

The Inseparable Bond between Fine Arts and Humanities : A Thai Case Study ⁽¹⁾

Chetana Nagavajara

May I be allowed to explain from the outset that this is not going to be an academic paper but rather something in the nature of a sharing of experiences. Parts of the material discussed are inevitably drawn from my own experience. I believe that fine arts and humanities in Thailand once belonged together, with the practical and the theoretical aspects of the disciplines being equally important to our life. With the introduction of formal education, especially in the context of higher education, a rift has set in and it has been difficult to recover the original disciplinary unity.

Allow me to begin by relating to you how things fared at an average Thai secondary school half a century ago. Naturally, academic subjects received adequate emphasis, especially for those who wanted to go on to the university, but my school, Debsirin, made practical work compulsory right up to our last school year. Sport and art figured fairly prominently in our curriculum, whereas other schools had replaced them with extra lessons in academic subjects in preparation for the university entrance examination. I still remember vividly that my last weeks at school were devoted to an assignment given by our art teacher, whereby I volunteered to model an image of an owl out of clay. It was a difficult task and I was

⁽¹⁾ Freely translated from a lecture in Thai given at the Faculty of Fine and Applied Arts, Sri Nakarinvit University, Bangkok, on 28 August 2001. First published in **Language and Literature Never Die : Collected Essays**: Nakorn Pathom: Department of Thai, Faculty of Arts, Silpakorn University, 2003, pp. 1-12. (In Thai)

naturally proud of the finished “art work”. (By a stroke of luck, I met my art teacher again in January 2003, and the old gentleman still remembered that owl of mine, which made me very happy.) Beyond that, I had the opportunity to learn a Thai musical instrument outside the regular school hours. If I have since become a music lover, an amateur musician and music critic, it was because of the congenial school environment in which music was part of our daily life, and not something imposed upon us. Academic subjects and practical work were part and parcel of our daily routine. Such was a fertile ground on which critics and academics could cultivate themselves as long as they kept on enriching their experiences through contact with works of art and through serious reflection thereon without having to rely on formal training. What I have been saying may sound like a nostalgic look at the past, but I do not rule out that a golden age can again come about in the future.

Experience as a university teacher has given me plenty of food for thought. I was once assigned by my university to chair a committee on the general curriculum, and subsequently asked to teach part of a course for students of all faculties called “Man and Creativity” which offered a discussion of general principles related to the creative urge in man, together with analyses of concrete examples of artistic creations. We involved not only artists and art historians, but also scientists who helped link scientific inventions and discoveries with works of art. From my teaching experience, it was rather strange that students from two faculties at my university could score better in the examination than their colleagues in other faculties. They were from the Faculty of Pharmacy and the Faculty of Painting, Sculpture and Graphic Arts, although the latter, more often than not, adopted a mode of “learning by proxy”. Nevertheless, they were sensitive to issues of creativity, whether this had to do with fine arts or literature, and they were also able to express themselves well. Students from the Faculty of Pharmacy responded in an amazingly rational way, even when they had to deal with literature, whereas as students of the Faculty of Arts, who should be expected to be at home in literary matters, did not perform as well. This phenomenon set me thinking, and after long reflection I came to the conclusion that those steeped in academic subjects

without practical experience tend to acquire knowledge of a *secondary* mode, or to put it bluntly, second-hand knowledge. Lack of first-hand experience could also undermine original thinking. At a higher level, academic and abstract discourse is often used to replace actual human experience. Even “international” scholars of the arts sometimes come up with highly abstract theories, which turn out to be an independent discourse divorced from a true appreciation and understanding of works of art. In all probability they would not know how difficult it is to model an owl.

Let me share with you another experience. Ten years ago I was asked to serve on the Policy Board of the newly created Thailand Research Fund (TRF) and soon discovered how difficult it was to bring life into research in the humanities. TRF initiated various measures to promote research, such as giving highly prestigious awards to well-known scholars to embark on group research. This worked well with scientific subjects, but the humanities were not all too responsive. It more or less transpired that many humanities scholars were weary of their own subjects and were in need of intellectual challenge. I am convinced that the most effective impetus can come from contact with the arts. But the question remains as to whether scholarship in Thai academia can lend support to artistic creation. My university, Silpakorn, grew out of the National Academy of Fine Arts, and half a century has elapsed without our being able to create the discipline of *art history* that can serve the furtherance of contemporary art. Worse still, many of our art historians are not interested in contemporary art. Colleagues have tried very hard to create a condition in which art history and fine arts can mutually enrich each other, but their efforts remain at the conceptual level, although the situation is improving little by little, thanks to the inputs from a new generation of artists and art historians. My tentative conclusion is that as long as the humanities are caught in abstraction and do not seek first-hand experience through contact with the real world and reality, the discipline is doomed to failure.

I would like now to turn to music in order to elucidate my point. Experts in the East and West do agree on the artistic achievements of Thai classical music. The question remains whether there exists

an academic discipline of substance related to this music. The answer is unfortunately not in the affirmative, but that does not mean that scholarly or academic thinking is totally absent from Thai classical music: knowledge and theory are *implicit* rather than *explicit*, that is to say, they constitute an integral part of the practice of Thai music and have not been codified and made accessible to the general public. In other words, scholarship has not yet assumed a distinct role in supporting the practice of music.

As for literature, the academic study of literature in Thailand has been going on as part of a formal tertiary curriculum for about 70 years, but may not have achieved much. Many students in Faculties of Arts today read very little and the quality of instruction is naturally affected thereby. Our experience from the research project “Criticism as an Intellectual Force in Contemporary Society” does confirm that criticism is in need of academic support. It is worth noticing that even announcements of prestigious literary prizes in Thailand are rather weak in explaining why the prizes have been awarded to such and such works, a testimony to the rather shaky foundation of literary study. The above-mentioned research project covers four areas, namely literary, art, theatre and music criticism, and in all the four domains, criticism receives minimal support from academia.

If we are to take into consideration Western humanities from which Thai scholars have derived much of the discipline’s philosophy and body of knowledge, it has to be admitted that the West is blessed with a time-honoured written tradition, which gives the Western world a considerable measure of confidence in its own cultural heritage. The British, for example, at one time believed that the best training for their leaders had to be in the Classics, meaning the study of the knowledge and wisdom from Greek and Roman Antiquities, consisting mainly of literature, history and philosophy. Those were the bedrock of the humanities transmitted predominantly through the written mode which required concomitant serious reading and study. The case of Greek theatre is of particular interest: Greek plays translated into Western vernaculars and put on stage today have been handed down to the present day through written texts, and even the texts themselves are

not explicit enough as to how the plays were performed under the originating conditions. What is left are the ruins of Greek theatres and the texts from which scholars have tried to reconstruct a performing convention. The written tradition facilitated communication across temporal and geographical barriers, and reading fired the imagination of readers. Contact with classical antiquity endowed Western humanities with a special fervour. Whenever a chance presented itself that enabled a Westerner to visit those ancient lands, the results often took the form of travelogues or scholarly works marked by great enthusiasm. German thinkers and writers in the 18th or 19th century headed for Rome and Sicily in search of concrete remnants of those ancient civilizations that could be witnessed through architecture and sculpture. A number of scholarly works on the visual arts of the West originated as an analysis of sculpture, for this art form encouraged reflections on the concept of art. But knowledge as such is not the only mainstay of Western humanities. Recently the President of the prestigious Alexander von Humboldt Foundation warned his compatriots that there would be grave danger in following some Western countries which had turned higher education into business and thereby overlooked the importance of the humanities, simply because they are not an income-generating discipline. He maintained that the humanities should not follow science and technology with their emphasis on experiment, but should aim at gleaning from human experience important concepts and theories, without which the humanities would simply lapse into a mere transmitting of brute knowledge without inculcating critical and analytical acumen.

Traditional Thai culture knew only a “primary” mode of imparting knowledge on a face-to-face basis. The method is still being adopted in some artistic domains (and as long as our open or distance-learning universities have not yet embarked upon programmes in music and fine arts, we can safely say that the arts have been spared the onslaught of technology-driven modes of instruction). Traditional Thailand was a community-based society in which practical work and theoretical thinking constituted a unity. Serious efforts to codify traditional knowledge and wisdom were

initiated by King Rama III who created the stone inscriptions of Wat Pho⁽²⁾ as a repository of knowledge, and it has to be admitted they were not all-embracing. That was a noble way of giving back to the people what belonged to the people, with the monarch acting as a “broker”. The notion of public access to knowledge was beginning to take shape, in contradistinction to the traditional belief in hoarding knowledge for your own clan or inner circle. Besides, traditional Thai society valued versatility as exemplified in the principle of the “mutual illumination of the arts”.⁽³⁾ The present Thai government’s campaign related to “one tambon⁽⁴⁾ one product” (OTOP) is a departure from the essence of traditional Thai culture. It can be seen that in a community-based culture, knowledge generation and dissemination and practical work went hand in hand. In this respect, subsequent development of fine arts and humanities within the framework of our higher education could have benefited from the cultural richness of traditional Thailand, but, alas, we have been all too Eurocentric.

My own experience with “old Europe” tends to confirm the viability of the Thai experience. When I was 19, I had the good fortune of spending 2 months in the German city of Nürnberg primarily to learn German, and I did not fail to imbibe the cultural riches of that exemplary German community. We usually associate Nürnberg with Nazi crimes and the Nürnberg Trials still linger on in the memory of many people. But those earnestly intent on discovering the real genius of Europe will look at Nürnberg from a different perspective. Artistic versatility was the hallmark of the great men of Nürnberg. For example, Albrecht Dürer distinguished himself in various art forms. The city’s architecture testifies also to

⁽²⁾ See: Chetana Nagavajara. “Literature in Thai Life”. In: **South East Asia Research**, Vol. 2, No. 1, March 1994, pp. 21-24.

⁽³⁾ See: Chetana Nagavajara. “Wechselseitige Erhellung der Künste in der thailändischen Kultur”. In: C.N. **Wechselseitige Erhellung der Kulturen. Aufsätze zur Kultur und Literatur**. Chiangmai: Silkworm Books, pp. 51-73. (In German)

⁽⁴⁾ “Tambon” in Thai is a unit within the Thai provincial administration, in size lying somewhere between a village and a district.

its glorious past, and although it was during the final phase of the Second World War razed to the ground by the allies' bombing (suffering the same fate as Dresden), the medieval city has been successfully restored, testifying also to the determination and artistic skills of post-war German artists and artisans. Nürnberg was blessed with various branches of craftsmanship. It was also known for its mechanical inventions, such as clockwork. The world's first globe was made in Nürnberg; the first German railway line was constructed between Nürnberg and Fürth. It was also well-known for culinary art. The artistic and intellectual prowess of the people of Nürnberg was brought to the fore in Wagner's opera *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*. In that opera Wagner more or less created a monument to one distinguished Nürnberger, namely the poet Hans Sachs, whose regular occupation was that of a shoemaker. I shall refrain from speculating as to how the craft of shoemaking and the art of poetry enriched each other. Again, the experience of Nürnberg would rather militate against the recent Thai concept of "One Tambon One Product" (OTOP)!

I have on an earlier occasion criticized our higher education's uncritical adherence to vocationalism,⁽⁵⁾ but I do not mean to propagate that concepts and theories should take precedence over practical work. We may have been plagued by a mistaken notion of vocationalism by linking it solely to practical utility. Traditional Thai aesthetics never distinguished between artists and artisans (or craftsmen). In other words we did not divorce aesthetics from utility. The import of Western theories of particular schools has brought about the distinction between pure and applied arts, which in many cases does not correspond to our way of life. For example, we Thais love to carve fruits into beautiful forms, representing flowers and the like, and we then eat them. But the art of picking up a carved fruit and putting it into your mouth requires also a certain degree of sophistication. It should be the task of the humanities to analyze cultural practices and then derive certain theoretical

⁽⁵⁾ Chetana Nagavajara. **Humanities in Crisis: A Thai Case Study**. Bangkok: The Thailand Research Fund, 1995, pp. 44-45.

conclusions from those experiences. It is true that the formulation of concepts and theories demands skills in abstraction and linguistic expressiveness, and it may also be true that we Thais do not put much emphasis on formulating abstract concepts. Modern education derived mainly from the West attaches great importance to concepts and theories, and we sometimes borrow Western methods without heeding cultural differences. For example, an analytical method known as SWOT (Strengths-Weaknesses-Opportunities-Threats) has been adopted as a tool for evaluation, and it has often turned out that this Western tool is very difficult to manipulate in the Thai context, not because we do not think or we cannot think, but because we think differently from Westerners: we do not usually go in search of abstract conclusions.

May I be permitted to illustrate Western preference for concepts with a little anecdote? At an international conference in Graz, Austria, a few years ago, I presented a paper on contemporary Thai drama and tried to characterize our theatre as a “theatre of conviviality” in view of our community-based structure. Colleagues soon picked up the concept of “conviviality”, and a lengthy discussion ensued on this concept. Although I did pinpoint from which source I borrowed the concept of conviviality (which was used by the 19th century critic August Wilhelm Schlegel in relation to the Shakespearean theatre), the colleagues were not overly interested in the source, but opted to congratulate me on my introduction of the concept, an honour which I had to humbly refuse!

It can be seen that Western intellectual circles accord prominence to the use of concepts, whereas their Thai counterparts aim at actual experiences and strive to communicate those experiences to others. If we have to explain a concept, we prefer to do it through story-telling. For example the concept of *Dāna* (giving) in Buddhism is an abstraction that is not easily comprehensible to everybody, and Buddhists would explain it through *Jatakas*, (being stories of the previous lives of the Buddha). Because of its inherent difficulty, Buddhists would resort to literature or mural painting in order to concretize the concept. These artistic works go into some length to explain how the path to *Nirvana* has to pass through one very important hurdle, which is

Dāna (giving). In relation to the well-known *Vessantara Jataka*, it would not be easy to comprehend this act of giving if it were not sufficiently elaborated, as has been done in literary works and mural paintings.

Let me now turn to contemporary Thai literature and the treatment of the Buddhist concept of *Abhayadāna* (forgiving). Our contemporary poet Saksiri Meesomsuep described the bloody event of 6 October 1976 in a stark, naturalistic way, that is to say, presented the atrocity of the event in physical terms. But he concluded this great poem by positing *Abhayadāna* as the solution for a national reconciliation. Forgiveness should serve to heal the wounds of history, and in reading this poem we realize that forgiveness is of a level much higher than an amnesty law which every military *Junta* never failed to pass in order to exculpate the murderers and the murdered alike. What the poet proposes through the elaboration of a Buddhist concept is meant to be a practical solution. Below is the poem.

Retracing Footprints on the Path

Paper birds panicked into flight
 Reeling in vast tear-filled skies
 Boom, Boom...scattered in fright
 Bang Bang...*ee-poh* guns broke the air
 Shot out chamaliang bullets
 Bright-eyed ones dropped drooped
 Eye-balls burst - broke and bled
 Blood dripped dropped like prized gems
 Smooth flesh breached
 By powered thrust of iron blades
 Screams reverberated through the land
 But valued no more than fruit-flies' buzz
 Back and forth, back and forth
 Tears flooded the clouds
 Little rabbit's up to its neck in despair
 Grabbed heaven-spire, pulled hope crashing down
 Rainbow ghost lunged his lightening rod
 Ripping through the startled chest

Rainbow ghost sucked dry the blood
 The sky moans mixed with fierce gun-fires
 Was it this tamarind tree or some other?
 Sobbing Pigtail, Topknot and Glae queried
 Was it on this branch or another, pretty tree,
 That they hung the beloved maid?
 Breezes blew, branch bent, body swung
 Beaten, battered, kicked as it hung
 No words, no cries, no recrimination
 Was the rope so tight that you're silent?
 Your eyes bulged, tongue hung out
 Is it rage that clenched your fist so?
 Let anger dissolve with the dissolving breath
 For the corpse they've cremated with burning tires
 They cupped hands to make megaphones
 For trumpeting news they'd concocted
 That we were a fungal and leprous lot
 With spotted hinds and scarlet heads
 Then they threw olive grenades
 Ten Thousand *ee-poh* guns responded
 Spattering chamaliang bullets
 Smashing lives, scattering bodies
 None died but revived by magic *wah*
 The dead were quickened with life
 Not killed, not dead, we're alive
 The wounded cured, the dead revived
 Not killed, we're still here to stand fast
 Hope and dreams are beacon-bright
 We select, analyze and put away
 Keep this, discard that to find the win-way
 You on your side, we on ours
 Differing yet steadfast...with Truth
 Let's cross the peaks of ignorance
 To reach victory through wisdom of mankind
 Like fire is the vengeful heart
 Let die the hatred of days past
 "Foes to be fought is the abasing Delusion

That inhabits the human mind”
 Come...keep banana guns against the wall
 And hone our wits for the vital war
 Make it sharp of edge and great of depth
 Set tactics for strategies of peace
 Sixth October 2519
 Retracting footprints on the path
 Subtracting a finger or a toe for each year
 None’re left on my hands and feet, dear friends
 Counting fingers and toes that day to this
 It’s been twenty years, dear friends
 Counting fingers and toes that day to this
 It’s been twenty years, dear friends⁽⁶⁾

As outlined above, the humanities in Thailand could only thrive if they were to maintain an intimate link with community-based practice, artisanship, conviviality and way of life marked by the principle of “give and take”. Failing that, we might encounter very serious problems. First, we would be building up a body of knowledge without being able to glean concepts and theories from actual experience, and secondly, without being able to derive concepts and theories from our own native soil, we would simply have to continue to borrow from the West in the hope that this would be the easiest way to reach our goal.

I cannot deny that as a Western-trained scholar of the humanities I also have occasionally had to look to the West for inspiration. My earliest work on criticism published in 1971 was that of a docile pupil of the West, but over the years I have learned to use my experience in, and with, Thailand to construct concepts and theories which I have proposed in such essays as “In Search of Indigenous Theories”, “An Aesthetics of Discontinuity”, “The Ranad Thum Culture” and “Music Criticizes Music”.⁽⁷⁾ The

⁽⁶⁾ Translated by Chamnongsri Ratnin.

⁽⁷⁾ Chetana Nagavajara. “In Search of Indigenous Theories”. In : **Dedications to Her Royal Highness Princess Galyani Vadhana Krom Luang Naradhiwas Rajanagarindra on Her 80th Birthday**. Bangkok: The Siam Society, 2003, pp. 235-246.

responses, especially from Western scholars, have been encouraging, and some Western colleagues went so far as to maintain that these theories possess a certain degree of universality and could be used to explain non-Thai experiences as well.

What could prove to be disturbing to us is that the humanities in the West have developed so far as to come up with brilliant theoretical discourses related to the arts. Recently a Western art critic gave a lecture on contemporary art by referring to “Participating Art” or “Participatory Art” as the latest trend in the international art scene. An artwork no longer seeks to impress the public by its artistic quality alone, but gives the public an opportunity to participate in the process of creation. An artist of today has to be articulate enough to be able to explain his own creative process, and it comes to pass that some Thai artists are well-known more on account of their verbal prowess rather than the artistic quality of their works. Are we confusing rhetoric with artistic creativity?

I shall now cite the example of a contemporary work of art that may illustrate a trend which is to be welcome in our contemporary world. Artists of today are in a position to work with cross-cultural experiences. A young Thai composer, Apisit Wongchoti, attempts to enter into a dialogue with 18th century Europe by composing a suite for strings recounting recent political upheavals in Thailand, consisting of 3 movements that depict events in October 1973, October 1976 and May 1992. Temporal demarcations made him think of the seasonal changes in the European context, and consequently of Vivaldi’s “The Four Seasons”. The compositional arrangement was that the 3-movement composition called “October...October...May” were inserted movement by movement among the four sections of the Italian work, thereby creating a dialogue between 18th century Venice and contemporary Thailand.⁽⁸⁾ The young composer has transformed programme music into an obliquely didactic art which should serve as a voice of conscience

⁽⁸⁾ A video recording of a performance of the work is available. (Those interested in the work may contact: TRF Research Project on Criticism. E-mail: thaicritic@hotmail.com or office@thaicritic.com)

to society. In a way he was fulfilling the mission started by Thai folk singers of 1970's who created a new genre known as "songs for life", this time to be played by a Western classical ensemble. Aphisit expresses the lesson of history convincingly with a new musical language, heart-rending and impressive in its own way. The humanities as an academic discipline should be in a position to respond to such new artistic creations in order to be able to identify their innovative character and to propose how innovations in contemporary Thai music could take off from this point.

Viewed from a cross-cultural perspective the new composition can be explained not merely as a dialogue between a Thai composer of the 21st century and a Western composer of 18th century, but also as an interesting phenomenon of how works of art, originating in a culture remote from each other temporally and geographically, can still communicate with the modern age and inspire new creations. We may have to reinterpret the notion of historical sense and also reassess the concept of continuity, which no longer functions within a homogeneous culture but blossoms into cross-cultural directions which are characteristic of contemporary cultural globalization. From a musical point of view, communication through non-verbal mode can be just as effective as verbal expression. In this respect we may have to fall back on German philosophy of the 19th century which welcomes the abstract nature of music as the most profound mode of communication endowed with a spiritual power that runs deeper than language. If abstraction is to be considered as a virtue, then it must be able to rely on a vehicle that can carry its message. Music can fulfill that function. Thai humanities may be fortunate in the sense that the various arts do not need to vie for supremacy, for they always coexist and enrich each other.

In conclusion, the only way to free Thai humanities from their present slumber would be to re-establish the intimate bond with the fine arts. At the same time the arts can benefit from the humanities through the latter's critical responses. Criticism for its part must rest on a solid base of experience anchored in creative works, otherwise it would only lapse into empty rhetoric or facile abstraction. If we are to maintain that the arts are there to

communicate the experiences of individuals or groups of individuals to the public, then the humanities, intimately linked with works of art, will have to perform the task of transforming the experience of individual scholars into a collective experience which can serve as an intellectual and cultural force for society and for the world. There will be no more need to prove the desirability and viability of the inseparable bond between fine arts and humanities.