

**Asian CORE Workshop  
Interface, Negotiation, and Interaction  
in Southeast Asia, Part Two  
March 11, 2013**

**ABSTRACTS**

**SESSION 3**

***Riverine Interfaces and Social Formation in Maritime Southeast Asia***

Noboru Ishikawa

***The Power of Narratives: Changing Interfaces***

Stan BH Tan-Tangbau

From the story-teller to the listener/recorder to the audience/reader, narratives passthrough interfaces that make sense of what would have been just quotidian into something with analytical meaning, bringing the stories to a wider world. Between the story-teller and the listener/recorder, we can safely suggest that academic training, field-based activism, and sometimes natural talent in story-telling imbued in individuals served as codification algorithms to construct these interfaces, otherwise known as ethnographical moments. Packaged into printed texts or documentary visual media, ethnography serves as that immutable mobile interface to connect the “out-of-the-way” subjects with the world. From the ancient invention of inscription and recent (some would say aged!) innovation of capturing sounds and visuals from analog to digital formats, this latter layer of interface has been greatly transformed in present time. Perhaps ‘revolutionized’ is a more appropriate word. This proposed session at the workshop asks a few questions:

1. Can Changing Interfaces also have a similarly revolutionary effect on “ethnographical moments?”
2. Do Changing Interfaces more than address the questions of ethnography and writing identified by James Clifford and George Marcus more than 20 years ago?
3. Can Changing Interfaces completely reconfigure the roles of subject ethnographer- reader and therefore the matrix of knowledge subject-production dissemination-consumer?

We invite practitioners and believers of the Narratives method to submit Research Notes for discussion at this workshop.

## ***Melancholy of Tribal Frontier***

Masao Imamura

Today a narrative of a tribal frontier is largely retrospective and it evolves around the theme of closure with a deep undertone of melancholy. James Scott's *Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia* presents one such narrative. In it, the tribal frontier is not only a closed space; it stands for a bygone era and above all it represents political radicalism that has been lost. This story of radical freedom resonates well with the well-known historical narrative of the American West, which expresses profound longing for the lost frontier. Indeed such melancholy has been the underlying tone throughout the history of frontier studies from Frederick Turner to Richard White's *Middle Ground*. These narratives, however, have been criticized for resurrecting native Americans as "serviceable ghosts" and reburying them retrospectively. The frontier historiography revives the dead tribes, restores their honor and dignity, and then reburies them. Our incessant consumptions of these narrations are a sign of melancholia, which consists of the cycle of facing and overcoming the guilt. Perhaps more than any other text, *The Art of Not Being Governed* reveals to us how melancholically we narrate the human history, what radicalism we endeavor to rescue from the past, and how we want tribal peoples to stand for such radicalism.

## ***Craving, Crafting and Contrasting: Memories of Home Place in Northern Burma***

Wen-Chin Chang

In this paper by using both written and oral narratives provided by a key informant, Zhang *dage* (Senior Brother Zhang), a second-generation-Yunnanese migrant born in northern Shan State of Burma, later migrating to Thailand and then Taiwan, I attempt to look into the theme of home place in diaspora. Centering on its meaning, I dig into various layers of Zhang *dage*'s emotion tied to different localities, people and time. The quoted narratives move from evident and coherent constructs of home-sweet-home images in connection with the joy of simplicity to an embedded and contrasting memory of danger and cruelty intertwining with the local politics in rural Shan State. The multiple aspects revealed in Zhang *dage*'s narrations not only show his divergent facets

of subjectivities as a diasporan but also the complexity of the local history in relation to an ethnically divided nation-state.

***Practices of Multiculturalism: an Ethno-biography of Cam Trong a Thái Cultural Politician in Vietnam***

Yukti Mukdawijitra

Vietnam promotes multiculturalism since the beginning of the post-colonial period. Nowadays, although socialism is distilling, multiculturalism remains a crucial concern of the Vietnamese state. Drawn from my ethnographic and historical research in Vietnam since 1998, with particular intensive field research during 2002-2005, when I worked closely under the guidance of Cam Trong, this essay presents Professor Cam Trong's work and life (1930-2007) as none governmental practices of multiculturalism. Cam Trong is a Thái person with Vietnamese nationality. The Thái, comprising of approximately one and a half million people, is ranked the second largest ethnic minority group of Vietnam. They are the majority population of northwestern Vietnam. In addition to the Tày and the Chinese, the Thái are one of the most powerful ethnic groups in Vietnam. I argue that Cam Trong is an ethnic actor who successfully negotiate to turn his disadvantage political subjectivation to become a base for re-subjectivate his identity and his ethnic fellows. Cam Trong himself is a site of connectivity demonstrating an "interactive pluralism" strategy where ethnic and national subjectivations intermingle.