

SEA- NEWSLETTER

The Department for Languages
and Cultures of Southeast Asia



Talks by Thai Studies alumnae in China

By Silpsupa Jaengsaawang

The National Centre for Borderlands Ethnic Studies in Southwest China at Yunnan University (NaCBES), School of Ethnology and Sociology, Yunnan University, hosted the “Workshop on Tai Tham Manuscripts along the Lancang-Mekong River: Exploring Historical, Cross-Regional, and Digital Humanities Perspectives” on 20–23 September 2024 at Yunnan University in Kunming, China. Professor Dr Volker Grabowsky, Head of the Department of Languages and Cultures of Southeast Asia, delivered a keynote lecture titled “Colophons in Tai Manuscripts and What They Tell Us About the Role of Scribes and Sponsors.”

Two alumni of our Department's Thai Studies Section were also cordially invited by Yunnan University to share their research with other speakers and an international audience who joined online and on-site. Dr Khamvone Boulyaphonh, a former PhD student whose doctoral dissertation is on “The Life, Work and Social Roles of the Most Venerable Sathu Nyai Khamchan Virachitta Maha Thela (1920–2007)”, is currently the Director of the Buddhist Archive of Luang Prabang. At the workshop he presented “The Preservation of Manuscripts at the Buddhist Archives of Luang Prabang: Discovering Tai Lü Manuscripts at Pak Chaek Village, Luang Prabang Province.” Dr Silpsupa Jaengsaawang, also a former PhD student who at present works as a Principal Investigator (PI) at the Centre for the Study of Manuscript Cultures (CSMC), presented the topic “The Legend of the Sun: Lao Manuscripts of Astrological Treatises.” •



ALUMNI
COLUMN

Photos by: National Centre for Borderlands Ethnic Studies in Southwest China at Yunnan University (NaCBES), School of Ethnology and Sociology, Yunnan University & Silpsupa Jaengsaawang

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Invited Lectures by Manuscript Scholars from Hamburg

By Silpsupa Jaengsawang

Hosted by the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Maha Sarakham University, a special conference on "Traditional Manuscripts and Folk Religious Beliefs" was organized on 5 October 2025. Two scholars on the manuscript culture studies from Hamburg were invited to deliver lectures.

Associate Professor Dr Prayook Srivilai, the president of Maha Sarakham University, graciously opened the conference and welcomed the two speakers from Hamburg: Professor Dr Volker Grabowsky and Dr Silpsupa Jaengsawang. The conference started with the first lecture "Tai Inscriptions from the Upper Mekong Region," delivered in Thai by the keynote speaker, Professor Dr Volker Grabowsky, Head of Thai Studies Section, Department of Languages and Cultures of Southeast Asia. Following the keynote address, the second lecture "Jātaka Palm-leaf Manuscripts in Lanna Dhamma Script found in Luang Prabang," was given by Dr Silpsupa Jaengsawang, Principal Investigator (PI) at the Centre for the Study of Manuscript Cultures



(CSMC). Over 300 participants who were lecturers, researchers, and students attended the conference and lively exchanged their knowledge and discussions.

Right after the conference, the two scholars, invited by the Research Institute of Northeastern Art and Culture (RINAC), where Dr Silpsupa Jaengsawang had served as a Visiting Professor in 2023–2024, visited the institute. The institute showcased manuscripts, original textiles, and artistic artefacts. They also surveyed manuscripts at Wat Mahachai Museum, known for its collection of historically ancient objects gathered by the highly praised Venerable Phra Ariyanuwat Khemacari. The visit by the two scholars from Hamburg was graciously supported and warmly welcomed by Associate Professor Dr Nittaya Wannakit, Dean of Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences and Mr Thom Gatewongsa and Dr Apiradee Jansaeng, Director and Deputy Director for Research and International Affairs of the Research Institute of Northeastern Art and Culture (RINAC).



Photos by: Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Maha Sarakham University & Research Institute of Northeastern Art and Culture (RINAC), Maha Sarakham University

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Cultural Artifacts from
Indonesia in Lower
Saxony

By Syukri Rizki



Roberta Zollo and Dr. Rainer Hatoum, a researcher at City Museum Braunschweig, showing a Batak manuscript.



Various Artifacts from Sumatra in City Museum Braunschweig.



City Museum Braunschweig.

We are delighted to share that Roberta Zollo, PhD student of Austronesian studies, participates in the project “Colonial Collections from Indonesia in Lower Saxony.” Initiated by the Network for Provenance Research in Lower Saxony, coordinated by the Museum Association for Lower Saxony and Bremen, and financed by the German Lost Art Foundation, the project aims to investigate the issue: how come there are numerous Indonesian artifacts housed within museums across Lower Saxony?

Roberta has been studying Indonesian artefacts originating from North Sumatra since she started studying Batak manuscripts for her doctoral thesis. Beginning in October of this year, she officially secured a position as a researcher at the State Museum Hannover, one of eight museums and collections that are involved in the project.

The project aims to trace the provenance of the artifacts acquired between 1850 and 1920 and to trace the network of acquisitions and collection building of these museum. Initially, the assumption was that the artifacts might have reached German holdings due to

Lower Saxony’s proximity to the Netherlands. However, Roberta holds the view that one should not hastily assume that artifacts from Indonesia, currently housed in Europe, have always come via the Netherlands. She has found historical records that mention a significant German presence in Indonesia during the nineteenth century. For example, there were German agents involved in tobacco plantations in North Sumatra during the nineteenth-century Dutch occupation. This underscores the intertwined history between Germany, the Netherlands, and Indonesia.

Roberta is working on the project to understand the functions and meanings of the artifacts in their original communities in order to make appropriate categorizations. For this purpose, Roberta believes that collaborating with representatives from those communities can lead to a deeper understanding about the historical background of the artifacts. Hopefully, all the findings from the project will benefit researchers from various disciplines in particular and cultural heritage enthusiasts in general. •

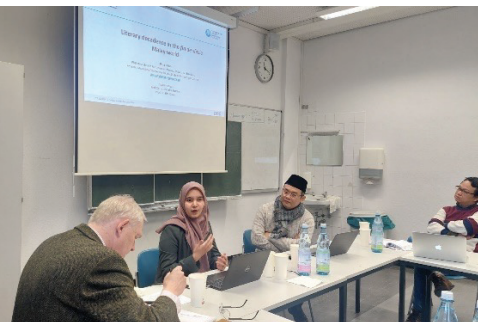
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The University of Hamburg Represents at Indonesian Studies Day 2024 in Cologne.

By Tiara Ulfah & Rangga E. Saputra



Rangga E. Saputra is presenting his research



Tiara Ulfah is presenting her research



On December 13th, 2024, two PhD students of the Austronesian Studies University of Hamburg Tiara Ulfah and Rangga E. Saputra presented their PhD projects at the 'Indonesian Studies Day 2024'. The event was organized by the Institute for Languages and Cultures of the Islamic World at the University of Cologne.

This event focused on the intersection of Islam, identity, and scholarship in Indonesian Islam. As an intimate colloquium, it brought together six Indonesian PhD students from various European universities to discuss recent research and exchange ideas on the development of Islam in Indonesia. Tiara Ulfah presented her current project on textual production in the Malay world during the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries. Her work explores the shift in mediums from manuscript to lithography and examines how this transformation influenced the textual productions and reading habits. Rangga shared his ongoing research on the Arab diaspora in post-WWII Indonesia. He emphasized the often-overlooked social and economic aspects of the diaspora, filling in the shortcomings of the existing scholarship on the land ownership and identity formation of the Arab diaspora in Indonesia.

The event was structured around three panels. The first panel explored the transmission of intellectual traditions, with discussions centered on 19th and 20th-century textual production, including grammatical and literary texts. The second panel explored Islamic interpretation across eras, from 19th century Java to current Indonesia. The third panel focused on the discourse of identity; the Arab diaspora in Indonesia and the Indonesian diaspora in the Netherlands.

Led by Professor Edwin Wieringa, a professor in Indonesian philology, the discussions were lively and insightful. The event showcased the fascinating and complex nature of studies on Indonesian Islam. All participants agreed that such an event should be continued in the future to stimulate academic discussion and promote the study of Indonesian Islam. •

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A field study among the Nùng people of Lạng Sơn province, Vietnam.

By Quang Minh To

From 3rd December to 17th December 2024, our MA student Tô Quang Minh was conducting field research in the village of Na Ban, commune of Văn Lang, Lạng Sơn province. This trip was part of his research on the Great Ritual of Then (Lầu Then) of the Nùng. This ethnic minority lives in the mountainous region of Northern Vietnam on both sides of the Vietnam-China border. Although the Nùng migrated to Vietnam later compared to other ethnic groups, they are numerous, currently more than one million people, living across the country, but mostly in the Northeastern border provinces, making it the sixth most populous among the 54 ethnic groups in Vietnam. Traditionally, the Nùng always had close relations with the Tai-speaking Tày people of Vietnam, which are named Zhuang in China, where they reside especially in the province of Guangxi, which is officially called the Zhuang Autonomous Region. In China, there are 20 million Zhuang. Almost two million Tày live in Vietnam.

universe and life. “Then” has many meanings. It means heaven and God, a form of worship, a belief, and is also the name of the shamans of those communities.

Minh approaches the Then of the Nùng from two perspectives, firstly, as a ritual, and then the Then as a form of shamanism. He selected a ritual called Lầu Then for observation and research. This is a big and essential ritual in the Then masters’ lives. During the two weeks of living with the locals, observing the preparation and practice of the ritual, as well as conducting many interviews, Minh collected a lot of information and photos for his research. His research purpose was to find out the reasons and ways for a Then master to mobilize a huge amount of money and labor to organize the ritual, as well as the great contributions of family members, the village as well as other Then masters in the ceremony.

Despite being aware of the difficulties in collecting documents, Minh believes that this field trip has brought him many new ideas and practical knowledge that are useful for his research. Hopefully, Minh’s research will be completed soon so that we can read it. •



Our MA student Quang Minh reflects his field trip among the Nùng people in Lạng Sơn province, Vietnam

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NEWSLETTERThe Department for Languages
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2024
publications

Last year, our department maintained steady research productivity, with faculty members making valuable contributions across diverse fields. Their work included articles in prestigious journals, presentations at leading conferences, manuscript catalogues, and published books.

From the Thaiistik department, Dr. Silpsupa Jaengsawang stood out with her book, *The Arc of the Pendulum: Anisong Manuscripts Facing New Technologies in Luang Prabang* (Zenos-Verlag), and her article, *Transformations of Anisong Manuscripts in Luang Prabang: Application of Modern Printing Technology*, published in *Southeast Asian Studies* (https://doi.org/10.20495/seas.13.2_343). Together with Dr. Peera Panarut, she co-authored an insightful study, *Princess Bualai's Embroidered Kammavācā Manuscripts from Thailand*, featured in the *Journal of the Pali Text Society*. Collaborative efforts within the Centre for the Study of Manuscript Cultures (CSMC) also led to the article *Material Characterisation of 19th–20th Century Manuscripts from Northern Thailand*, published in *Restaurator* (<https://doi.org/10.1515/res-2023-0028>). Another milestone was the publication of the manuscript catalogue, *Centre of Northern Lao Manuscript Culture: A Catalogue of Manuscripts from Vat Mai Suvannaphumaram, Luang Prabang*, co-authored by Dr. Khamvone Boulyaphon, Prof. Dr. Volker Grabowsky, and Dr. Silsupa Jaengsawang. Additionally, Sutheera Satayaphan, PhD candidate contributed to the understanding of Thai literary heritage with her article *Ramakian, the Royal Version of King Rama I*, featured in *Priceless Documents of Siam*. These works underscore the department's commitment to preserving and analyzing the cultural and historical legacies of the region.

The Austronesian department also made significant strides in advancing the understanding of cultural and historical traditions in Island Southeast Asia. Prof. Elsa Clavé and Dr. Mulaika Hijjas collaborated on *The Transmission and (Re) Invention of Tradition in Island Southeast Asia*, an editorial introduction to a special issue of *Indonesia and the Malay World* (Volume 52, Issue 152, 2024). This special issue originated from two panels presented at Euroseas 2019: 'Performing Sumatra through Cultural Heritage', convened by Dr. Alan Darmawan and Prof. Jan van der Putten, and

'Material Culture, Heritage, and History in Southeast Asia', convened by Prof. Elsa Clavé and Dr. Mulaika Hijjas. It brings together six scholars working on four countries within Island Southeast Asia (Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, and the Philippines), united by a shared focus on how tradition is evoked, invoked, reinvented, and above all transmitted. This theme of transmission challenges conventional notions of stability in form and content, demonstrating that major transformations often accompany the process.

The special issue also included two notable contributions from our department. Dr. Darmawan's *Erecting the Submerged Tree Trunk: Mak Yong Theatre and Practices of Traditionalisation in the Riau Islands, Indonesia* examined the adaptive practices surrounding traditional performance art. Prof. Clavé's *Dressing up the Monarch: Authority and Its Representation in the Sulu Sultanate Royal Tradition (19th–21st Century)* provided a detailed analysis of symbolism and representation in the Sulu Sultanate (<https://doi.org/10.1080/13639811.2024.2327170>). Additionally, PhD student Zakariya Pamuji Aminullah, alongside co-authors Andrea Acri and Verena Meyer, explored religious and philosophical intersections in 19th-century Java in their article *Antinomianism as a Way to God in Nineteenth-Century Java: The Suluk Lonhang*, published in the *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* (<https://doi.org/10.1017/S1356186323000652>). On top of that, our most recent PhD student, Dewa Ayu Carma Citrawati, along with her co-author, Gede Gita Purnama Arsa Putra, published an article on creating metadata, cataloging, and digitizing Balinese manuscripts. The article appears in the *New Review of Hypermedia and Multimedia* and is available for free access here: (<https://doi.org/10.1080/13614568.2024.2345182>)(<https://doi.org/10.1080/13614568.2024.2345182>).

These contributions collectively highlight the department's active engagement with the dynamic processes of tradition, transformation, and cultural heritage in Southeast Asia. We cannot wait to see what this year will bring as we continue to push the boundaries of research and scholarship. •