

GLOBAL CONNECTIONS XI
“WEST MEETS EAST”
JUNE 25-30, 2008

SEMINAR DECLARATION

The eleventh gathering of Global Connections took place at The Prem Tinsulanonda Center for International Education, Chiang Mai, Thailand. Five continents were represented: a remarkable diversity of educational institutions inclusive of national and state education met to share, discuss and reflect. For those from all points of the compass, the theme West meets East sparked and illuminated many ideas both as reflections of the speakers and of one another, whilst the vibrant tapestries of Thai culture and values enriched us each day.

In the recent past the East looked to the West for technology, education and innovation; the West to the East for spirituality and wisdom as well as excitement and mystery of the exotic. In the midst of rich natural resources, we have learned, with humility that East and West separate is an incomplete world, yet together they can make the difference needed to restore and sustain our planet. We learnt No as a question, not an answer; we were encouraged to be as fluid as the water which finds its way above and below the ground in our teaching and learning. Rather than dwelling on yesterdays' issues and needs, we must think beyond the horizon and, travelling with the lantern of imagination, reach the stars. Acceptance and celebration of difference are the lights of human interaction and global citizenship: we, from the East and from the West, need no longer ask for permission but for forgiveness.

Our learning rose above the Center and allowed us the opportunity to touch the land: we were exposed to projects which travelled beyond the borders of change, and ensured sustainability. Each was grounded in local cultural values and wisdom. These projects, which created a social conscience of “mass protection” and which reinforced goodness above competency, enthralled us as we moved through the experience of “people drama”. We witnessed the strength of community in partnership, the philosophy of sufficiency and the power of self-reliance. We reflected on the balance of the ‘middle-road’ and the intersecting circles of Thailand’s “security”, “development” and “participation”. These, indeed, are wheels that aerate the muddied waters of our planet and restore life to the natural cycle.

Both the East and the West need to confront the real issue of the depletion of the planet’s natural resources and our loss of cultural identity through technology and materialism. A deer hiding behind a bush viewing the hunter is at great risk if he is to eat the leaves! We exposed our ideas and risked thoughts in discussion on the challenging issues that face the West and the East. Perhaps the East needs to turn to East to explore further its roots and identity and complexity, for how can we know the whole forest if at first we are unable to understand and appreciate a single leaf?

Perhaps the West could take heed of the present Thai King's sage advice on sufficiency economy: "stop competing outrageously". We learnt that to change the question is to find another answer; that rules are mainly to maintain order, not to enforce judgment, nor to constrain creativity. Controlled creativity avoids chaos and the centre does continue to hold strong. Participation and consultation, together with reflection and patience, give us permission to engage fully whilst guiding our direction and supporting our search to understand the younger generations of the East and the West.

To build the Thai lantern, the artist plans meticulously. He selects his materials, balances and weights the bamboo frame, carefully designs the shape and size, secures the fuelling mechanism and using the wisdom and experience of yesteryear ensures his dream will be real. To set the lantern free, he calls upon his family, his neighbours – they all protect the lantern while lighting it and as a community "read the time" to allow it to be free. With pride, hope and joy, the community reflects on this powerful journey to the heavens.

Global Connections recognises the power of the lantern and its journey into the world of dreams and hopes. As the lantern of education fills in each of our schools, we will on reflection of Global Connections XI, be reminded of General Prem's statement: a person must not simply be good at the process of thinking, but must be a person with "good thinking". From this meeting of West and East, we are surely privileged to have had first hand experience and thus understanding of His Majesty King Bhumibhol's words: "The stability of the building is resulted from unseen and mostly forgotten pillars". The educative process has many unseen and forgotten pillars that ensure stability; it too has the power to make us soar as a Thai lantern to the stars.