

SEA- NEWSLETTER

The Department for Languages
and Cultures of Southeast Asia

Talks on Southeast Asian Studies in Bulgaria

(with a special focus on Vietnamese Studies)

**Thursday, 26 June 2025,
2:00 PM – 4:00 PM (CET)**

**Asien-Afrika-Institut,
Ostflügel, Room 121
Edmund-Siemers-Allee 1
Universität Hamburg**

**Webinar-ID: 610 5028 8103
Kenncode: 40721501**

[https://uni-hamburg.zoom.us/j/61050288103?
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Southeast Asian Studies is a newly emerging academic field in Bulgaria, shaped by changing geopolitical dynamics, growing global interest in the region, and evolving interdisciplinary approaches. Despite the longstanding diplomatic relations between Bulgaria and Vietnam dating back to 1950, Vietnamese language and culture only became part of the curriculum at Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski" in 2015, with the launch of the Southeast Asian Studies minor with special focus on Vietnam within the Asia area Studies program.

This academic development reflects a broader shift in attention toward Southeast Asia, particularly Vietnam, but also Indonesia, Thailand and the Philippines. The field has since gained momentum, supported by research in diplomatic history, cultural heritage, archival studies, and comparative regional analysis. The growth of interest in Vietnamese Studies related topics has been supported by ongoing student exchanges, collaboration with Vietnamese institutions, and interest from scholars in related fields.

Beyond academic coursework and research, the program also fosters cultural and creative engagement of students. Events such as Cultural Days, exhibitions, student performances, and public lectures have become an integral part of campus life, promoting intercultural understanding and offering students hands-on experience with Southeast Asian traditions.

Despite its promising development, the Southeast Asian Studies program in Bulgaria faces some challenges such as the need for expanded academic expertise, limited resources and the ongoing effort to continuously raise awareness and interest among students and the wider academic community.

However, recent dissertations, publications, and conference proceedings demonstrate increasing scholarly engagement with topics such as traditional belief systems, cultural identities, traditional and modern society, postcolonial transitions, political and economic dynamics and the contemporary Vietnamese diaspora in Bulgaria. We can see how Southeast Asian Studies in Bulgaria is emerging as a vibrant and relevant field of academic inquiry in Southeast Europe and the Balkans in the 21st century. •

About the speakers:



Rayna Beneva

is an Assistant Professor at the Center for Eastern Languages and Cultures at Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski". She holds a PhD in Theory and History of Culture – Korean Studies from Sofia University. Her main affiliation is in the Korean studies department but since 2015, she has introduced and developed the Southeast Asian and Vietnamese Studies minor within the curriculum of the Asian Studies Program. Her research interests include the traditional cultures of Vietnam and Korea, Vietnamese folklore rituals and beliefs, the ancient and modern history of the Korean Peninsula and Vietnam, cultural zones and ethnic diversity in Vietnam, as well as Bulgaria-Vietnam relations.



Dayana Ivanova

is a researcher at the Department of African and Indo-Pacific Studies, Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski". She holds both a BA and an MA degree in Asian Studies (South, East and Southeast Asia) from Sofia University. She also earned an MA degree in Vietnamese Studies at the University of Social Sciences and Humanities - Ho Chi Minh City. She is currently a PhD candidate, and her research interests include youth, educational programs and cultural policies in Vietnam, modern history and diplomatic relations, teaching Vietnamese as a foreign language.

Five Lectures in a Row per Visit by Thai Studies Professor

Content contributor: Dr. Silpsupa Jaengswang

Photo credits: 1.Naresuan University, 2. Volker Grabowsky, 3. Naresuan University

Last summer break, Professor Dr. Volker Grabowsky, Head of the Thai Studies Section in the Department of Languages and Cultures of Southeast Asia, undertook a productive lecture and research trip to Thailand and Laos. He was invited by several partner universities and institutes in Thailand to deliver academic lectures in Thai. Participants in his lectures learned about a wide range of topics, including manuscript cultures, Tai local history, international relations, and the general situation of Thai Studies in Germany.

His lecture series began with two topics: “The Relationship of Lan Na, Lan Xang and Yunnan on the Southern Silk Road: The Case of the Tai Nüa Polity of Moeng Laem (Menglian)” and “Cambodia in the 20th Century: The Road Towards Disaster.” Both lectures were presented at Naresuan University in Phitsanulok on 7 March 2025. The following week, he traveled south to give two more academic lectures in Central Thailand: “Thai Studies in Hamburg” at Rajamangala University of Technology, Thanyaburi Campus, on 11 March 2025, and “The Importance of Paratexts for the Study of Thai-Lao Manuscript Cultures” at Silpakorn University on 13 March 2025. His final lecture, “Germany: Changes Seen from the Old Days,” was a special event organized on 5 April 2025 at the Goethe-Institut in Bangkok by a group of Thai academics who have been studying in Germany since the 1960s, including Professor Dr. Ampha Otrakul and Professor Dr. Chetana Nagavajara.

As on previous visits to Thailand, Professor Grabowsky was warmly welcomed by representatives of our partner universities, where many of our BA and MA students from Hamburg spent their semesters abroad. Covering a wide range of topics pertaining to Thai and Southeast Asian Studies, Professor Grabowsky helped raise awareness of Hamburg as a prominent destination for young Thai students to pursue their academic studies in the future. •



A PhD Candidate (Austronesian Studies) and an Alumni (Thai Studies) of AAI, UHH Attending the Symposium

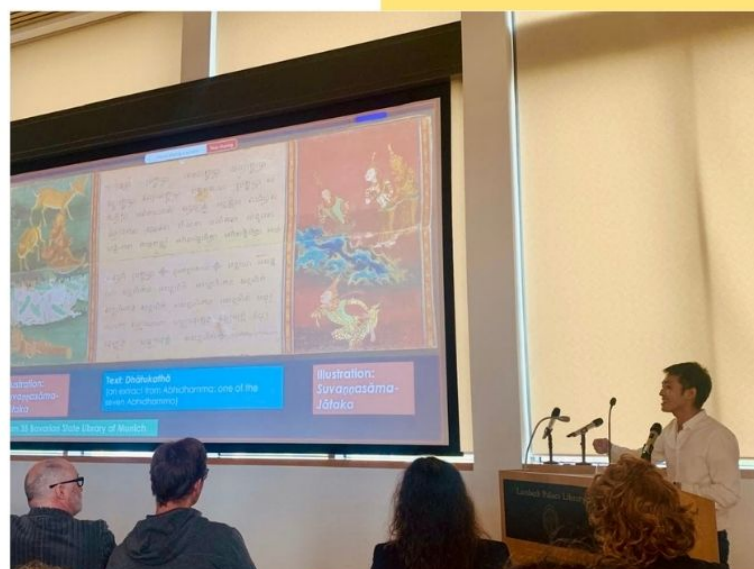
“Concertina-Fold Books across Time, Space and Cultures” in London and Oxford

(29 April to 2 May 2025)

Content contributor: Peera Panarut

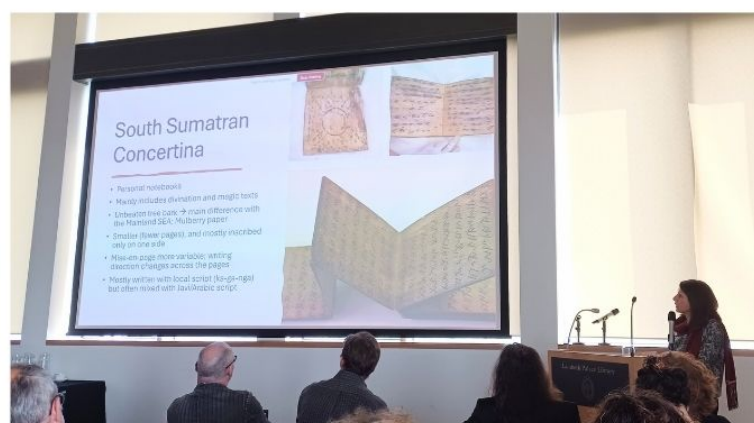
Photo credits: Roberta Zollo, Peera Panarut

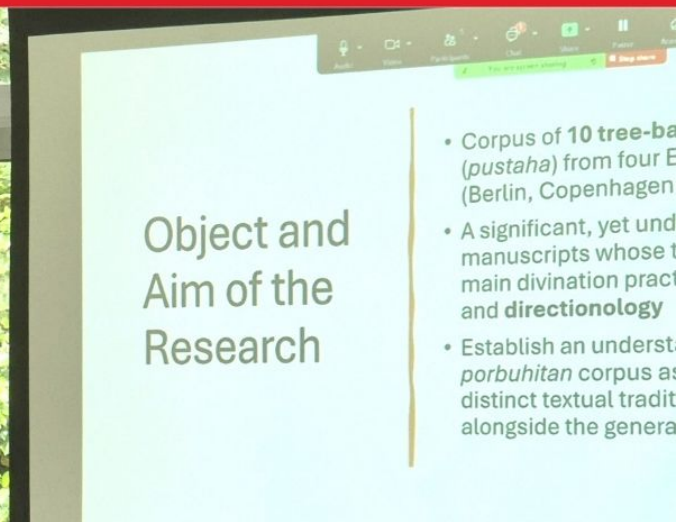
From 29 April to 2 May 2025, Roberta Zollo (a PhD candidate in Austronesian Studies at Universität Hamburg) and Dr. Peera Panarut (an alumnus of the Thai Studies program at Universität Hamburg, and currently a postdoctoral researcher at the Museum für Asiatische Kunst in Berlin) were invited to attend the symposium “Concertina-Fold Books across Time, Space and Cultures,” held in London and Oxford. Supported by the Royal Society of Edinburgh, the UK Heritage Fund, and the Centre for the Study of Manuscript Cultures (CSMC, UHH), the symposium aimed to expand knowledge of concertina-folded books (also known as leporellos) from a comparative perspective. It brought together participants from various cultural fields—including Medieval Europe, Mesoamerica, Ethiopia, China, Japan, Tibet, Thailand, and Indonesia—alongside librarians, curators, and conservators from institutions across London. Throughout the events, Roberta Zollo and Peera Panarut took part in object study sessions of several outstanding British collections of concertina-folded books, including those at the Lambeth Palace Library, the British Library, the British Museum, and the Sam Fogg Collection in London, as well as the Bodleian Libraries in Oxford. During these sessions, Roberta Zollo gave a short presentation on Batak manuscripts at the British Library, while Peera Panarut presented on Siamese (Thai) manuscripts at both the British Library and the Bodleian Libraries, together with host librarians and curators.



At the Lambeth Palace Library symposium in London on 1 May 2025, both Roberta and Peera delivered academic lectures on the tradition of concertina-fold books from the cultures they are researching. Roberta Zollo’s lecture was entitled “The Concertina Manuscripts Produced by the Batak People (Sumatra, Indonesia),” while Peera Panarut’s was “Graphics and Illustrations in Siamese Concertina-Fold Books (18th–19th Centuries).”

These events and symposiums enabled our two speakers to share their expertise and experiences with other scholars studying diverse writing traditions, thereby broadening the comparative perspective on concertina-fold books. The results of the symposium will be published in a collected volume at a later date. •





Reviving the Existence of Batak Manuscript Culture through A PhD Study

Contributor: Syukri Rizki

Photo credits: Muhammad Dian Saputra, Tiara Ulfah

After a diligent six-year PhD journey, Roberta Zollo successfully defended her dissertation in a disputation at the Centre for the Study of Manuscript Cultures (CSMC), University of Hamburg on May 19, 2025. Her research focuses on ten manuscripts of the *porbuhitan* corpus in Batak society. These multiple-text manuscripts present a set of omens accompanied by corresponding consequences that are to be consulted in a ritual of buffalo sacrifice. The board of examiners consisted of five scholars with varied areas of expertise: Prof. Dr. Jan van der Putten, Prof. Dr. Arlo Griffith, Prof. Dr. Antonia Soriente, Prof. Dr. Elsa Clavé, and Dr. Will Derks.

Roberta firmly maintained her argument that the Batak word *buhit*, from which *porbuhitan* is derived, actually refers to a small raised mount of soil surrounding a pole to which a buffalo is tied for sacrifice. Furthermore, Roberta emphasized that *porbuhitan* manuscripts should not be characterized merely as divination manuscripts but also as encyclopedic works compiling ritual knowledge, cosmological frameworks, and divination practices.



Concerned over the long-dormant manuscript production of this genre, Roberta confidently regards her study as part of a revival attempt to preserve the Batak manuscript culture. Her network with Batak communities in Indonesia and Germany will soon help her disseminate her academic contribution.

Roberta's ability to defend her thesis through an eloquent presentation and to provide satisfying responses to all questions asked led the board of examiners to award her the grade of *magna cum laude*. From that day onwards, she is entitled to bear a new academic title, Doctor of Philosophy (Dr. phil.), to her name. A celebration marking the successful disputation took place immediately at Asia-Afrika-Institute, attended by the examiners, family, friends, and members of the Batak community in Hamburg who came to congratulate Roberta's success and appreciate her dedication to their culture. •



Sound of Indonesia:

Content contributor: Tiara Ulfah

Photo credits: Tiara Ulfah, Yanti Mirdayanti

Preservation of Indonesian Wonders through Music and Cultural Festival

The Indonesian community excels at many things, and putting together vibrant cultural festivals filled with good music, good food, and for a good cause is high on that list. After last being celebrated in 2017, Sound of Indonesia (SOI) was back in Hamburg to celebrate the wonders of Indonesian culture on May 2nd, 2025. Organized by Indonesian Student Association (PPI) in Hamburg, the festival brought together cultural performances and Indonesian singers (students and teacher from Austronesian studies department included), including Angklung Hamburg Orchestra, PPI Hamburg Theatre, Widya Indonesian Dance Group, Wira Pranata (a Balinese dancer), Toffi Hamburg, Kamila Batavia, Ensemble Hamburg, Andy Fendy, Benbees, and the most awaited of all, popular Indonesian singers and songwriters Sandhy Sondoro and Pusakata as the headliners.

Sound of Indonesia is not just a music and cultural festival; it is also a fundraiser. This year, they partnered with the Greenation Foundation, a non-governmental organization focused on waste management, climate change, and the circular economy.



Greenation Foundation is currently addressing the negative impact of tourism on the natural environments, particularly public beaches and forests, which have been significantly affected by over-tourism. Through the festival, SOI aims to raise awareness about this critical issue. All proceeds from the festival will be donated to the Greenation Foundation to support their conservation program in affected tourist destinations and raise awareness among local communities.

All in all, it was a truly wonderful night. Indonesian citizens attending the festival felt like they were coming home for a short while, and likewise, non-Indonesians were introduced to the vibrant wonders of Indonesian music and culture. We are grateful to have been invited to this festival and sincerely congratulate everyone who made it such a success. •

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