



Research alumna Piyada Suwanpinij, ambassador for RWTH and Germany in Thailand.

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“Nothing to fear but a brilliant experience”

Christin Wannagat

RWTH-research alumna Piyada Suwanpinij between Germany and Thailand

Piyada Suwanpinij works as a lecturer and researcher in Materials and Metallurgical Engineering at the Thai German Graduate School of Engineering (TGGGS) in Bangkok, Thailand. She has recently become an important part of RWTH Aachen University's international network, especially in the South East Asian area supporting the university's partnership with TGGGS. She is one of about 200 connected research alumni of RWTH worldwide whose views, impressions and experiences give great insight into how research in Germany is conducted in general.

Born in August 1980 in Thailand, Piyada came to Germany for the period of her PhD at RWTH Aachen University in October 2006. She was recommended by TGGGS to Professor Wolfgang Bleck, director of the Institute of Ferrous Metallurgy (IEHK), with whom she then published several articles resulting from European Respiratory Society

(ERS) and Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG) granted projects on the subjects of “Hot Rolled High Strength Steel” at the IEHK and TGGGS. Before her research stay in Aachen, she did her Master's with distinction in the U.K., “I now see academics not only in Germany but in Europe.” After six years of doctoral studies, she knows what an accomplishment a PhD is and a lot about writing proposals and gaining projects, which are very helpful for TGGGS and Thai research institutes. “Nothing to fear”, she summarizes when speaking about Germany to her Thai students at TGGGS. In Thailand she is appreciated in the academic field not only by students, lecturers and other scientists, but also by the industry because of her experience abroad.

But at the beginning it was even difficult for her, especially to get along with her third language and the organization at her research department: Eight years ago in a mee-

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ting, just in her second week after her arrival in Germany, her first challenge was it to present herself in German in front of 40 people at the project colloquium. “What I did not expect was that everything would be in German, all the meetings, almost all lectures, proposals of my PhD project as well as the project colloquia of the project. So I was not able to follow along many contents for a long time. But then there is nothing to be scared of if you take this challenge to make it become a brilliant experience in the end.” So she took a few intensive German language courses, looked for a nice room to live in and started forming friendships with her colleagues as well. “That was everything I needed to survive at the beginning. After that I was able to professionally start my research on ‘Hot Rolled High Strength Steel.’” Having gained some impressions of the academic field, she points out Germany's collaborative model between university and industry. “Because of that special landscape, research in Germany is very interesting and also very systematic like Germans are by nature.” In contrast doing research in Thailand is more relaxing, the hierarchy among lectures and students is very level and additionally “Thailand is called ‘the land of smile!’ for a reason.

She now combines her experience in Germany with her Thai lecture style. For example she is giving a lecture course that she has already held in Germany as a PhD assistant, so there is nothing new to prepare. But still, for her next research stay abroad she will need to find a new budget. At the beginning she, herself, signed what she called a “permanent contract”, a seed funding by the Royal Thai Government under the cooperation between the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) and the Centre for Higher Education (CHE). “This is a very strong commitment to your home country at a time when you are a young researcher without any plans because it asks you to immediately come back to Thailand after graduation. They are investing in human resources. Like you are funded for five years, you have to work for Thailand for ten years. It is a great task if you do not know how your life will go.” And Piyada did not know for sure herself at that time.

She adjusted to the task with a personal compromise: she now writes a lot about travelling though she does not travel herself. Meanwhile, she has published a travel guide about Germany in Thai that should make it a lot of easier for her Thai readers as well as her students to learn about the tourist destination. She has even made research in Germany more attractive by emphasizing persuasive reasons like the direct German character and mentality, the structural working culture and the good work-life-balance. Moreover, she talks about how to do business with Germans as well which is what Thai students are interested in knowing. “So no phone calls during the meeting!” or “What is the dress code?”, “How do I introduce myself?” “When and how to shake other people's hand?”

ALUMNI IM PORTRAIT



In August 2013 she was asked to do a workshop about her knowledge of Germany by the “Deutsch Networking Center”, a center of knowledge informing about German networking, technology and education, which was organized by the CP ALL Public Company Limited, one of the most well-known company in Thailand and Panyapiwat Institute of Management (PIM). Apart from these ambassador activities Piyada is involved with a company that represents Deutsche Bahn in Thailand, the Meininger Hotel Hostel and Munich Tourism. She also joined the 1st German Thai Tourism Industry Event in November 2013 and met other companies such as Lufthansa and Air Berlin. Her next German advertising job will be a workshop “Prepare Yourself for (going to) Germany” at TGGGS for all students in order to introduce German life, working style and culture to them, especially in the context of DAAD-seed funds for enhancing a strong academic network with Germany together with the International Office of TGGGS.

Asked about her role as a woman in science who has attended international conferences in Europe, China and USA and has met “big bosses” of companies as well, she answered: “It works to my advantage, people within this context will remember me a lot easier than my male colleagues”. But in general, doing research as a woman is becoming more and more common in Thailand.

She was one of the six representatives research alumni from RWTH Aachen University who joined the Research Alumni Conference held by Alexander von Humboldt Foundation in late 2013. She is motivated to do research in Europe again. Her future plan is to submit a proposal for a new project at DFG and head to Germany again. She is taking advantage of what she has already learned at RWTH Aachen University. ■