

Auf der Suche nach einer grenzüberschreitenden Wissenschaftskultur. Gesammelte Aufsätze 2001-2013 by Chetana Nagavajara (Nakhon Pathom: Department of German, Silpakorn University, 2013). ISBN 978-974-641-491-3.



Chetana Nagavajara was educated at the University of Cambridge, graduating in French language and literature. He then graduated from the Eberhard-Karls-Universität Tübingen in German language and literature with specialization in comparative literature studies, a discipline known in German as *Komparatistik*. His academic career was spent at Silpakorn University, from which he retired as professor emeritus. The focus of his research and publications has been on comparative studies of American, English, French, German and Thai cultures, especially their literature, performing arts, and music. He was elected an Honorary Member of the Siam Society in 2004. This volume contains nineteen papers, nine of them previously unpublished, compiled as a tribute to his

mentor, Eberhard Lämmert, on his 89th birthday in 2013. The title is perhaps best translated as *In Search of a Transboundary Culture of Humanities*.¹

This compendium is rich in original, seminal contributions to ongoing deliberations on the rationale that underlies endeavors geared toward making progress in enhancing interaction across cultures. Its ultimate goal is to find the common values inherent in the heritage of diverse cultural traditions.

Chetana, in his own words, does not like to develop a thought in a single, straight line. He likens his style of presenting thoughts, deliberations, reflections, findings, diagnoses, descriptions, and conclusions to the technique applied by a visual artist in creating a “collage.” Each of the author’s papers is a “collage” in itself, and the compendium is a collection of “collages.”

The strong underlying theme of this outstanding collection is the importance of ethical values, both in distinguishing mere technical expertise from true art, and in providing a common set of standards to unite the world. By using a Buddhist

¹ Chetana Nagavajara also published *Bridging Cultural Divides: Collected Essays and Reviews 2006-2014* (Bangkok: Faculty of Arts, Silpakorn University, 2014). This English-language collection, also dedicated to Eberhard Lämmert, contains fifteen essays, which cover the same themes as the German-language collection, and in some cases are translations or close adaptation, along with 25 review articles not found in the German collection.

perspective to analyze classic European works, and using his own Europe-educated perspective to analyze classic Thai works, Chetana builds towards a theory of a transboundary culture of humanities, a *grenzüberschreitende Wissenskulturr* that transcends geographical regions, nation states, religious tenets, languages, and cultures.

In his role as a scholar of comparative culture and especially of literary studies, Chetana appears intent on exploring unbeaten tracks to trace, detect, explore and chart the links, so as to transcend boundaries and to encompass diverse *Wertewelten*, consensually valued socio-cultural phenomena on a global scale, with the implicit intention of describing, diagnosing, analyzing, and ultimately defining a universal science of humanities.

Chetana examines encounters between cultures in order to foster appreciation and to build bridges through mutual understanding. He teases out similarities and relationships across cultures and artistic disciplines. He uses the German word *Ungereimtheiten* which, depending on the context, has a meaning somewhere along a spectrum from inconsistency or irregularity to cheating or even corruption, to highlight the variation in thinking when expressed in German, English, French, or Thai.

Given the location of this review, I will concentrate on the papers relevant to Thailand, which focus on the tradition of improvisation, the search for indigenous theory, and critical discourse.

Chetana highlights the importance of teaching morality, comprising Buddhist principles, words of wisdom derived from the cultures of India, Persia and China, and recorded indigenous wisdom as well. These values, norms and sanctions, which have been internalized and creatively adapted, serve as sources of inspiration for poetry in Thailand's language.

Improvisation is the core of Thailand's culture. Its traditional folk theatre does not know any original text versions. Touring groups rely on well-known stories, tales, narrations, legends, and epic poetry. The director and actors reach a consensus on how to make a drama evolve. As soon as actors are on stage, they must rely on their talent for improvising. Thailand's actors – and musicians as well – are performing artists and creative artists at the same time. Improvisation is not merely a matter of form but an attitude towards living, or even a philosophy of leading one's life. Its guiding principle is an unwavering belief in the inexhaustible spring of human creativity. In traditional music and folk theatre, improvisation has been of vital importance. It might be questioned, whether the talent for improvising is a virtue, across the board, or if it might become a nuisance. Improvisation allows for great flexibility and liberty to invent. The inclination to talkativeness might be related to improvising in literature, for improvisation triggers verbosity rather than encouraging concise expression.

Thailand's traditional orchestra comprises two xylophones, placed at the front.

One is called *ranad ek*, the first xylophone. It is in charge of the leading melody and is usually played by a musician who displays exuberant virtuosity, impressing the audience as the star of the orchestra. Placed alongside is the second xylophone called *ranad thum*, meaning the one with the soft voice. Its player seemingly serves to accompany the melody by interjecting some syncopes, taking care of the rhythm and occasionally paraphrasing the melody. This musician is often called the buffoon or joker of the orchestra. Appearances are deceptive, though. Very often the master of the orchestra himself plays the second xylophone, and in truth is leading the orchestra by availing himself of the greater freedom to improvise. Other members of the orchestra are bound to pay attention to the master who may vary the tempo. Chetana's "theory of the second xylophone" explains some aspects of Thailand's culture, and in the considered opinion of some observers even reflects its national character.

The aesthetic of restraint is paradoxical in that Thailand's people display a tendency towards verbosity, even somewhat annoying chatter. On reflection, however, this exuberance in using words is the root of the great diversity of popular culture. Folksongs often take the form of a dialogue in verse between women and men, delighting the audience members who appreciate the witty repartee. The answer to this paradox lies in the importance of the middle path. After all, in social life the dictum that prevails is "speech is silver, silence is golden."

In social life and particularly public affairs, one may gain the impression that Thailand's population is neither hesitant nor reluctant to improvise their own lives. The perpetual coming-and-going in Thailand's politics, for example, adversely affects society's stability. From an aesthetic perspective, improvisation is a form of rebellion against a fixed script -- in literature, drama, or music -- which may become petrified. This thought is germane to the mode of living according to Buddhist principles. In a world of impermanence, any idea of the immortality of works of art can only be illusion. Improvisation allows expression of the indelible creativity of human beings.

Thailand's oral culture is not merely a literary phenomenon or a principle underlying the arts but reflects an attitude towards living, perhaps even a sort of Asian philosophy of life. This oral tradition conveys its wealth through direct contact and shared experience among human beings, with each generation eager to pass on the heritage, thereby augmenting and enriching it. Any losses are not regretted. What had been said, remains said -- it cannot be revoked or regained. The memory alone shows the path to the future. This mode of thinking shows trust in the creative power of humankind which is not restricted to any particular generation or any specific epoch in history.

Chetana raises the question whether Thailand's literary tradition has any consciousness of theory. Are authors, intellectuals and scholars capable of thinking in theoretical terms? Chetana's search for indigenous theories has not yielded,

in his own words, any solid corpus or set of theorems that could be deemed self-explanatory. Yet Thailand's culture is very rich in implicit theory that deserves to be explicated. Theories that are embedded in the mode of living and the cultural heritage can be discovered by a process akin to archeology, but that should be only a first step. Further stages of systematic reconstruction are needed to arrive at a better understanding of one's own culture as a means of building self-knowledge.

Chetana stressed that literacy does not simply entail "being capable of reading, writing and arithmetic," as propagated by UNESCO. Literacy also implies critical reflection which underpins the doctrine of free speech. According to Chetana, criticism is hardly acceptable in Thailand. Whoever criticizes frankly runs the risk of annoying friends and colleagues alike. A gentle, personal hint about some weak point in one's own work will always be preferred over any published statement. That such attitudes are common is clear from research on criticism conducted by a team under the auspices of the Thailand Research Fund (TRF). These attitudes should not be mistaken for a lack of capability to criticize. Most likely, Thailand's culture of criticism is closely tied to oral tradition. Newspapers accept critical articles by university teachers who are ready and willing to sign their names and shoulder the responsibility for their published text. Professors of high repute write for daily newspapers and popular magazines, instead of concentrating on producing learned papers for publication in journals read by their academic colleagues alone.

Chetana stresses that criticism at its best can become a voice of society and a voice for society. Peaceful demonstrations staged in Thailand's capital city and some provinces from February until April 2006 blasted away at the corruption of the government and bureaucracy. While political rhetoric in parliament is stagnant, eloquence flourishes among the protest movements. While politicians grub around for ways to make money, ethics and morality are the message coming from the mobs on the streets. The combination of enlightening rationality, solid evidence, fervent persuasiveness, and literary refinement that emerged from the demonstrations achieved standards of rhetoric not seen for years. Irrespective of the serious intentions of the movement, there was room for humor. A song, using a folk tune and entitled "Square Face" named the misdeeds of a political leader and his followers in phenomenal language of prosodic perfection.

Karl E. Weber