรากฐานของประสบการณ์ส่วนตนในฐานะผู้เชื่อมประสานระหว่างวัฒนธรรมทั้งสอง โดยชี้ให้เห็นว่า จุดสุดยอดของประสบการณ์ดังกล่าว คือการที่เขารับมรดกเยอรมันที่ว่าด้วยความสำนึกเชิงลึกในทางวิชาการ แล้วนำความสำนึกนั้นไปปรับให้เป็นความถูกต้องทางจริยธรรมในบริบทของบ้านเกิดเมืองพุทธของเขาเอง

คำสำคัญ:

การทูตชั้นสูง, พุทธศาสนา,  
คณธรรมดาสัมมัญ, ทวีวจน์,  
โรแมนติกเยอรมัน

**Preamble: Discourse on Method**

I permit myself to preface this presentation with a few explanatory remarks. The normal way to deal with a celebratory occasion is to concentrate on political history, studded with eminent figures including monarchs, princes, heads of state, political leaders, distinguished diplomats and other dignitaries. Without having to call upon the authority of the French Annales School, we can rely on sheer common sense and shall not fail to realize how friendly relations between countries are sustained at the lower echelons of society by professionals and interested people in all walks of life. I have on an earlier occasion demonstrated this point in my Keynote Address given at the annual conference of the Sirindhorn Anthropology Centre on 28 March 2013 under the title, “Willingly Participating: ASEAN for the Commoners”, in which I emphasized how the evolution and success of that international organization rest on the contributions of the common people.(Chetana Nagavajara, 2015, pp.219-280)

The present paper is not constructed on a purely scholarly basis but also draws on personal experiences. (I often refer therefore to my previous publications.) These experiences sometimes cannot be substantiated by concrete evidences or textual references, and mutual trust

between the speaker and his audience must be presumed upon. Beyond this personal approach, I have made use of works of art that I consider supportive of my argument. I propose to call this approach an “Aesthetics of the Lowly”. I shall be more specific and cite two examples, one Thai and one German.

The first example is drawn from Thai mural painting. Traditionally, mural painting was meant to adorn the interior of a temple by telling the stories of the Life of the Buddha or the Jatakas, being the previous lives of the Enlightened One. Later, the Thai version of the Indic epic, the Ramayana, known in the Thai version as the Ramakien, was introduced with the intention of educating the people by way of the struggle between good and evil. The heroism of Thai monarchs was then taken up, with the implication of good triumphing over evil. Naturally, the major part of the space is devoted to the valorous exploits of historic figures or the path to nirvana of Lord Buddha. But Thai painters have managed to use the bottom part of the wall to depict the lives of the common people, the lowly, whose existential realities are far from the world of gods, heroes and holy men. A sense of humour

pervades these realistic depictions, and the artists, at times, venture as far as insinuating succinct social criticism. The illustrated example tells the story of a young boy going up to his father, who is marching by with a garrison, asking him to take a few minutes off to meet his mother who must have felt abandoned during her husband's compulsory conscription or *corvée*. In this way the lowly people try to convey a message to the *grandees*. Whether that message gets through is a different matter. (Figure 1)



**Figure 1: Traditional Thai Mural Painting (bottom part)**

Turning to the Western context, I would like to refer to a musical masterpiece, the Farewell Symphony in F sharp minor by Joseph Haydn (1732-1809), whose originating intention should give us pause. The patron of Haydn and his musicians, Prince Nikolaus Esterházy (1717-1790), normally engaged the orchestra to keep residence at his palace



in Eisenstadt for a number of months and let them go back to their families at a certain date. But in 1772, he was so captivated by their playing that he kept them far beyond the deadline. It was not customary in those days for a music master to remind his princely employer directly; so Haydn found a way to speak to the Prince in musical terms, hence the “Farewell” Symphony, whose last movement is so structured as to make the individual musicians leave their respective stands one by one until the symphony ends with nobody in the orchestra. The Prince was sensitive enough to get the message and allowed the musicians to go home. It can be assumed that Haydn and his contemporaries had no further messages to convey to the Prince. But we in the 21st century naturally cannot help feeling that his musical stratagem has implications in the way of social criticism. (Figure 2)



**Figure 2: A Performance of the Farewell Symphony**

In this sense we can say that the mural painting and the symphony have somehow entered into a dialogue with each other across temporal and geographical divides. We can detect a hidden message in both works, but what matters more is not their content, but rather their method of expressing the message. Suggestive power characterizes both works: the artists could not make direct statements. In their respective originating contexts, they could not make an unequivocal entreaty to their superiors, and such inhibition challenged them to subtle artistry. We know that Haydn was successful in obtaining the result that he and his colleagues had wished for. We do not know the result of the Thai case, but we can assume that by allowing scenes about the normal lives of the common people with their biting humour and at

times obscenities to occupy murals essentially devoted to regal exploits and holy lives, the ruling class or those who commissioned the works must have been awake to the suggestive messages (and might even, in as hidden way, enjoyed these light-hearted asides.) Research has not yet been done as to what extent these hidden messages have been understood. From the vantage point of today, it is worthwhile to stage, or construct, such dialogues. The fact that the respective artists, East and West, did not know each other and never entered into a real dialogue is beside the point. The receiving end in 21st century gains much intellectually from such an imaginary dialogue, for it confirms that the lowly do think and are endowed with a critical culture. I first introduced this concept of “imaginary dialogue” in a Festschrift article in German, called “Imaginärer Dialog: Die zeitgenössische thailändische Lyrik und ihre westlichen Gesprächspartner” (Imaginary Dialogue: Contemporary Thai Poetry and Its Western Counterparts) (2001) (Chetana Nagavajara, 2014, pp.147-166) whose idea constitutes the basis for a comprehensive research project supported by the Thailand Research Fund under the title, “Poetry as an

Intellectual and Spiritual Force in Contemporary Society: Experiences from Thai, British-Irish, American, French and German Literatures” (1995-1998). (An Imaginary Dialogue: A Comparative Look at Contemporary Thai and Western Poetry, n.d., pp.255-270) The results were revelatory: those poets hailing from different cultural and literary backgrounds seem to share common concerns and aspirations, a common humanity even. Without direct contact with one another, they are able to enter into a dialogue, while we scholars and researchers provide them with a supportive platform. I believe that such imaginary dialogues are a method that enriches scholarly enquiry. For our present purpose, this dialogic approach, propped by an aesthetics of the lowly, appears to be an effective instrument in confirming the strengths of Thai-German relations.

### **A Dialogue Between Buddhism and Brechtian Socialism**

I got to know the abbot of the Buddhist temple, Wat Sam Phraya, rather late. He was already in his 80s. His position in the sangha order was high, being a somdej, a title comparable to a bishop in the Christian context, and he could have become the Supreme Patriarch of Thailand on account of his seniority and his scholarly distinction. But he refused to

candidate as he did not want to get involved in Buddhist politics. The abbot conducted himself like an ordinary monk, bathing in the open air and washing his own robe in the process. Extremely knowledgeable in the Buddhist canon, serving for several decades as Chair of the Buddhist Examination Board, and publishing widely, including a succinct treatise on the Thai language. Yet, when he discussed Buddhist dharma with us, he rarely used Pali terminology, and could relate all kinds of worldly experiences to the teachings of Buddha. He kept himself up to date on current affairs, and I often visited him in the late afternoon until he bade us goodbye at 7 p.m. sharp in order to listen to the Evening News on Radio Thailand. Here was a monk who could dialogue with the common people, and his humility endeared him to the common folk who visited him and sought his advice. He was versatile, perspicacious, knowledgeable and tolerant. I felt at home at Wat Sam Phraya, because the abbot was accessible and ready to discuss any subject with us. When feeling unsure, he would send us to the library to consult certain sources which he named precisely. (Figure 3)



**Figure 3: Wat Sam Phraya**

I was preparing a paper on Bertolt Brecht to be presented at an international conference. To test it out with fellow Germanists would have been easy, but I was curious to see how Buddhism bears on the aesthetics and ideology of the German dramatist. I recall very well that occasion when the abbot listened attentively to my outlining the gist of the draft paper, and after I had finished, he did not hesitate for a moment to give his reaction: “You think far too much in social terms. Where is the individual?” I realized immediately that I had emphasized too much Brecht’s early leaning towards orthodox Marxism and have not paid sufficient attention to the other side of the coin, so to speak. There are great personalities in the plays of Bertolt Brecht who do not necessarily impress us with their individualism but rather with

their problematic character that sets us thinking. The “lowly” figures, especially, are carriers of complex thoughts and behaviours, among others, Mutter Courage, Shen-te, Pelagea Vlassowa and of course Grusche. I may have been much influenced by Brecht’s early plays, having been introduced to Brecht by a very impactful interpretation of *The Exception and the Rule* by my fellow students at Fitzwilliam College, Cambridge, in the late 1950s. The point here is that a Buddhist monk’s estimation of my dealings with Brecht’s world goes right to the heart of the matter. If the path to nirvana is via an individual, then societal change by collective force cannot overlook the contributions by individuals. The corrective offered by the senior Buddhist monk prevented the professor of German from lapsing from the middle path: Brecht’s social and political aspirations are propped by the efforts of individuals. We are dealing with dramatic arts, and a good play can never dispense with strong memorable characters, and at this point I take full cognizance of Brecht’s ability to invest lowly characters with admirable leadership, with heroic dimensions even, in spite of his dictum, “Unfortunate is that land that has need of heroes”. In this respect, Buddhism can

easily enter into a dialogue with socialism. Both aim at the well-being of the human kind, naturally with different emphases, a spiritual well-being on the one hand, and a social well-being on the other, while they are not mutually exclusive. (Figure 4)

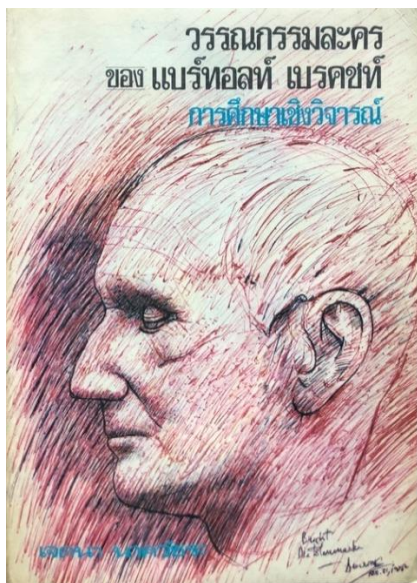


Figure 4: Monograph in Thai on Bertolt Brecht by Chetana Nagavajara (1982)

I have mentioned the character of Grusche in The Caucasian Chalk Circle, the lowly nanny who risks her life to



protect the child of noble birth, whose father has been executed in a rebellion, while the mother has simply run away without any concern about the child. When the civil war ends and the mother comes back and wants to reclaim her child, the nanny refuses to give him back. The village judge, always drunk, symbolically disregards the texts of the law by sitting on those big tomes of legislation, and decides in favour of the adoptive mother. A portentous message is declared: the bond of love is worth more than the bond of blood. If this is the way to express a strong message steeped in Socialism, Buddhism would most probably have no objection, though it would not revel in any radically formulated doctrine.

### Learning German in Distant Climes

What can a non-German student or teacher contribute to the furtherance of the study of German language, literature and culture? I have seen my fellow countrymen adopt a rather fatalistic stance, based on the erroneous belief that we never shall be able to compete with native speakers. That may be true in terms of skills, but knowledge and scholarship can be acquired and cultivated, and non-Germans are in a position to

contribute in ways that may be appreciated and valued by the Germans themselves. I was both fortunate and unfortunate at the same time to have started learning German in Britain and inevitably grew up as an adoptive “British Germanist”. There are obvious defects attributable to learning German in a non-German environment: I have until today to struggle with genders in German grammar, for example. Otherwise I have nothing to complain. I have benefited from the use of German literary texts, extremely well edited with copious explanatory notes. I also realize that the “Auslandsgermanistik” (German Studies outside Germany) has been able to deliver research results that have enhanced and enriched German Studies at home. The fate of the Germanistik in Germany itself is much more problematic than many other (more “neutral”) disciplines, for during the Nazi era, it was adopted into, and to a considerable extent, cooperated with, the reigning ideology. The “doyen” of postwar Germanistik, Eberhard Lämmert (1924-2015) (whom I had the privilege of knowing personally and benefiting from his guidance) made a radical statement to the effect that Germanistik in Germany would not have been able to recover without the constructive work done by foreign Germanists and German emigrants during the war and the

immediate postwar years. (Chetana Nagavajara, 2014, pp.51-52)

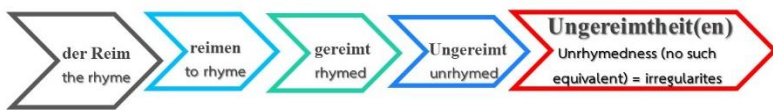
I shall refrain from referring in great detail to my own works as a Germanist and comparatist and their resultant evaluations by my teacher, Kurt Wais, and eminent colleagues, such as Eberhard Lämmert and Reinhold Grimm. (Chetana Nagavajara, 2022, pp. 195-194; 201-204) Suffice it to say that they have taken me seriously and have never adopted a patronizing attitude towards a foreign academic. Besides, being conscious of one's position as a teacher of a foreign language working in a non-indigenous cultural environment, distance could become a boon, as a foreign teacher cannot take things for granted and may even be particularly sensitive to certain phenomena that invite in-depth analysis and interpretation. I spoke at some length in my inaugural lecture in the series Die Macht der Sprache (The Power of Language), organized by the Goethe Institute in Munich on 9 May 2006, on the subject of the first subjunctive (Konjunktiv I) in the German language, pointing to the inherent power of that language to empower its speakers to place themselves in a neutral position. (Chetana Nagavajara , 2014, pp.427-428) With regard to the

literary culture of the West, most people tend to look at France as the epitome of that culture, with the venerable French Academy as the guardian of literary and linguistic standards. I have chosen to look the other way, in the direction of daily life. I once invited a German friend to lunch and ordered roast duck curry for him. He enjoyed it so much that he exclaimed: “Ein Gedicht!” (A poem). So Germans and Thai share a common high valuation of the culinary art, and being endowed with a natural predilection for literature, equate all good things in life with poetry. (I have here deliberately related a personal experience, though examples from literary works abound too.) We are at the level of streetside eatery and do not need any official consecration from a literary “academy”. (Figure 5)



Figure 5: Roast duck curry / Ein Gedicht! (A poem!)

I am prepared to go a little further in my semiotical analysis of the German language. In a paper presented at my alma mater, Tübingen University (Chetana Nagavajara, 2014, pp.167-203), I discoursed at some length on how poetry could influence life. Although ancient German only knew of alliteration, rhyme, which was later appropriated, has for over a thousand years been adopted into German poetry to sustain literary or poetic qualities. A mammoth masterpiece like Goethe's Faust thrives on rhyming virtuosity. How the German language invests rhyme and rhyming with other qualities, including ethical qualities, is worth investigating. I shall try to make my point with a graphic, depicting a gradation in word formation.



Let us follow the German language's journey from prosody to morality. "Rhyme" as a noun and "to rhyme" as a verb belong to the domain of everyday experience, but once one moves to the past participle of the verb in the form of

“gereimt” (rhymed), the prosodic attribute begins to acquire a larger meaning: “rhymed” suggests “order”, “being in order”, hence “proper” or “vested with propriety”. Its opposite “ungereimt” (unrhymed) takes on a sense of censuring, namely “inappropriate” or “improper”. The substantivizing of “ungereimt” into a noun in the plural form “Ungereimheiten” (with no equivalent in English) become a process of moralization, for irregularities can take on the sense of corruption or even embezzlement. This semantical transformation should capture the attention of non-German language teachers. Generalization can grow wild with regard to the cultural implications of such a linguistic phenomenon. What I am aiming at is that the distance that separates a foreign language teacher from the originating culture need not prove to be a drawback, but rather a heightened sensitivity. Learning German in distant climes may have its advantages, on the condition that teachers and students should not content themselves with just language learning and instruction, but should take courage to cross over (carefully) into the field of comparative cultural studies.

## The Meaning of Education

The streamlining of modern education with its bent towards systematization may help a modern state to achieve what they believe to be good governance. We go by grades and levels with their accompanying certifications, and we assume that we can think better, plan better and organize better with such categorizations as formal, non-formal and informal education. Yet traditional learning paid more attention to individual capabilities, and the pacing of teaching and learning was marked by greater freedom than today. I have sung the praise of the traditional German university in at least two previous published papers (Chetana Nagavajara, 2014, pp.337-345) ; (Chetana Nagavajara, 2022, pp.496-497) and pointed out how students were once allowed to charter their own curriculum. The pre-Bologna German university was a model of what UNESCO might call “learning to be”, but I concede that studying too long could become a burden on the state, or more precisely, on tax payers’ money. But the advantages in the formation of knowledge and wisdom and also the personality of the individual learner were the virtue of that system, which has remained unequal. We in Thailand

also adopted a similar mode of learning in our traditional education, with teachers and pupils harmonizing their needs in a kind of implicit mutual contract. Traditional learning has survived in some disciplines, such as Thai classical music. Pupils may have to follow their masters strictly at the basic level, but once they have mastered the basic skills, the teachers will see to it that their pupils can develop further in accordance with their individual talents and musical personalities. One particular hallmark is improvisation, which is encouraged at more advanced levels. An American musician, who had settled in Thailand and made his adoptive country a permanent home, related very succinctly how he was taught by his Thai master. One day the latter summoned the former to his home and asked his foreign pupil: "Why haven't you asked me for a song?" This may be incomprehensible to the uninitiated. What was contained in that question was an evaluative statement, namely that the pupil had reached a level of competence advanced enough for him to acquire more sophisticated knowledge and skills. What is worth noticing is that the pupil should ask the teacher to advance him to a higher level and to embrace a more sophisticated repertoire. The pupil was also supposed to gauge his own educational progress. In the same way,



a German student in the traditional university had to be conscious of his own readiness and then present himself to his professors for an examination. A Thai-German dialogue in education could be eminently constructed in this way.

Another worthy point of comparison is the notion of education itself. Education did not mean only formal training, but also formation of the personality that formal schooling could not fully provide: a child was expected to learn from his familial environment, and the parents had to take responsibility for this learning process. No insult in the Thai language could be harsher than: “Your father and mother have not taught you anything!” In this respect, the German concept of “Bildung” is just as comprehensive, and Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767-1835) constructed his philosophy of education on the basis of this principle. Although self-cultivation has priority, harmonization with others and with society is just as important. Implicit in this concept is the belief in man’s capacity to learn and to mature, and in this respect, “Bildung” accords well with the Buddhist trust in an individual’s capacity to choose the path of good karma. Although the road to nirvana is via an individual, Buddhism is

not an escapist philosophy of life, and ethical consciousness remains at the core of Buddha's teachings. The emphasis on self-reliance in Buddhism is certainly responsive to the call of "Bildung". A Thai-German dialogue can be further enriched by the role of the arts in cultural development. A recent research project, "13 October 2016 and the Renaissance of Thai Art" which deals with how the passing away of the beloved King Bhumibol of Thailand reaffirms the traditional trait in Thai culture that the Thai people can best express their innermost thoughts and feelings via the arts. It is not difficult for us Thai to understand why Wilhelm von Humboldt gladly appropriates Friedrich Schiller's (1759-1805) ideal of an "aesthetic education of man" into his philosophy of education. One particular point in Schiller's thinking is worth examining, namely his concept of "Spieletrieb" (the play impulse) in the arts.

(The play impulse) brings (sensations and emotions) in harmony with rational ideas; and in proportion as it deprives the laws of reasons of their moral compulsion, it will reconcile them with the interest of the senses. (Schiller, 2004) (Figures 6 and 7)



Figure 6: Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767-1835)



Figure 7: Friedrich Schiller (1759-1805)

The word “play” (both as verb and noun) in Thai is often mistaken to represent an overly hedonistic bent in Thai life. In actual fact, it is indicative of a way of life which can take reason for granted in order to rise to the level of spontaneity which Schiller describes as “the interest of the

senses". When a Thai asks the question, "What do you play?", he means "What is your specialization?" or "What do you specialize in?" To know your subject or your craft well is to transcend the bounds of rules and reason such that you can "play" with them. The concept of play in the thinking system of Schiller can very well illuminate our Thai way of thinking, and a philosophy of education of the Humboldtian type can very well be acclimatized in the distant shores of Thai culture. An imaginary dialogue between Thailand and Germany can go very deep indeed.

### **Ideas Travel Far and Wide**

Allow me to refer again to my personal experience. My doctoral research addresses the role of the German Romantic, August Wilhelm Schlegel (1767-1845), in contributing to the rise of Romanticism in France. It appeared in book form under the title, August Wilhelm Schlegel in Frankreich. Sein Anteil an der französischen Literaturkritik 1807-1835 (August Wilhelm Schlegel in France. Schlegel's Contribution to French Criticism 1807-1835) [1966]. The process of research, which derived much from primary sources in the French National Library, filled the young graduate student in me with much enthusiasm, as I discovered that ideas could travel fast and

transcend differences, including political enmity. As a comparatist I went on to undertake further research on Franco-German intellectual relations, resulting in a monograph in English, *Brecht and France* (1994), and more recently in a comprehensive article on, “The New Beginnings of Comparative Literature in Germany 1945-1975: An Outsider’s View” (2022), in which I demonstrate how Comparative Literature as a scholarly discipline, and for that matter, higher education in Germany, could rise again after the Second World War with the support of the allies, eminently France. My faith in the power of ideas to cut across temporal and national boundaries has lately been much reinforced by the work, *Nous sommes tous des romantiques allemands* (We are All German Romantics) (2002) by the French poet and scholar, Jacques Darras. Devoid of all traits of intellectual chauvinism, Darras acknowledges the originality of the German Romantics that has influenced the thinking of poets, writers and intellectuals in the West, particularly their positioning of literature as an intellectual and spiritual force that could rival religion. His approach is two-fold: first, as a historian of ideas, he defines the trajectory of Western ideas, expressed via

philosophy and especially art, and second, he strives to point the way forward. And in this process, the German Romantics who assembled in Jena at the turn of the 18th to the 19th century were supreme catalysts and mediators because they could fulfil both functions in many constructive ways. The Romantics rendered great service to the West because they could pinpoint the pillars of history that have propelled the West to rethink and reinvent. The German Romantics learned much from great minds like Dante and Shakespeare and passed on their reflective and creative legacy to those who came after them. In a nutshell, Darras defines the dynamism of Western thinking as “a long dialogue of poetry with power and religion which finds no end” (Darras, 2002, p.234) (Figure

8)

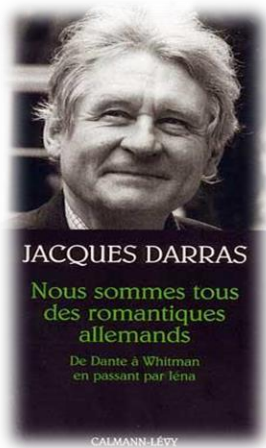


Figure 8: “We are all German Romantics”

It might be too ambitious to engage here in a an all too scholarly dialogue with our French colleague only in terms of content. A more fruitful approach would be to emulate his approach in discovering dialogues across time and space, but with one proviso that we should welcome his estimation of German thinkers and artists as analysts of human experiences of historic dimensions and at the same time highly imaginative generators of new ideas that can inspire further thinking.

I take leave to present my own treatment of the subject as an extension of Darras' position. In my research on August Wilhelm Schlegel in France mentioned above, I realized that French authors and critics were sometimes puzzled by the novelty of German Romantic thinking. One idea in particular provoked a positive as well as a hostile response, namely that incorporated in the statement: "Romantic literature is in the process of becoming." In a country which prided itself as the unassailable heir of Greek and Roman Antiquity and had created a "classicism" of its own which was recognized throughout Europe, the idea of an endless "becoming" must have appeared a bit much. It is worthwhile to quote the original statement made by Friedrich

Schlegel (1772-1829) and popularized in France by his elder brother.

Romantic literature is still in the process of becoming. Truly, that is its real essence, in that it can only transform itself indefinitely and can never be completed. No theory can ever elucidate it exhaustively, and only a kind of divinatory criticism could ever dare to characterize its ideal. (Schlegel, n.d.)

My personal experience has been that this idea is still very much with us in the modern age, and I shall substantiate my claim with concrete examples drawn from the arts.

When the Neue Staatsgalerie Stuttgart, designed by the British architect, Sir James Stirling (1926-1992), opened in 1984, it caused quite a stir, and was seen as a work of Postmodernism, whereby traditional elements are combined with a modern architectural aesthetics. Those who knew the Centre Pompidou in Paris would probably see that the two edifices are architectural allies. Nurtured through my research in German Romanticism, I found a particular portion of the Stuttgart New State Gallery of especial interest, namely the wall of the carpark which leaves open some big holes, with



blocks of stone lying in front of it, thus giving the impression of an ancient historic building with stones falling off through the passage of centuries. If “restored” by way of the archaeological technique known as “anastylosis”, those blocks of stone would fit perfectly into the holes; but this is a work of art created according to an artistic principle. When I visited the museum in 1987, I could sense straightaway the Romantic legacy: incompleteness is not a defect but an element of the process of “becoming”, because a true work of art must not be allowed to be perfectly completed, for in this way it can set people thinking and imagining infinitely. Being a student of European Studies, I knew full well that the German “Economic Wonder” was the envy of Germany’s neighbours, and the rebuilding of a regional capital like Stuttgart, now with its ultramodern Museum of Modern Art, had a festive ring to it, a luxury befitting the “Nouveaux riches”. The Scottish architect allowed himself a friendly dig at his German sponsors (who awarded him a prize for the design). Why not give the Newly Rich a little present in the form of fake antiquity? A sense of humour of this sort is in the spirit of the original German Romanticism. (Figure 9)



**Figure 9: Neue Staatsgalerie  
Stuttgart, 1984**

Architect: James Stirling

The Newly Rich of Bangkok wanted to have a monument of their own too. The tallest building in Bangkok, the Maha Nakhon Building, was opened in April 2016, costing US\$ 620 million. The German architect, Ole Scheeren (b.1971), hailing from Wiesbaden, must have gone through an educational system that knows its “Romantic” roots. He made the architectural landmark of Bangkok look incomplete. Looking from afar, one could almost sense that the building could lose its balance and topple at any moment. Its precariousness is its charm. The Nouveaux Riches of Bangkok never hesitated for a moment to exploit its provocative qualities. From its skywalk, one can have a wonderful view of the Thai metropolis: the entry ticket costs Baht 880 or roughly

US\$ 25, a fairly substantial sum for a country whose minimum wages are Baht 354, or just over US\$ 10. My own vision of the edifice may be a little quaint: it looks to me like a piece of worm-eaten cheese. This interpretation also may also be in the spirit of German Romanticism. (Figure 10)



Figure 10: Burj Khalifa, 2016

Architect: Ole Scheeren

Let us leave jesting aside for a moment and take a look at a serious treatment of the Romantic legacy. I take as my last example a statue of the Buddha from the exhibition “Death before Dying” by the Thai artist Montien Boonma (1953-2000). When German Romanticism reached a Far-Eastern land of Buddhism, probably by several removes, it went through a series of metamorphoses. It should not be forgotten that Montien did his graduate studies in France. The idea of incompleteness here was turned into a potent philosophical reflection. If a work of art must remain incomplete, that is perhaps more than an artistic or aesthetic principle, for humility can be taken as an ethical attribute. As we can see from the illustration, Buddha is not allowed to be represented completely in the form of a sculpture. The Enlightened One has attained nirvana, and that state of positive nothingness can never be expressed in concrete form. It remains an ideal that can be realized only by certain individuals. So a Buddha statue created by an ordinary mortal – be he a great artist – can only take the form of a beginning, caught in the process of becoming. The scaffolding is part of the message that we can only have a partial glimpse of the idea of perfection; it is not to be dismantled. A visitor to the exhibition is, however, allowed a special privilege: he/she can

see the inside of the sculpture, whose surface remains rough, but with one compensation: he/she can smell the incense from inside the statue, a reminder that we are still at the stage of sensuality, although it is a smell connected with religious rites. Art is allowed a status a little higher than that of an ordinary everyday life, plus a synesthesia, a combination of sight and sound. The exhibition was entitled “Death before Dying”, with an autobiographical implication, for Montien, suffering from cancer, knew he was going to die young. But the enigmatic title befits his deep espousal of Buddhism: “death” means physical death, whereas dying here signifies the cessation of “kilesa” or defilements, which is the goal of Buddhism. The title in Thai is more explicit: it can be rendered as “death before extinction” (of kilesa or defilements). Montien’s work expresses a sense of humility: it cannot be expected that artists are spiritually in a more enlightened position than normal human beings, however great their artistic achievements may be. But we should not stop striving for that distant goal of “extinction” or “cessation”. The incompleteness of the work of art in a perpetual state of “becoming” becomes a Sehnsucht (longing) towards

something higher. Another tribute to German Romanticism?  
(Figure 11)



**Figure 11: Montien Boonma: From the Exhibition**  
“Death before Dying”

We are all German Romantics! Inspired by Buddhism, we can move a little further. A Thai-German dialogue can always give you ample food for thought.

### **From the Vantage Point of the Land Beyond India**

In the section on “Learning German in Distant Climes”, I have spoken in general terms about German Studies in non-German countries; I now propose to address the case of Thailand, based mainly on my personal experiences. German

orientalists used to call Thailand and her neighbouring countries “Hinterindien” (literally “Behind India”), meaning those lands beyond India, implying perhaps unintentionally those backwoods further East beyond the ancient civilization of the sub-continent. Sanskrit scholarship used to be the pride of German academia, but after the Second World War, German scholars have also produced significant research on South East Asia, and Thai Studies in Germany are highly respectable, especially thanks to the pioneering work of the versatile scholar, Klaus Wenk (1927-2006). They seem to have taken the Land of Smiles seriously.

In the opposite direction, German Studies by Thai scholars are still in its infancy. As I pointed out earlier, the misapprehension about the scholarly primacy of native speakers has proved to be misleading. I may have been fortunate in having the opportunity to study with scholars who treated foreign students and colleagues as equals. What we outsiders, including those hailing from “Hinterindien”, can contribute beyond the substantive part of German and/or European Studies is the kind of impartiality that remains elusive to insiders. My teacher Kurt Wais, upon reading the

manuscript of my thesis on the comparative subject of the role of August Wilhelm Schlegel in the development of French Romanticism, made the emphatic statement that “No German or Frenchman could have written the way you have!”, and he saw to it that the thesis should be published by the reputable Max Niemeyer Verlag within one year of my graduation. In his preface to my book, he attributed that impartiality to the “serenity of the soul that he brings with him from his Thai homeland”, (Wais, n.d.) (the keyword being “Seelenruhe” in German). Without any false modesty, I must confess that I was not in any way conscious of any “serenity of the soul”; I just interpreted the facts (in this case an abundance of primary materials) intuitively and rationally as they came to me, no more nor less. “Impartiality” may be a convenient word to use in connection with the work of foreign students or scholars who are not weighed down by any burden of Western history, but I personally do not think that it can capture exactly our frame of mind. Perhaps the German word “Unbefangenheit” may be more to the point. It is impossible to find an exact equivalent in English, and the online dictionary m.dict.cc offers a series of English renditions, such as “impartiality”, “unbiasedness”, “unselfconsciousness”, “naturalness”, “ingenuousness”, “unencumberedness”, “uninhibitedness”.



It can be concluded that “outsiders” who are well informed and who can think constructively can render valuable services to the study indigenous cultures.

May I be allowed to cite the case of a German Scholar of Thai Studies who thinks along the same line? Martin Schalbruch is at present Lecturer in Thai at Humboldt University, Berlin. He lived in Thailand for decades, mastered the Thai language to perfection and knows Thai culture inside out. His decade-long teaching of German at Ramkhamhaeng University and his involvement in various Thai-German collaborative projects were very much appreciated by his Thai colleagues and students, and he was awarded an honorary doctorate by that university. Beyond language, literature and culture, Herr Schalbruch is a fervent music lover, and in that respect we converse at great length on our mutual interests when we meet, either in Germany or in Thailand. He maintains that he can learn much about Western classical music from his Thai colleague.

Germans at least of my generation are unable to be unselfconsciously patriotic or proud of German

achievements in arts and culture ... It was Chetana's incorruptible and sincerely love for German music and literature that impressed and moved me and gave me a sense of ease with my own cultural background that I had not known before. (Schalbruch, 2022, p.264)

I know that my admiration of Richard Wagner's music, for example, sets him thinking, for although I know that Wagner was, in some respects, a despicable man, that he was antisemitic and that he was exploited by the Nazis, I find his music uplifting, and I have a way to explain my estimation of that music, because being a non-German, I do not have to grapple with a guilt-ridden past. But that is more than "impartiality", and the "Unbefangenheit" with which I approach Wagner's legacy is a state of mind that is akin to the "Seelenruhe" that my teacher Kurt Wais spoke of, which I still consider to be an overstatement. When all is said done, it is most encouraging to be told by somebody from the originating culture that you, an outsider, a foreigner, could help him regain his confidence in his own cultural legacy, whatever that weight of history may have been.

On the academic front, I was again fortunate to be awarded short-term research fellowships for 10 consecutive

years between 2008 and 2017 by the International Research Centre, “Interweaving Performance Cultures”, of the Free University Berlin. I have learned much from the experiences of international colleagues. But it was only last year that I received a feedback on what they might have learned from me. For the Festschrift to mark my 84th birthday, Professor Erika Fischer-Lichte, the Director of the Centre, said the following in her contribution.

For Chetana has a capacity, which is rather rare in academia, to utter even a sharp criticism in a way that does not offend, but conveys to those receiving it that he is deeply involved in their project as an important piece of scholarship and just wants to contribute to this process. (Lichte, 2022, p.241)

I must say that I was not conscious of, or tried to cultivate deliberately, a particular brand of criticism that should appease and invigorate those involved in the process. Nor would I make any claim (which my teacher Kurt Wais made on my behalf) of a culture peculiar to our South East

Asian nations. It all came to me in a natural way, and the way I acted was sustained by a sense of “Unbefangenheit”. In this connection I might be allowed a conjecture that growing up in an oral literary culture, in which verse repartees constituted our main entertainment, was to be imbued with the spirit of “play” in the Schillerian sense, whereby one gradually learned the art of striking a balance between lightheartedness and seriousness, a balance that could enliven a critical and a scholarly culture.

Naturally I must thank my foreign colleagues for having elucidated, and made me conscious of, my own “methods”. For my own part, I often thought that I was a product of the oral culture that does not only recognize the power of improvisation in the arts but also encourage it as a way of life. I asked the editors of my Festschrift to weave in the idea of improvisation into the volume Chetana@84: Improving His Way Through Life, and they were kind enough to let me have my way, but only as far as the title. Those many contributions, both from Thai and foreign friends and colleagues, contradict my self-estimation. They have been able to discern certain patterns in my behaviour and my work that may not be haphazard. At 84, I awakened to certain revelations that had eluded me in my younger days. And it cannot be denied that,

in many cases, foreign colleagues are even more sensitive to those personal and scholarly traits in me than my compatriots. What an honour to hear from them that a voice from “beyond India” has in some ways opened up new possibilities for them! What could be a more rewarding cross-cultural dialogue?

### Epilogue: A Faustian Lesson

I have, in the present lecture, tried to demonstrate how Thai-German relations have proved to be a mutual learning and a mutual enrichment, naturally with a little bias towards the work of professionals and scholars representing “the small man” in the august hierarchy of the traditional thinking on world diplomacy. The best way to conclude this cross-cultural dialogue might be to concentrate on an experiential phenomenon that probes the depths of both cultures. I plead for a personal approach. As a student of German literature, I could do no better than referring to a famous quote from Goethe’s *Faust I*. (ll. 682-683)

What you have inherited from your forefathers  
Work at it such that you will possess it.

(Was du ererbt von deinen Vätern hast,  
Erwirb es, um es zu besitzen.)

The almost untranslatable word is “Erwirb” from the infinitive “erwerben”. The most mundane translation is that of “acquire”, but in the context of Goethe’s drama, the problematic protagonist of the play, namely Dr. Faust, is grappling with his “inherited” knowledge in such a way that it becomes a demand for a kind of intellectual and spiritual power beyond the common run of human quest. The act of “erwerben” is the weightiest step in the process, and to render “Erwirb es” as “work at it” may not sound so elegant, but does somehow reflect the onerous demand of the task. As a product of the traditional German higher education, I am not so arrogant as to liken my professional dealings with German intellectual legacy with that of Dr. Faust, but I choose to refer to Goethe in this context in order to underline the difficulty and the seriousness of the endeavour. I propose to relate the incident that prompted me to define my indebtedness to my teachers, and the way I tried to express myself might be worthy of discussion. On 13 July 2009 in the late afternoon, after the conclusion of an international seminar in the series “The World of Values”, Tübingen

University organized a simple ceremony of awarding me an honorary doctorate, in any idyllic ambience, the venue being the “Hölderlinturm” on the river Neckar, a landmark known to most people including tourists, rebuilt from the house occupied by the great poet during the last decades of his life. The laudation was delivered by the distinguished German comparatist and Germanist, Prof. Dr. Eberhard Lämmert, former President of the Free University Berlin, who had known me for several decades. When my turn came to make a reply, I decided to make it very brief, the gist of which is as follows.

Was ich von meinen deutschen Lehrern geerbt habe, ist eine wissenschaftliche Gewissenhaftigkeit. Über die Jahre habe ich versucht, diese in eine moralische Aufrichtigkeit umzusetzen. Ich habe es schwer gehabt, aber ich habe überlebt.

(What I have inherited from my German teachers is scholarly conscientiousness. For years, I have tried to turn this into moral rectitude. I have had grave difficulties, but I have survived.)

The report in the local newspaper, Schwäbisches Tagblatt, two days later was a puzzlement: Why did the awardee decide on such a short speech and speak in such a way? Those few words coming from a grateful and humble alumnus of the ancient German university were meant to be a commentary on the Faustian credo. The small man from the Land of Smiles beyond India was lucky enough to have studied with great scholars who were also inspiring teachers. The legacy, as perceived by him, was not mere content or methods, but an intellectual honesty in the pursuit of truth. Within the framework of academia, scholarly conscientiousness is a virtue. Having returned to his homeland, the young man inevitably confronted harsh realities that must have somewhat disturbed his “serenity of the soul”. But the knowledge and wisdom he had received from that foreign land challenged him to a daunting ambition: to turn scholarly conscientiousness into moral rectitude. How the two can be related to each other is a question that should concern all scholars and professionals. He did not give up too easily, but faced up to the obstacles, and the little success of which he was proud to speak was simply that “he had survived”. What greater tribute could he have paid to his alma mater, who did him the honour of awarding him the same degree of Doctor



of Philosophy twice, one regular and one honorary? That procedure had to be debated by the University, and the positive resolution, which does set precedence, has been jokingly described in the language of jurisprudence as “Lex Nagavajara” (The Nagavajara Law). The German tradition of awarding honorary degrees, with myself as the case study, has been succinctly studied by my successor in the Chair of German at Silpakorn University, Prof. Korakoch Attaviriyapab. (Korakoch Attaviriyapab, 2009, p.13)

I have taken the liberty of telling, at some length, a tale about myself and my association with Germany out of the conviction that much could happen in the way of mutual intellectual dialogue at the level of the “bottom part of Thai mural painting”.

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a discussion in the larger

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