

Will the Mekong Survive Globalization?

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The Mystery of the Mekong River

During the cool and dry season of 2001, I sailed down the Mekong River on a 200-kilometer journey beginning in southern China, passing through Burmese and Lao territory on my right and left – a designated economic quadrangle “which has not yet succeeded in becoming a hub of economic activities” – eventually reaching the Golden Triangle in Chiang Saen district of Chiang Rai province, Thailand.

The journey began with a flight from Bangkok to Kunming and on to Yunnan’s Chiang Rung (Jinghong), the “city of dawn” (not “rainbow city” as many Thais have it). There, at Sipsongpanna (Xixuangbanna), home of the Tai ethnies – Tai without the “h” of the nationalistic Thai – we encountered Tai and Tai Lue people who were becoming somewhat Sinicized. The next day, we boarded a bus at three a.m. and one hour later were riding uphill through the mountains to the border of the Chinese Empire. Fog was so thick that the road was invisible, sparing us the fright of watching the cliff that dropped off beside us! An 11-hour ferry ride still lay ahead before we reached Chiang Saen at 8 p.m. I must confess this to be one of the most memorable journeys of my life.

In the past few years, the Mekong River has become a very popular academic seminar topic. Both western and Japanese researchers flock to university meetings in Chiang Mai, Khon Kaen, and Ubon, and at Chulalongkorn and Thammasat universities, scrambling in a search of competent counterparts to join in multi-million baht research projects.

This climate of excitement led me to peruse many books on the Mekong before I began my own exploratory voyage from Chiang Rung to Chiang Saen. One that caught my attention was “The Mekong River Handbook” (in Thai), published by the Office of the Supreme Command of the Armed Forces of Thailand in 1973. Probably written under the guidance of American intelligence, which was actively fighting the “thirty years war” in Indochina, the book originated in the context of Cold War security concerns and was classified “for official use only.” It contains pictures and information about Thai provinces along the river as well as rare information about the other bank in Laos. Because it was published prior to Thailand’s tumultuous revolt of October 14, 1973, and before the US was defeated in Indochina in 1975, the book’s greatest relevance was probably to the Thai military’s crackdown on Communists.

Interestingly, the opening chapter of the book refers to the Mekong as “mysterious.” Was the river deemed mysterious because its source was in Tibet, a high plateau at the top of the world but under the rule of Communist China? During the Cold War, matters relating to any subject behind the “bamboo curtain” tended to be shrouded in mystery, darkness, and fear.

The book concluded, partly in error, that there had never been an exploration that sought to map the river completely.

Prior to American hegemony, this area was under the influence of the Chinese, the French, and the British. To them, the river would not have been “mysterious.” It might have been so for the Americans, however, and perhaps for their Thai ally, both of whom who came to the area much later. When the United States followed the European path of imperialism, it went only so far as to colonize the periphery of Southeast Asia – the Philippines. The Mekong was still beyond America’s reach.

The same observation could be made of Siam. It is probable that those in the central region (Bangkok) knew very little about the Mekong area. To the central Thai, the Mekong was culturally and linguistically Lao. But the mighty Mekong did not seem so alien to those in the north and northeast such as in Lanna (Chiang Mai) and Lan Xang (Luang Phrabang and Wiangchan) or for those further south and east, such as the Khmer and Vietnamese.

New Information on the Mekong River

We can identify three special characteristics of the Mekong River: its size and length; its rich natural resources; and the ethnic diversity found along its banks.

Cartographically, one can see that the Mekong flows from the Tibetan high plateau north of Dali, a town near what was once the Nanchao Empire. (Incidentally, many Thais used to believe that Nanchao was an original Tai kingdom, supporting the idea that before Sukhothai-Ayutthaya-Bangkok, we must have come from southern China.)

According to old statistics, the Mekong River is 4,809 kilometers long, or the 12th longest river in the world. However, recent Chinese claims make it 100 kilometers longer. One of the latest findings, using remote-sensing technology, by Liu Shao Chuang of the Institute of Remote Sensing Application, in collaboration with the Chinese Academy of Science, has determined that the source of the Mekong (in common with the Yangtze River) is in the Jifu mountain range in Yushu Autonomous Region, 5,200 meters above sea level. Mr. Liu calculates that 2,198 kilometers of Mekong’s 4,909 kilometers is inside the Chinese border, where it is called the Lan Xang (Lancangjiang).

At any rate, the Mekong is clearly enormous and by far the longest river in Southeast Asia. It is an international river, flowing through the six nation-states of China, Burma, Laos, Thailand, Cambodia, and Vietnam. Its basin covers an area of 810,000 sq. km., or almost double the size of Thailand. This explains why the Mekong is a favorite of natural scientists and geographers, not to mention those fond of a well-known whisky that shares its name. (A Google search of the keyword “Mekong River” yields 83,000 listings.) Geographers say the

Songkhla Lake (Thalesap Songkhla) in Southern Thailand is in fact a child of the Mekong. Mud sediment from the Tibetan plateau swept down through Vietnam and crossed to the Gulf of Thailand to form a mud wall, creating the lovely lake of Songkhla. This is something only short of a miracle!

Turning to the second point – natural resources – we need only note the keenness of economists, capitalists, developers, and others touting “mega-projects” to register the Mekong’s richness. The Mekong river basin hosts rich forests along both banks, and in Laos gold ore is being mined. It is a home to rare aquatic and non-aquatic animals such as the giant catfish, the world’s largest freshwater fish, as well as the river dolphin. In this it is second only to the Amazon River. For its rich natural resources, the Mekong has attracted European “colonializers” in the past and American “globalizers” and their colleagues in the present.

The third characteristic of the Mekong is the ethnic diversity that makes it a “heaven” as well as a “haven” for anthropologists. With 100 million people along its banks – 200 million if one stretches the definition of a riverbank – an anthropologist can spend a whole life immersed in any number of traditional (or tribal) societies. Historians, naturalists, ecologists, and NGOs are also attracted by the Mekong as a subject of study, a target for aid and assistance, or a source of quick profits.

All three characteristics – the Mekong’s reach, resources, and people – explain why the Chinese government has expressed interest in developing the river after several historical attempts by France failed. China set up an office for the development of the Lan Xang (Lancangjiang)/Mekong River in 1994. In April 2000, an agreement of free passage along the river was signed by China, Laos, Burma, and Thailand. Ferry service was inaugurated two years ago, which prompted the blasting of many of the Mekong’s rapids that block the route. This development has led to conflict over the use of natural resources.

What’s in a Name?

Let us for a minute pretend that we are not government officials or academics but rural villagers. Now, the river to us would be a source of livelihood and we may not be aware that the very same river we use daily originates in Tibet and flows out to the sea in Vietnam.

Before the river was called the “Mekong” all the way from its source to its end, people in China called it the Lan Xang (Lancangjiang) River. In Tibet (if you consider Tibet a separate socio-political entity from China), the name was Dzachu, which means “River of Rocks.” I’m not sure if the term Lan Xang is broadly used. It may be an old name that eventually became the name of a kingdom in Laos – perhaps like York in England, which gave birth to New York in the United States.

In old Lao-Tai languages (not modern Thailand's Thai), the name "Nam Khong" (น้ำโขง) for the mighty Mekong is commonly used. It happens to be the name of the district called Chiang Khong (เชียงใหม่) in Chiang Rai province. Somehow the "h" in Khong disappeared, just as it did in the name of the whisky Mekong (เมมโโขง). Therefore, it is possible that the word Khong (น้ำโขง) is the oldest name for the river as far as the Lao-Tai are concerned.

We do not know the origin of the word "khong" or "kong," but when considering folk culture, one may liken its sound to that of "khe" (ai khe, ai khong), meaning some kind of crocodile. From the point of view of royal culture, however, the word "khong" suggests a creolized form of Ganga or Ganges, the holy river in India, known as Khongkha (คงคา) in Thai.

Once the Mekong enters Cambodia it becomes the "Tonle Thom," literally large river, and as it flows into Vietnam it acquires yet another name, "Gao Long" or nine dragons, giving Vietnam one of the world's most fertile deltas for rice cultivation. Despite all this diversity, there is but one spelling of the river's name in English.

Henri Mouhot and the Mekong "Craze" under French Colonialism

Any real traveler in the region cannot fail to have come across the name of Henri Mouhot, the French naturalist-cum-explorer, who between 1858 and 1861 obtained the support of the British to explore Siam, Laos, and Cambodia. This period was in the reign of King Mongkut, Rama IV, when Cambodia was a tributary state of Siam. (The Cambodians also sent tribute to the Vietnamese Emperor in Hue.)

Mouhot explored the central Mekong region – he was dubbed "the discoverer of Angkor" – and eventually came to Bangkok via Singapore (see his *Travel in Siam, Cambodia, and Laos* 1858-1860). Although Mouhot died at the age of 35, inspiring the phrase "see Angkor and die," the success of his explorations led to Angkor Wat and Angkor Thom being named "great wonders of the East" (the term "Southeast Asia" having yet to be coined). It also led to great interest in the region among the French, who eventually colonized Indochina. Coming late to the Far East as a colonial power, they took the southern part of present-day Vietnam only in 1862. France later convinced King Narodom (the great-grandfather of the present Cambodian king) to end his country's tributary status under Siam to become a French protectorate instead.

In this colonial milieu, France's unhidden agenda was to use the Mekong as a "backdoor" into China. In fact, the French and British differed little from their present-day counterparts – led now by American corporations – in their mission to expand markets for their industrial products. The huge Chinese population buying their goods is what they dreamt about. How much profit could be made if every Chinese person bought one pen, one pair of shoes, or one

hamburger?

In 1866, after colonizing Cambodia, Paris sent a full survey team up the Mekong to China. The British, who sought China's "backdoor" via the Irrawaddy, satirically tagged the French survey team *la monomanie du Mekong*, or crazy about the Mekong. The expedition was led by the famous naval commander Dudart de Lagree.

This French expedition was very important. Dudart de Lagree was himself the French representative in South Vietnam, had visited Angkor, and was quite familiar with the region. His expedition consisted of 10 French officers, including Francis Garnier. Garnier's name is known in Southeast Asian history as someone who was truly "mad" to defeat his British rivals. (He was later killed in Hanoi by Vietnamese nationalists.) Apart from militarists, botanists, and geologists, the expedition also included a photographer and the artist Louis Delaporte, who produced excellent photos and sketches during the trip.

The expedition set off from Saigon. It stopped to explore and photograph Angkor before passing through Vientiane, which had been abandoned and reclaimed by the jungle since the 1826 war against Siam. In Luang Phrabang the explorers were warmly welcomed by Laotian monarch King Chantharacha. Here they were warned not to proceed to China because of a looming peasant rebellion. But the warning did not stop them from continuing their trip up the river through the borderlands of Burma, Laos, and Siam, a region known today by the touristy name Golden Triangle. By the time the expedition reached southern China, Dudart de Lagree had died of illness. He was replaced by Garnier, who led the expedition to Dali where he ended its two-year journey.

All in all, the expedition from Saigon to Dali convinced the French that the plan to access China's "backdoor" via the Mekong was impossible. The difficulties of navigating the Mekong's rapids were immense, the distance of 3,000 kilometers too long. The plan was eventually dropped. Now we will see if the current scheme of China and Thailand to navigate the Mekong will be any more successful.

The Mekong for Navigation and Tourism

The Mekong can be roughly divided into three parts: the upper stretch, from the Tibetan headwaters to the Golden Triangle; the middle stretch, which runs through the flat terrain from Ubon province, Thailand, to Champasak, Laos; and the lower reaches, which begin where the Khone Falls plunge into Cambodia and end in the Vietnamese delta. The upper stretch of the river surveyed by the French expedition more than a century ago and revisited by us in December 2001 flows through steep gorges and is studded with rapids. We saw about 70 Chinese flat-bottom boats made of iron, mostly carrying pears and apples and cheap Chinese goods ready for "dumping" into Southeast Asian markets. It is an open question how

the smaller riparian countries – Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam, even Thailand – will fare from this ambitious navigation and trade in comparison with China.

Aside from trade, tourism seems to form the core economic plan of the Mekong countries. “Cultural” and “eco” are popular prefixes that make the industry sound friendly, and the countries involved anticipate quick money. However, I wonder how many tourists, especially those accustomed to the leisure-oriented style of mass tourism, would enjoy such a tough and highly adventurous trip. Our expedition in 2001 took five days. We spent about Bt 31,000 or US\$ 670 per person. And I’m not sure we’d want to do it again.

At the other extreme, we heard about a grand tour organized by Diethelm Travel under the nostalgic theme “Expedition Mekong: River of Dreams.” Travel is on the Shanghai-made Hoover Craft, notorious for its noise pollution. The 17-day trip covers 2,620 kilometers, from Jinghong (Chiang Rung) to Saigon – over half the entire length of the Mekong – at a cost of US\$ 4,700 (Bt 200,000). At the height of Thailand’s bubble economy in the early- and mid-1990s, a number of Thai businessmen invested heavily in Chiang Saen and Mae Sai. However, many shopping centers and other buildings erected then have been more or less abandoned since the bubble burst in 1997. Who still dreams Bt 200,000 river dreams?

Back in 2001, I brought back as a souvenir a Chinese poster advertising a Lancangjiang-Mekong River Youth Friendship Voyage on a three-storey flat-bottom boat. Chiang Rung, a major city in that area and a stop on the voyage itinerary, had in the old days selectively absorbed interesting outside influences. However, the charming traditional Tai houses there are now giving way to ugly concrete shophouses of urban Chinese style. Han Chinese culture is fast creeping into the city and replacing what was once a bastion of Tai civilization. Kids absorb the latest international fashions, not unlike kids in Bangkok’s Siam Square or Tokyo’s Shinjuku district.

A prime tourist attraction boasted by Chiang Rung are the traditional dances performed by beautiful local maidens. These dances were spectacularly “exotic” to my eyes – a kind of belly-dancing – not unlike a Hollywood farang performing a Thai dance in *The King and I*, the film banned in Thailand. I must be frank, however. A variation of these spectacular events is already offered in Thailand by our own tourism industry.

The Mekong in the Era of Dam Building and Rapids Blasting

A growing number of academics and NGOs are convinced that conflict over natural resources is one of the most serious problems facing the world. Technology and political power allow some to gain advantage over others in accessing those resources. At one time, Cold War fears of Communism gave the United States the opportunity to become a superpower in this region, replacing French and British imperialists. Development plans on the Mekong River were

created in the name of poverty reduction with a simultaneous agenda of eradicating the influence of China and the USSR.

More recently, global “development” giants – the World Bank, International Monetary Fund, and Asian Development Bank – have poured some US\$ 40 billion in loans into infrastructure projects such as roads, dams, and power plants in the Mekong region. However, several separate researches and studies undertaken by state agencies and independent organizations confirm the negative social and environmental consequences of these projects, especially the hydro-dams. Communities which depend on the fertility of the Mekong and its tributaries have suffered due to the diminishing bio-diversity of food plants and fish stocks.

Currently, the Mekong is facing two major threats: the blasting away of river rapids for ease of navigation and the construction of massive dams on the Mekong in China. To state planners and project developers, the ongoing “development” is for the well-being of the people in the region (and perhaps also their pockets), but to NGOs and those seeking smaller and more sustainable alternatives, these mega-infrastructure projects mean “damage,” “destruction,” even the “rape” of nature.

In 2000, four Mekong riparian countries – China, Thailand, Laos, and Burma – signed an agreement liberalizing navigation on the Mekong River from Si Mou in China to Luang Phrabang in Laos. Between the Burma-China border demarcation point and Huay Sai in Laos, however, more than 100 rapids were identified as “dangerous” for navigation. The current plan is to eliminate them. But will the economic benefit gained be equal in value to the massive loss in ecology and biodiversity? These rapids are home to hundreds of fish varieties and bird species. Almost all riparian Mekong communities survive by small-scale fishing. The elimination of the rapids may result in changes in the river current and soil erosion. Border lines between Thailand and Laos may even change.

If the rapids are not blasted, would it still be possible for boats to travel up and down the river? The answer is “yes,” if the type and size of boat is matched to river conditions. It is possible for 80-100 ton boats to navigate from China to Chiang Saen and Chiang Khong in Thailand. To reach Luang Phrabang the boats should be reduced to 60 tons. Moreover, roads currently under construction can connect Thailand to Laos and Yunnan as an alternative route. Would such a transport scheme be as “competitive” as a smooth-running, rapids-free Mekong? Probably not, but a narrow calculation of economic costs is not an honest calculation. The alternative approach seeks to factor ecological and economic diversity and sustainability into the equation.

The origin of China’s hydroelectric dam projects on the Mekong lie in the policy shift toward capitalism since the era of Deng Xiao Ping. The first mainstream dam, Man Wan, was

completed in 1993. For the 1,500 megawatts of electricity produced by Man Wan, some 25,000 people in ninety-six communities were resettled with no right to debate or dissent. Since the completion of the dam, fishing communities downstream have reported reduced catches. It is the reality of current Chinese politics that none of the concerned communities have the right to participate in decisions made about their future lives and livelihoods.

The third of the ten dams planned, Xiao Wan, is now under construction. Estimated to be as high as a 100-storey building, it is scheduled for completion in 2012. This dam will surely have an effect on the middle 800 kilometers of the Mekong, which flow through the flat Thai-Lao borderlands, and the lower reaches, where the river first forms a delta in Phnom Penh, although it is not yet close to the sea, and in Vietnam, where the vast delta feeds almost the entire population of the southern region of this once war-torn country. What will happen to the water level of the Mekong in the next decade from Chiang Rai to Khong Chiam (Ubon)? In Champasak in southern Laos? In Phnom Penh's delta and Vietnam's rice land?

The ultimate question is this – is China destroying the Mekong in the same manner it destroyed the Yangtze River, or Europe destroyed the Danube, or the US destroyed the Mississippi? Moreover, as the Mekong is an international river cutting through six countries, has China consulted the countries downstream before building its dams? The answer is “No.” China seems too mighty to seek consultation with smaller countries. (Or could it be that governments of these countries have been “co-opted” by the Chinese leaders?)

The Mekong in the current era of globalization is facing conflict over natural resources and water. These conflicts may not be as acute as the war for oil we have recently witnessed, but they are like cancers slowly eating into the bones of underprivileged people in the small riparian countries. The new world emerging features not only the United States as global supercop, but China as our neighborhood superpower. And China's power is likely to spread to mainland Southeast Asia through the Mekong River.

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