

SEA- NEWSLETTER

The Department for Languages
and Cultures of Southeast Asia

Thai Cultural Day 2025

Content contributors: Volker Grabowsky, Silpsupa Jaengsawang

The Hamburger Gesellschaft für Thaiistik e.V. (HGT) hosted the annual Thai Cultural Day (Thai-Tag) at the Asia-Africa Institute on 14 June 2025, themed “Threads of Time: Preserving and Creating Thai Fashion.” Supported by the Royal Thai Embassy in Berlin, the Royal Thai Consulate-General in Munich, the Krohn Foundation, and the Bernhard-Nocht Institute, the event attracted participants from universities in Germany and Thailand.

The event was opened by Miss Chompoonute Chompookam, Chargé d’Affaires of the Royal Thai Embassy in Berlin; Mr. Stefan Krohn, Honorary Consul of Thailand in Hamburg; and Prof. Dr. Volker Grabowsky, Head of the Department of Southeast Asian Languages and Cultures. The keynote lecture, “Royal Fashions: Reflections on Modernizing the Image of Siamese Women,” was delivered by Prof. emer. Dr. M.L. Pattaratorn Chirapravati, highlighting Thailand’s dress reforms from King Chulalongkorn to Queen Sirikit, which have shaped national identity and cultural pride through textiles.

Following, Asst. Prof. Dr. Natawat Jatuphatwarodom from Rajamangala University presented innovations in sustainable textiles made from agricultural waste like water hyacinth, banana, and bamboo fibers, supporting local communities and Thailand’s circular economy.

A vibrant fashion show featuring Thai garments, organized by students Kukasina Kubaha and Karandeep Singh, showcased traditional textiles. After a lunch with authentic Thai dishes, a book launch introduced “Religion in Mirrors,” edited by Prof. Dr. Sven Trakulhun and Dr. Silpsupa Jaengsawang, which was presented to an enthusiastic audience.

A Career Opportunities forum hosted by the Royal Thai Embassies featured Aline Theresia Bauer from Universität Heidelberg sharing her Thailand experiences. The student quiz on Thai language, culture, history, and geography tested participants’ knowledge, with winners receiving prizes from the Krohn Foundation.

The day concluded with traditional Thai dance and music performances, including a graceful greeting dance by Nutthanit Chamchueai. With over 120 participants, Thai-Tag was a great success, celebrating Thailand’s rich cultural heritage. •



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MoU Agreement with Mahasarakham University, Thailand

Content contributor: Silpsupa Jaengsaawang

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After working together in a Visiting Professor program and at an international conference in 2024, Mahasarakham University and the University of Hamburg have formalized a mutual agreement on academic exchanges under a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU). The official contract was signed on 16 June 2025 at the university's Main Building.

The ceremony was presided over by Prof. Dr. Silke Segler-Meißner, Dean of the Faculty of Humanities, and Prof. Dr. Volker Grabowsky, Head of the Department of Languages and Cultures of Southeast Asia at Universität Hamburg. The eight-member delegation from Mahasarakham University, led by Assoc. Prof. Dr. Nittaya Wannakit, Vice-President of Mahasarakham University, was warmly welcomed by Anke Katzschnher from Partnership Management, Department of Strategy and Partnership at the University of Hamburg.

Under the five-year official agreement, we plan to collaborate on educational activities including student and researcher exchanges, as well as international workshops and conferences, in order to advance academic contributions in the field of Thai Studies. Through this mutual agreement, students and colleagues from both universities will be able to work hand in hand to establish a strong network, sharing knowledge and expertise with each other and connecting with other institutions with similar interests.

The delegation visited the Asia-Africa Institute library, which includes the Thai Corner—whose books and publications have been generously supported by the Royal Thai Embassy in Berlin. Led by Professor Dr. Agnieszka Helman-Ważny and Dr. Irina Wandrey, the Centre for the Study of Manuscript Cultures (CSMC) was introduced to the delegation, who also presented their university and the Research Institute of Northeastern Art and Culture (RINAC). Professor Dr. Agnieszka Helman-Ważny presented a video about palm-leaf manuscript production and guided the delegation through the laboratory, assisted by PhD researchers Malgorzata Grzelec and Kyle Ann Huskin. At the CSMC library, Dr. Irina Wandrey led the delegation on a tour, highlighting several written artefacts on display. •



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Students and Alumni of the Southeast Asian Studies Department





Bringing *Pustaka* Manuscripts Closer to the Batak People

Content contributor: Syukri Rizki

A group of motivated batak-origin youth in Yogyakarta, *Kawan Pustaka*, initiated BATUAKBA (*Baca Tulis Aksara Batak*, Reading and Writing Batak Script), a class dedicated to preserving and teaching the Batak script. In early June this year, the representatives of the group, Agung Firmanto Budiharto, Sopandu Manurung, Farid Noor Siregar, and Louisye Ellysabeth Lubis, stopped by the University of Hamburg to present their *Arus Balik* ('return flow') program on their way to some European institutions that house the manuscripts.

The program seeks to engage the Batak community in Indonesia to participate in the restitution of Batak cultural artifacts now kept outside the Batak land. For this purpose, the *Kawan Pustaka* visited members of the community in North Sumatra to sensitize them about the richness of their cultural heritage that was deprived from them sometime in the past. This group aims to challenge the stereotype that portrays the Batak people as uncivilized and suggests that their ancestors left no traces of knowledge. They hoped that feasible access to the *pustaka* manuscripts presenting contents of various subjects can bring about some fresh, balanced perceptions.

This intention is in harmony with the program's title itself, *Arus Balik*, which sounds homophonic to an Indonesian phrase, *Harus Balik* ('must return'). By this they suggest a pilgrimage to the regions of Batak people to encourage their collaboration regarding the future use of the artifacts. Furthermore, the leading figures of the Batak community—the *pemangku nilai* (value holders)—should be afforded an opportunity to observe some European collections to clarify how foreign institutions acquired and currently treat *pustaka* manuscripts.

As a fitting conclusion, *Kawan Pustaka*'s presentation culminated in a hands-on workshop on writing Batak script. Using a manual of individual characters of the script (with varieties used among the *Karo*, *Pakpak*, *Simalungun*, *Toba*, and *Mandailing-Angkola* ethnic groups), participants were invited to write their own names in the script—bringing the session to an appropriate close. •



Photo credits: Yanti Mirdayanti



Declaiming *Pantun* and Playing *Sepak Takraw* at The University of Hamburg

Content contributor: Syukri Rizki

Austronesian Studies Program welcomed representatives of Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris (UPSI) Perak, Malaysia, in a follow-up meeting to further develop the planned collaboration with the University of Hamburg. Joining them was also a group of *sepak takraw* (kick volleyball) athletes who represented Malaysia in the Dragons Cup competition taking place in Elmshorn on June 14-15, 2025.

During a ceremonial meeting at the AAI building on June 12, 2025, Dr. Mohd Amir bin Mohd Zahari, the deputy dean for student affairs and alumni of the Faculty of Languages and Communications of UPSI, delivered some remarks on a potential student exchange program between UPSI and the University of Hamburg. This was followed by a presentation from Dr. Robe'ah binti Yusuf, who discussed the cultural functions of *pantun* (traditional Malay quatrains) in Malaysia and Indonesia, outlining its various types (such as religious, humorous, and advisory), key scholarly studies, and its typical construct (especially concerning numbers of stanzas and rhyme scheme). To illustrate how *pantun* is traditionally performed, students from Mrs Yanti Mirdayanti's Indonesian class presented several verses they had learned in class. Next, all the participants were invited to gather in the yard adjacent to the AAI building, where they had the opportunity to try playing *sepak takraw* for fun, guided by the skilled Malaysian *sepak takraw* athletes.



Photo credits: Yanti Mirdayanti

The whole ceremony, with a hands-on cultural experience that matched the intellectual conversation, was both a memorable and enriching day.

The day concluded on a high note as Prof. Elsa Clavé, Head of the Austronesian Studies Program at the University of Hamburg, joined UPSI representatives in officially signing an agreement for future academic collaboration. •

Vietnamese Culture Forum

Chữ Nôm: Script Ideology and Language Preservation Strategies among the Kinh (Việt) Minority in Southern China

Hybrid Talk

Friday, July 11, 2025

2:30 PM – 4:00 PM CEST

(7:30 PM – 9:00 PM GMT+7, Vietnam Time)

University of Hamburg
Asia-Africa-Institute (AAI)
Edmund-Siemers-Allee 1,
Flügel Ost, Room O-121

Webinar-ID: 656 2963 9166

Passcode: 53265783

[https://uni-hamburg.zoom.us/j/65629639166?](https://uni-hamburg.zoom.us/j/65629639166?pwd=9r4h8F6ZM8Wlhq38cjsmBcDI5l7mX9t8.kGQUC-44nOTNGO1n)[pwd=9r4h8F6ZM8Wlhq38cjsmBcDI5l7mX9t8.kGQUC-44nOTNGO1n](https://uni-hamburg.zoom.us/j/65629639166?pwd=9r4h8F6ZM8Wlhq38cjsmBcDI5l7mX9t8.kGQUC-44nOTNGO1n)

Abstract:

The Jing people (Viet., *dân tộc Kinh*), an officially recognized ethnic minority in China, are primarily concentrated in Jiangping Town, Dongxing City, within the Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region. Their heritage language, Jingyu (Viet., *tiếng Kinh*), constitutes a regional variant of Vietnamese. In recent decades, Jingyu has faced intensifying pressure from dominant languages, including Mandarin Chinese, regional Sinitic dialects, and standardized Vietnamese. As a result, the language is now critically endangered.

In response to the imminent threat of linguistic extinction, a group of elder Jing intellectuals has initiated efforts to preserve and transmit Jingyu through the adoption of *Chữ Nôm*—a logographic script historically used to represent Vietnamese prior to the introduction of the Romanized Vietnamese—*Quốc ngữ*. The presentation, based on sociolinguistic fieldwork conducted in 2015 across the so-called “Three Islands” inhabited by the Jing community, offers a preliminary examination of the ideological and sociocultural motivations underpinning the community’s selection of *Chữ Nôm* as a medium of linguistic preservation. It further investigates the mechanisms by which this script is being transmitted across generations.

A comparative analysis reveals that *Chữ Nôm*, a script derived from the Chinese character system, lacks the phonemic transparency and orthographic efficiency characteristic of the modern Vietnamese script. Consequently, it offers limited practical utility for the accurate phonological representation and effective transmission of Jingyu. This study argues that the selection of *Chữ Nôm* is not grounded in linguistic functionality but rather reflects deeper ethnonationalist considerations. Specifically, the script’s use reinforces the Jing people’s genealogical and cultural affiliation with the Sino-character tradition, positioning their identity within a broader Han-centric sociocultural narrative. •

About the Speaker:



Dr. Nguyễn Tô Lan

Institute for Philosophy,
Vietnam Academy of
Social Sciences,
Hanoi

Dr. Nguyễn Tô Lan is currently a Senior Researcher at the Institute of Philosophy, Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences (VASS) since 2024 and formerly a Researcher at the Institute of Sino-Nom Studies (VASS) from 2004 to 2024. She earned her Ph.D. in Linguistics and Literature from the Graduate Academy of Social Sciences, Vietnam, in 2012.

She was awarded as an ASIA Fellow (2010–2011) to conduct a comparative study in China. She later held several visiting and research fellowships, including: Visiting Scholar at the Harvard-Yenching Institute (2013–2014), Guest Scholar at the Institute for Research in Humanities, Kyoto University (2014), Coordinating Research Scholar at the Harvard-Yenching Institute (2015), Visiting Scholar at Academia Sinica (2018), Visiting Scholar at Beijing Foreign Studies University (2019), and Visiting Researcher at Toyo Bunko, Japan (2023).

In 2025, she was selected as a Petra Kappert Fellow at the Centre for the Study of Manuscript Cultures (CSMC), University of Hamburg.

Her research focuses on *chữ Nôm*, comparative literature, translation studies, transcultural studies, and the study of overseas minorities—particularly Overseas Chinese in Southern Vietnam, Overseas Vietnamese in Guangxi (China), and Overseas Vietnamese in Bangkok (Thailand). She also works extensively on Buddhism and print culture in East Asia. Her major publications include a co-authored monograph with Rostislav Berezkin (Fudan University), *Avalokiteśvara of the Vietnamese Sea: Miaoshan-Guanyin Legend in Vietnam* (Vietnam University of Education Publishing House, 2021), and a book chapter in *Ecologies of Translation in East and Southeast Asia, 1600–1900*, edited by Li Guo, Patricia Sieber, and Peter Kornicki (University of Amsterdam Press, 2022). She has published over 80 scholarly articles and book chapters in Vietnamese, Chinese, English, and Japanese.

Vietnamese Culture Forum

Refracted Portraits: Trương Vĩnh Ký through His Autobiographies and the Retrospective Lens of the 1920s

Online Talk

Friday, September 26, 2025

2:00 PM – 4:00 PM CEST

(7:00 PM – 9:00 PM GMT+7, Vietnam Time)

Webinar-ID: 671 5459 3815

Passcode: 64908837

<https://uni-hamburg.zoom.us/j/67154593815?pwd=49BZhw70OYd-Rr1HbJfdZs3ldlplW3k1.cpgqvJlgUwAoYKJ>

Abstract:

Petrus Trương Vĩnh Ký (1837-1898) is one of the most contentious figures in Vietnam's modern intellectual history. Was he a traitor, a collaborator, or a French-educated Vietnamese Catholic patriot with a distinct sense of national loyalty? Generations of scholars—Vietnamese and foreign, Marxist and non-Marxist—have grappled with this question, offering divergent and often conflicting interpretations of this erudite polymath whose influence spans centuries. Yet rarely have we heard from Trương Vĩnh Ký himself.

With the recent rediscovery of his autobiographical manuscripts, we are now afforded a rare opportunity to engage with Trương's own self-representations and to reconsider how these documents were selectively cited, appropriated, or reframed by later writers—most notably French scholar Jean Bouchot and Vietnamese author Huyền Mặc Đạo Nhân Dương Mạnh Huy. This talk examines the interplay between Trương's self-portraits and the portraits rendered by subsequent interpreters, arguing that none of these accounts are neutral reflections. Rather, they are refracted through the cultural, political, and ideological lenses of their time, inviting us to reflect on the nature of historical representation itself. ●

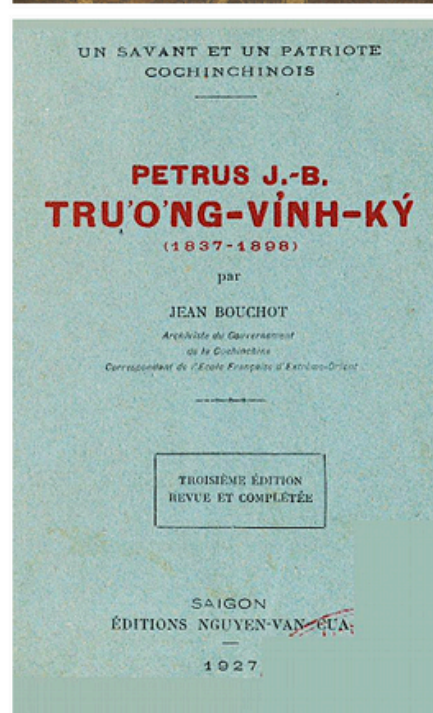
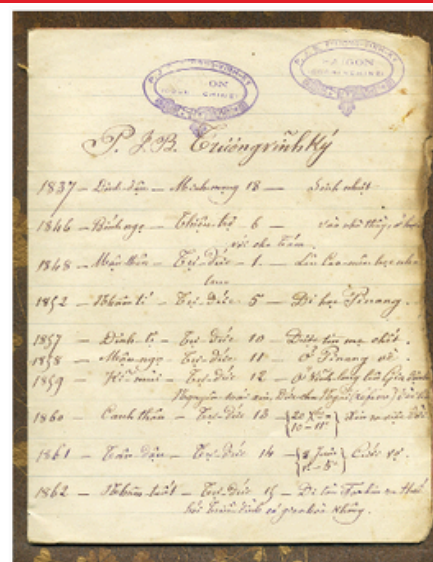
About the Speaker:



Prof. Dr. Nguyễn Nam
Fulbright University
Vietnam,
Ho Chi Minh City

Nguyễn Nam is a founding faculty member of the Fulbright University Vietnam, now in charge of the Vietnam Studies Center of the school. He served as a senior lecturer at the University of Social Sciences and Humanities (USSH), Vietnam National University in Ho Chi Minh City from 1986 to April 2018, and as the USSH's former Chairperson of the Division of East Asian Studies (1993-1994), and Division of Chinese Studies (2010-2012).

Nguyễn Nam has also conducted his research in East Asian countries, such as Japan (as a Visiting Fellow of the Japan Society for the Promotion of Science, 2016-2017; as a research fellow of the Japan Foundation's Asia Center, June to August 2018; and as a visiting scholar of the International Center for Japanese Studies Nichibunken, February to August 2020), and Taiwan (as a Visiting Fellow/Scholar of Taiwan Center for Chinese Studies, 1999 and 2011).



During the summer of 2013, as visiting professor he taught in the Department of Languages and Cultures of Southeast Asia, Asian African Institute, Hamburg University. He has also served as a lecturer for the Overseas Study Program of Loyola University Chicago in Ho Chi Minh City from 2012 to 2018. His research interests focus on comparative intellectual history/literature (dealing mainly with East Asian countries, including Vietnam), cultural studies, translation studies, and adaptation studies. He is also an associate of the Harvard-Yenching Institute.