On February 15-16, and as part of the activities to celebrate its 50th anniversary, the Faculty of Social Sciences (FSS) of Chiang Mai University (CMU) hosted the 2014 conference of the Asia Pacific Sociology Association (APSA), titled “Transforming Societies: Contestations and Convergences in Asia and the Pacific”. That the conference was hosted and co-organized by an institution with such a long and strong commitment towards the understanding of transformations in the region (and towards the “contestations” mentioned in the subtitle, in particular) was no mere coincidence.

The welcoming and opening remarks by representatives of organizers FSS and Chulalongkorn University (Bangkok) mentioned on the challenges implied in the study and understanding of the fundamental developments taking place in the region at present, while both the director of the Regional Centre for Social Sciences and Sustainable Development (RCSD) of CMU, Ajarn Chayan Vaddhanaphuti, and the President of APSA, Ms Ruchira Ganguly Scrase, elaborated on the need for a dynamic and comparative focus that goes beyond the framework of the nation-state and which looks at the local without losing sight of the global, in order to give account of the diversity of lived experiences and to help us discern whether socioeconomic change in the region is not benefiting “only a few”.

Indeed, while several of the keynotes and round tables addressed the theoretical problems involved in the production of a sociology which goes beyond the aporias of Western ethnocentrism, most of the presentations seemed to pay special attention to the realities on the ground, and apart from the “convergences” that APSA itself, as the only pan-Asian association of sociologists, represents, the emphasis was on the shadows of the rapid processes of economic development affecting societies in Asia and the Pacific, and on the diverse types of inequalities that these processes are producing – both within and among countries in the region. Jonathan Rigg’s (Durham University) Sunday keynote, “The Shadows of Success: Transformation and Marginalization in Southeast Asia” was in this sense paradigmatic.

The more than 50 panels organized dealt with issues as diverse as migration, climate change, urbanization, civil society, resource management, transnational marriage, or child trafficking, giving a comprehensive picture of the complexities of the present moment, while at the same time qualifying the triumphalist discourse consistently maintained by both governments and multinational donors. On the other hand, and in spite of the pan-Asian character of the association and the conference, a major concern during the conference was the analysis of Southeast Asian contexts – as shown by the keynotes by Kachin activist Daw Seng Raw Lahpai and by Jonathan Rigg, or by the various round tables that addressed site-specific issues concerning politics in Thailand or Malaysia.

In relation to this, several panels specifically addressed issues related to the borderlands between Southeast Asia and China, trying to grasp the rapid and unprecedented transformations populations in the area are going through. A number of presentations had as their object the “minority” groups in southwest China (particularly in Yunnan province) and mainland Southeast Asia. Many of these were delivered by members of the Research School of Ethnic Minority Studies at Yunnan University (Kunming), whose Director, Prof. He Ming, was present at the the conference with a paper on the Blang or Bulang in the panel “Media and Popular Culture”. Zhang Zhenwei, also from Yunnan University, provided with a glimpse to his research on the religious trans-border contacts of the Buddhist Achang in Dehong prefecture, in the panel on “Religious relations in multicultural societies”. The results presented by Long Xiaoyan, from the same institution, a study of the identity change among Tai Lue communities in Chiangkham district, Phayao province (Thailand), were part of a research project conducted by Chinese researchers in northern Thailand, and in which they have collaborated with specialists at CMU, in which signals what we trust will be a long and fruitful partnership.

The spectacular increase in the influence of the ever-growing Chinese economy in mainland Southeast Asia in the last few years has also become a matter of academic concern. While most presentations by Chinese researchers revolved around the changes brought about by modernization upon minority cultures in the region, the research carried out by Thai specialists adopts a much more critical position toward the effects of Chinese “soft power” in the area. In this sense, the panel “Variegated Dragon”, held on the first day of the conference, showed the results of a project funded by the Thailand Research Fund and conducted by several Thai researchers at CMU directed by Ajarn Yos Santasombat, on the effects of Chinese economic expansion in the northern areas of Thailand and Laos: Ajarn Pinkaew Laungaramsri offered a very informative depiction of Chinese private investment in northern Laos in the form of a large casino complex in Bokeo province, while Ajarn Aranya Siriporn focused on the internal conflict
A report on the APSA 2014 Conference

among Chinese communities in northern Thailand, caught up between old allegiances to the Kuomintang and to Taiwanese investment, and the new influence of the People’s Republic in the area. This research understands Chinese investment as an important but potentially disrupting phenomenon, which puts some of the populations affected at risk – in the case of northern Laos, the Lao peasants displaced to make room for the casino in the name of “development”.

Various panels addressed the issue of religiosity in the region, helping perpetuate the idea that religion and the realm of “the sacred” are fundamental identity markers for populations in the borderlands between China and Southeast Asia. The panel titled “Religion, Ethnicity and the Crisis of Modernity” included a presentation by Ajarn Amporn Jirattikorn (CMU) on Khuba Bunchum, a holy man dwelling in the borders of upper Mekong region, and the effects of his activities on previously non-Buddhist minorities; one by Wahyu Koncoro, a MA student at RCSD, on the activities of the Muslim group Tablighi Jama’at in the border areas between Burma-Myanmar and Thailand; two presentations dealing with religious dynamics among the Hmong, one by Ajarn Prasit Leepreecha (CMU), focused on the populations in northern Thailand and Laos, and the other by Jakob R. Hickman, from Brigham University, on the context of the Hmong diaspora; lastly, Wu Da, a Chinese scholar from the Yunnan University for the Nationalities, gave a presentation on cultural change among the Yi groups inhabiting Yunnan and Sichuan provinces of China.

The panels on ethnic identity also included some presentations dealing with our region: apart from the talk by Long Xiaoyan on the Lue in Phayao province, the panel “Ethnic Identity in Negotiation” included a presentation by Achariya Choowonglert (Naresuan University) on the White Tai in northern Vietnam, and another by Flora Bawi Nei Mawi (CMU) on the bride price among the Kachin in northeastern Burma-Myanmar, while on the panel “Shifting Ethnic Identity” Zha Lingfei presented a paper on the road in Yushichang; Ma Changwei, also from Yunnan University, with a study on the “Yekuzha” festival of the Akha in northern Thailand, and Prof. He Shaoying, from the Yunnan University for the Nationalities, with a study on the shifting identity of Kemu people, were not present but nevertheless their papers were to be found with others in the CD-ROM distributed by the organizers at the start of the gathering.

The reflections and closing remarks by Ajarn Chayan, Ms Ruchira and others put an end on Sunday afternoon to two short but intense days of conference, which included parallel sessions in Thai language, fascinating exhibitions, and film and documentary projections. Before the conclusion, it was announced that Amporn Jirattikorn would be taking the job of APSA President after the conference. In short, the conference was another organizational success for CMU and FSS. Regarding the area covered by the Thai-Yunnan project, the meeting was proof of the increasing number of Chinese researchers conducting research in upper mainland Southeast Asia, as well as of the attention and concern with which economic transformations in the border areas between China and Southeast Asia are being followed.