

BOOK REVIEWS

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***Bounding the Mekong: The Asian Development Bank, China, and Thailand.* By Jim Glassman.**
Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2010.
Pp. 208.

Jim Glassman has written a well researched book on the economic, political and socio-cultural integration of the Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS). Since the GMS entered into the realm of useful knowledge in 1992, a series of studies have been conducted in regards to the evolution of this subregion, most of which focus mainly on the success of cooperation among members of the GMS, the progress of its regionalization and how the GMS has slotted in so perfectly with the ongoing trend of globalization. The study by Glassman, however, represents a major departure from the available literatures on the Mekong subregion.

Glassman's objective is ambitious. He sets out to debunk the myth of the GMS as being calculatingly constructed by the Asian Development Bank (ADB). To the general understanding of many, the GMS is seen as another kind of representative of regionalization. In reality, unlike other regional organizations of the world, such as the European Union (EU) and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) which were born out of governments' initiatives that intended to bring institutional coherence to their trans-national processes, the GMS was arbitrarily

"manufactured" by numerous publications of one specific institution — the ADB — to which member countries owe the definition of the GMS.

Divided into seven chapters, the book begins with how to best approach the GMS. Glassman lays out an argument that includes recognition of the importance of institutions that regulate regionalization and discursive processes that produce the object of regulation and knowledge about it (p. 15). His argument is best explicated in Chapter 3, while the author deals with the manufacturing process of the GMS. Terms like "strengthening GMS cooperation for economic growth and mutual benefit" and "the river links six countries", according to Glassman, are misguided simply because they inaccurately portray the dynamics of the actual regionalization processes that are taking place in the GMS. Glassman boldly argues that rather than being based in complementarities and the spatial proximity of countries within the GMS, the GMS integration process is indeed driven by more global, but highly uneven, capitalist investment, production, and trade, leading less to the integration of the GMS per se than to the integration of GMS countries into a much larger East Asian regional system (itself embedded in broader global processes), albeit in quite differential — and differentially advantageous — ways (p. 37).

In other words, what has been the driving force behind the GMS is neither the comparative advantage nor naturally existing proximity as often claimed by the ADB, but rather competitive

profit seeking by different investors, inside and outside the subregion, who are in search of exploiting economic benefits, such as cheap labour and natural resources, offered by countries of the GMS. Thus, the notion of a win-win situation and mutual benefit gained from the cooperation through the GMS is at times illusory and fails to reflect the realities in the Mekong subregion. It also proffers false hope for poorer nations participating in the GMS of a certain degree of fairness. Glassman points out that while various opportunities are emerging for smaller players to play roles in regionalization, the opportunities are not necessarily equitable or win-win; and in some cases particular groups of less empowered actors may be seen as definite “losers” in the process (p. 63).

The author also critically discusses the politics inside the ADB, such as the struggle for hegemonic positions among key powers for control of the organization and the seemingly inequitable structure of the bank. The ADB has become less of a bank that assists development but more of a lending institution, thus continuing to maintain its dominant position in the GMS and keeping member countries dependent on outside donors. Glassman presents his case through a myriad of figures and tables, deconstructing what are believed to be contributing factors to GMS regionalization. The fact that GMS countries have traded more with those outside the subregion and that they have become a platform for investment by global capitalists, especially from East Asian countries, and not among members themselves, are testimony of an artificial step of regionalization within the GMS. Important projects like infrastructure development endorsed by the ADB can create increasingly uneven socio-spatial patterns of GMS development, as they tend to give considerable advantages for places like Bangkok and Kunming as sites of investment and accumulation, not really for the areas directly in the vicinity of the Mekong River (p. 59). As a result, they are likely to encourage further socio-spatial unevenness.

ADB’s constructed image of GMS integration — a natural political and economic space based on

the myth of homogeneity, geographic proximity, complementarity and comparative advantage — runs contrarily to other images which the ADB may wish to hide. Glassman works on two significant issues — resources and labour. Laos has a potential to turn itself into the “battery of Asia” due to its many hydropower projects, serving as an energy supplier for other countries in the GMS. But performing this role comes with a hefty price. While the Lao government may indeed become a major beneficiary of GMS integration, especially through hydropower projects, the prospects for broadly distributing the gains of these projects are limited. They generate winners and losers, not win-win development as the ADB likes to show to the world. Compensation, resettlement, and environmental issues have not yet been effectively dealt with (p. 148). Likewise, economic development in the Mekong subregion has brought about more illegal migrant workers, particularly from Myanmar into Thailand. The absence of serious discussion on workers and the labour process illustrates a fuller account of uneven regionalization emerged within the GMS.

This is an important book that effectively unmask the Mekong subregion, one that is normally beautifully packaged by the ADB. Glassman concludes in his final pages using an example of the recent clashes between Thailand and Cambodia — a conflict sporadically erupting even today — to confirm one reality. That is, the GMS might bring peace and prosperity to people in the subregion, but it might also engender conflicts that reflect the interests of some of the major actors pushing regionalization and globalization (p. 170). There are two sides of any development. In the case of the GMS, a well-choreographed integration does not reveal the whole truth about the nature of the Mekong subregion, and more importantly, the negative impact that comes with regionalization.

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