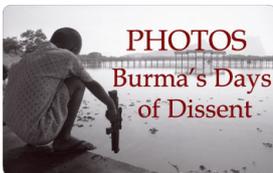


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An Unfinished Story

Far from an ordinary river, the Mekong is rich with convoluted memories of conflicts past, rich with multiple identities and increasingly these days, also a cross-border route promising to deliver 'progress' and 'development' to riparian countries. **Lia Sciortino*** follows the unfinished story of the Mekong region.

BANGKOK - Recent headlines broke the news of the maiden journey of two oil tankers up the Mekong River from Chiang Rai, Thailand to Jinghong in Southern Yunnan, China. This "trial launch of China's oil shipping programme with its South-east Asian partners" took many by surprise, drawing wonder as well as alarm. What is happening with the mighty Mekong? Have its unpredictable waters been 'domesticated' in order to serve the economic interests of the collaborating riparian countries? Is this unprecedented expression of transnational unity going to benefit the people who live along or near the river? How it will affect the river's fragile ecosystem? Can we praise it as a sign of 'progress' and 'development', or should we look at it as the start of a series of deleterious consequences?

That the Mekong draws strong emotions and opinions is not surprising, because it is far from an ordinary river. One of the world's major rivers, the Mekong embodies the spirit of mainland South-east Asia. Flowing down from the mountains of Tibet, through an estimated 4,200 kilometres, its waters bind six countries together -- China, Myanmar, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam -- before splintering into branches and weaving its way to reach the South China Sea through the Mekong Delta.

From time immemorial, its magnificence has inspired respect and awe. Generations of men and women have found food, entertainment, and refreshment in its waters, but have also been exposed to the capriciousness of its floods and droughts. Poets and musicians have sung praises to its sacred meanings, and painters have captured the colours of the sun thrown up by its waters. Explorers have been surprised by the river's extreme seasonal variations and the strength of its rapids and waterfalls, which make navigation an arduous task. Scientists have raved over its rich environment that nurtures a diverse array of flora and fauna, while stressing the importance of protecting its fisheries as a source of livelihood for millions of people.

And as if the multitude of fish species in the river, including the majestic Giant Mekong Catfish, was by itself not impressive enough, mythical creatures are believed to live in the Mekong's depths as well. Once a year, thousands gather on the Mekong's banks on the Lao-Thai border to see reddish-pink fireballs, spat out by the Mekong dragons, burst out from the water's depths into the air. No wonder, then, that in these modern days, the name 'Mekong' in popular culture is associated with vigour and power - indeed, a well-liked whiskey made of rice bears the river's name in order to appeal to a male-dominated constituency.

Flowing through the heart of South-east Asia, the Mekong's currents carry with them convoluted memories.

It was centuries ago that countless tribe relocations-- across and through the Mekong, in the then borderless territories stretching from India to Chinastarted to shape today's cultural mosaic of multiple identities. Ancient kingdoms tried to conquer each other on the Mekong's banks -- before the 'discovery' of the river and surrounding lands by European explorers, adventurers and missionaries confronted the Mekong with the ambitions of colonial powers, eager to establish economic domains and commercial routes. Around this main waterway, the French launched their empire-building project to unify present-day Laos, Vietnam and Cambodia into French Indochina, one that was later challenged by upcoming nationalist movements inspired by a shared Marxist-Leninist ideology.

World War II and the Cold War saw the Mekong become the epicentre of decades-long international wars and internal conflicts that would leave indelible marks on the region's people and countries - from the physical and psychological scars and disabilities among the survivors to the vast tracts of land made unusable by landmines, and the spraying of napalm and other defoliants.

Only in the eighties could the region experience relative stability. The flux of the Mekong's currents whisper tales of how, at the threshold of the new millennium, Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam had to scramble to catch up with more developed economies in the region and beyond. These tales recount the countries' strenuous efforts to break out of isolation and become part of the global order so as to challenge the direness of their situation. Inspired also by the changes in China, they gradually began to shift from a centrally planned economy into a market-oriented one, struggling greatly to reconcile a socialist ideology with a capitalist approach.

As history progresses, a new story is unfolding. It is one of development, in which the six riparian countries join hands to promote economic growth and alleviate poverty under the encouragement of the Asian Development Bank and other international donors. The model of regional integration that has been launched prioritises the construction of large-scale telecommunication and transportation infrastructure to facilitate the movement of goods and investments, and maximise the use of natural resources. There are initiatives to construct trans-border hydropower plants, to increase the navigability of the Mekong, and to build new highways and new ports. Through these and other profound transformations, it is envisioned that the estimated 30 percent of the region's 310 million population still living below the poverty line, and many more surviving at subsistence level, will eventually be lifted out of poverty and enjoy a better quality of life.

Again, events centre on the Mekong River. The emerging economic area has been named 'Greater Mekong Sub-region' in reference to its comprising the Mekong watersheds and the riparian countries (Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand, Vietnam and the two Chinese provinces of Yunnan and very recently, Guangxi). But, even more poignantly, the Mekong's waters provide a test case of how development is unfolding: Will it result in degradation and loss of cultural and natural resources with scarce attention for vulnerable populations, as many fear? Or will it indeed maximise the potential of those resources for the benefit of the entire region and people in an environmentally and socially sound manner, as the planners argue it will?

As the countries bound by the river take up the joint challenge of spurring regional economic growth, the future of the Mekong River is more than ever linked to the future of the region. Many wonder how the cooperating states will balance economic considerations with socio-cultural and environmental concerns in order to capture the benefits, and avoid or ameliorate the negative impacts of regional development. As Filipino historian Maria Serena Diokno wondered aloud in a

recent publication entitled 'The Mekong Arranged and Rearranged', can "treating the Mekong as an entity make a difference to the socio-economic life of the region and its member countries and bring about the much desired change and prosperity?"

This still unfinished story of regional integration is the focus of the articles in this column series. Akin to the currents of the Mekong River, 'Mekong Currents' will flow from one topic to another, reporting on and analysing the flow of events, issues and the different streams of views, hopes and fears about the development process that today engulf the Greater Mekong Sub-region.

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