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BOOK REVIEW

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Chris S. Sneddon

Department of Geography, Dartmouth College, Hanover, NH, USA; cssneddon@dartmouth.edu

One of the more inspiring occurrences over the past 25 years has been the efflorescence of scholarly work on the Mekong River basin, ranging from multiple monographs on its biophysical dynamics and astonishing fish production to the profound alterations its societies and ecosystems face due to anthropogenic processes such as hydropower development, deforestation, agro-industrialisation and global warming. As someone who has followed and engaged in Mekong-based knowledge production over this same period, it has been on the one hand gratifying to see the outpouring of rigorous work documenting the river system's fluvial geomorphology, the productivity and diversity of its fish populations, and the varied and important ways the livelihoods of the basin's primarily rural residents are linked to and sustained by the river's flows. On the other hand, it has been bittersweet to see this knowledge produced in the face of the burgeoning, intertwined environmental and socio-political crises confronting the basin and its peoples. As a series of large hydroelectric dams are constructed on the river's main channel and on multiple tributaries, and as institutional arrangements for promoting cooperative and sustainable transnational development initiatives falter or are re-imagined, the generation of empirically grounded, conceptually innovative, and politically attuned research on water governance in the Mekong region is more crucial than ever.

Fortunately, *Water Governance Dynamics in the Mekong Region* edited by David J. H. Blake and Lisa Robins fulfils this obligation admirably. Moreover, *Water Governance Dynamics* is the culmination of a five-volume series masterminded by the Thailand-based Mekong Program on Water Environment and Resilience (M-POWER) and published through SIRDC (the Strategic Information and Research Development Centre). Both organizations deserve praise for the tremendous contributions this series has made to our collective understanding of the multiple dynamics of Mekong governance and in particular how state-centred water governance in the region might be vastly improved through engagement with questions of democratization, human rights, multiple knowledge domains, and sustainable livelihoods. For readers not familiar with the entire series, I encourage a closer examination of all five books published over the past decade. The series is unique in its attention to the nuances of processes and conflicts in the Mekong basin centred around – albeit not exclusively – hydropower development and the challenges of finding pragmatic approaches to participatory water governance in the context of a biophysically, politically, and culturally complex region. Moreover, the series regularly features scholars – at various stages of their career – who are from or deeply familiar with Mekong societies.

The latest instalment, *Water Governance Dynamics*, is organized around a series of cases examining various aspects of how governance institutions – both formal and informal – at several spatial scales are responding to the rapidly shifting political and economic circumstances occurring throughout the Mekong. As narrated in the book's excellent introduction, "three major intertwined macro-level processes – renewed geopolitical contestation, globalization and economic regionalization" are prompting profound effects on the states, societies and ecologies of the region (Blake and Robins, 3). Water of course offers a cross-cutting theme of paramount importance as the nexus of transnational cooperation, state development initiatives, livelihood resilience, biophysical transformation, and wide-ranging social movements. The chapters themselves highlight the familiar geographical territories of the shared basin – China, Myanmar, Laos, Thailand, Cambodia, and Vietnam – across a range of critical issues, including irrigation development, China's deepening hydro-political influence in the region, questions of water justice, shifting national water policy frameworks, advocacy networks to oppose problematic development projects, and cross-scale water governance issues.

David Blake's analysis (Chapter 2) is built around a comparative case study of irrigation development in northeast Thailand and northern Cambodia, drawing on and extending the 'iron triangle' of interrelations and mutual benefits accruing to state water bureaucracies, politicians, and engineering firms – familiar to observers of water resource politics. Blake's innovation is to expand the triangle to include other powerful actors – such as international development banks and aid organizations in Cambodia and members of the military and monarchy in Thailand – and thus present a much more incisive portrait of how irrigation is intimately linked to (and often bolsters) the interests of elite groups in both countries, often to the detriment of biophysical and livelihood systems. I was struck by the aptness of Blake's focus on irrigation dynamics as a lens to unearth power relations in water development; for too long, a majority of literature on irrigation has been largely managerial and technocratic, and this crucial dimension of water-society relations, while perhaps not as 'sexy' as hydropower conflicts, is long overdue for critical attention.

Running throughout the book is a keen awareness of how to situate what are sometimes universalized conceptions of justice within very specific political, cultural and environmental contexts, and the segments by Carl Middleton and Ashley Pritchard (Chapter 3) and by Maureen Harris (Chapter 4) offer insightful examples of this tack. Using the construction of Xayaburi Dam on the Mekong River main channel within the national territory of Laos, Middleton and Pritchard clarify how opponents of the dam have pursued "multiple arenas of water justice" within the context of political and legal frameworks residing across several spatial scales (e.g. international river basin agreements, standards for foreign direct investment, the Thai legal system) to at the very least slow down the project's progression. The authors aptly expand the purview of work on transboundary struggles over water by highlighting the efficacy of anti-dam arguments built on human rights-based approaches (HRBAs) in general and the extraterritorial obligations (ETOs) that riparian states may extend towards one another in particular. They also offer an outstanding and comprehensive set of details on the conflict surrounding the Xayaburi project and the possibility it will stand as a seminal precedent in the water justice movement.

Harris' chapter on the Lower Sesan 2 Dam (sited on the river of the same name and developed mainly via a large Chinese state-owned utility) in Cambodia is similarly robust in thinking about the importance of legal-political institutions and questions of justice in explaining how water conflicts evolve. A main point of the chapter is that Cambodia's legal regime is (unsurprisingly perhaps) inadequate to deal with questions of water justice when, as in the case of Sesan 2, the economic benefits and socioecological costs of water resource development projects are so unevenly distributed across different sectors of a society. This is a depressingly familiar story, but what sets Harris' analysis apart is the exhaustive focus on legal instruments – both at national (e.g., Cambodian fishing laws) and international (e.g., the Chinese government's foreign investment standards) levels – that might in theory be used to question the Sesan development on the grounds of its likely environmental impacts,

its dubious social and environmental assessments, and its inattentiveness to compensation for dam-affected communities. Both Chapter 3 and 4 see some hope in the capacity of a normative framework built around international justice and human rights standards for mitigating some of the more egregious decision-making and impacts surrounding hydropower development, but are duly sober about the political will of the region's governments to apply and respond to invocations of these standards.

The volume's next three chapters focus much-needed attention on water governance and politics in Myanmar as part of more general patterns and development practices in the Mekong region. In Chapter 5, Pichamon Yeophantong zeroes in on China's efforts at 'dam diplomacy' in Myanmar. This is a fascinating examination of how actors in China's hydropower industry, in constant search for foreign investment opportunities, often underestimate the complications that might arise from local socio-political dynamics. Building her argument around the controversial Myitsone Dam – proposed for the Irrawaddy River just below its confluence with two major tributaries – Pichamon identifies three crucial factors (termed 'game changers') that contributed to the eventual decision by the China Power Investment Corporation (CPIC) to pull out of the US\$3.6 billion project. These factors – resistance within Myanmar from a coalition of communities and NGOs, emerging interest within China to promote more socio-ecologically sustainable foreign investment practices with infrastructure, and the Chinese government's increasing desire to be a 'good neighbour' in terms of regional development initiatives – combined to lead to the rather remarkable suspension of the dam, and sheds new light on the vicissitudes of Chinese foreign investment in hydropower, which is too often portrayed in overly simplistic terms.

Zhu Xianghui, Tira Foran and David Fullbrook (Chapter 6) also employ the case of the Myitsone Dam, but in this instance to highlight how effective resistance to the dam was painstakingly assembled through strategic coalition-building among Kachin-based political and environmental organizations (Kachin are the majority ethnic group in the region of the dam's proposed construction) and to some extent sympathetic transnational environmental networks. As in the previous chapter, the history of the Myitsone conflict is developed through highly detailed empirical information – gleaned primarily through interviews and policy documents. One of the chapter's key contributions is its analysis of how Myanmar-based knowledge brokers such as the Biodiversity and Nature Conservation Association (BANCA) leveraged their growing legitimacy within national political culture to insert critical assessments of the dam's likely social and environmental impacts into the hydropower planning process. Perhaps most remarkably, the Myitsone case offers an instructive example of how questionable hydropower development in the Mekong region – even if backed by powerful state and corporate interests – is not a *fait accompli*; such projects can be effectively stalled and cancelled given multi-scalar coalitions of opponents who are able to 'read' and influence political dynamics in astute fashion.

Although at a smaller scale than the Myitsone Dam, the Ka Lone Htar project envisioned as part of the Dawei Special Economic Zone in southern Myanmar (Chapter 7) offers an equally compelling case study and, as highlighted by Zaw Aung and Carl Middleton, advances several key conceptual and pragmatic insights. Significantly, the authors use the case to synthesize insights from social movements theory and David Harvey's Marx-inspired accumulation by dispossession in the service of explaining the struggle against the water storage dam led by members of the Ka Lone Htar community. They emphasize, on one hand, the extra-economic efforts of the Special Economic Zone promoters (made up of government officials and foreign and domestic investors) to employ ostensibly beneficial development initiatives to effectively displace local economic actors who are already quite successfully negotiating national and global market relations. On the other hand, they demonstrate how successful social movements – at the time of publication the dam had been suspended – hinge crucially on effective local leadership, community solidarity, and linkages to regional and global networks, especially

when political circumstances shift rapidly, as in the case of Myanmar, to afford more productive avenues of political advocacy.

In Chapter 8, readers are turned towards Cambodia's waterscapes via Borin Un's instructive case of 'fishing-farming' communities around the Tonle Sap wetland system and their capacities to navigate national-level fisheries reforms in the context of a changing set of environmental conditions. Un's central contribution is a meticulous examination of the on-the-ground consequences of the somewhat heralded yet problematic fisheries reforms in Cambodia that, initiated in 2000 and subsequently re-worked several times over the past 15 years, provided increasing official recognition of community fisheries (CF) governance institutions and management regimes. These reforms are intended to provide greater degrees of freedom to communities throughout the country, but especially in the incredibly productive Tonle Sap system, to manage small-scale fisheries in a more democratic and sustainable fashion. Yet the community fisheries initiative has largely failed to achieve its goals, and has instead served as institutional cover for increasing levels of illegal fishing and chaotic management regimes. Frustrated rural residents have turned to migration as a viable livelihood strategy, and Un argues that that fisheries reforms in Cambodia have been largely counter-productive.

The final two chapters (9 and 10) engage Vietnam and the Mekong Delta and the efforts at local, provincial and national levels to govern and mitigate the rapidly changing hydrologic, ecological and social conditions of this vital region. Tien L. T. Du and her co-authors productively engage concepts such as adaptive change and multi-level social learning to examine the shifting institutional and organizational settings for water governance in Vietnam. They highlight the rise of river basin organizations (RBOs) in the country and offer an incisive description of the numerous state and non-state actors that have contributed to, unfortunately, a quite fragmented approach to water governance. The focus on the roles that civil society organizations (CSOs) have assumed in relation to water management activities is particularly enlightening, demonstrating the need for more research focused on informal institutions and cultural values vis-à-vis their influence on water management and decision making. Nguyen Van Kien, Daniel Dumaresq and Charles Howie concentrate squarely on the adaptations of farmers and fisherfolk to the changing hydrologic regime in An Giang province, a critical area of the Mekong Delta that has experienced rapid and often unexpected socioecological alterations in recent years. This case offers an excellent example of how changing environmental conditions (in this instance, the timing of floods) spur a technological response (the imposition of high dikes to control said flooding) that in turn initiates social changes: increased administration of water distribution reflecting a common-pool resource (CPR) management approach. Based on research in several villages in the province, this research not only showcases the analytical strength of a comparative case study approach, it offers a fascinating glimpse of how localized water management regimes – far from being static – must constantly navigate broader-scale changes in biophysical and political-economic conditions.

In sum, *Water Governance Dynamics in the Mekong Region* (and indeed the entire M-POWER series) should be required readings for students, scholars, development practitioners, and (optimistically) policy makers interested in the past, present and future of regional development trends in this vital and engaging part of the world. It may be challenging for interested readers in some locales to find, but will be well worth the effort to track down. The book is important at other levels as well. By including authors who represent a wide swathe of academics and public intellectuals, the book spotlights an emerging generation of scholars from the Mekong region who are pioneering critical analyses of environment and development problems. Although I have focused on the book's content throughout this review, I would be remiss if I did not mention the excellent illustrations, maps and photographs peppered throughout the volume. These are never obtrusive and do a fine job of complementing and illuminating the various narratives. In the interest of not being exclusively positive in my praise of the book, chapters do suffer at times from blind spots when it comes to discussion of the political dynamics and power relations inherent to state-sponsored water governance in the Mekong region. These power

dynamics – manifest in the recalcitrance of most state actors at national and transnational scales to adopt more participatory decision-making around water governance – are arguably the most important factor in explaining the gap between official rhetoric on sustainable development and the all-too-familiar realities of livelihoods and ecosystems confronting a series of deteriorating biophysical and social circumstances. That said, I put down the book feeling a cautious sense of optimism given the ever-increasing number of thoughtful and critical scholars and practitioners that are adding to our understanding of Mekong dynamics in tangible and thought-provoking ways.

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