

***Impact of China's Rise on the Mekong Region.* Edited by Yos Santasombat. New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2015. Hardcover: 261pp.**

Since 2000, the countries in the Mekong River basin have received a new influx of migrants, traders, small and large scale investors, labourers and professionals from mainland China. In engaging with the Mekong states and societies, Chinese newcomers have contributed to producing significant social, environmental and economic change by establishing cash crop plantations, casino-centred special economic zones, markets and free trade areas, exploiting minerals and building modern infrastructures. *Impact of China's Rise on the Mekong Region*, edited by Yos Santasombat, is one of the few scholarly works to date that explores the nature of such change.

The book makes an important contribution to understanding these new Chinese–Southeast Asian engagements on numerous counts. First, the essays in the collection are written by Asian scholars — seven of whom are based in academic institutions in Mekong countries and three in Taiwan — and present Asian views in an academic debate about “China’s rise” otherwise dominated by American, European or Australian analysts. Second, with contributions from anthropologists, economists, sociologists and a political scientist, the collection takes a multidisciplinary approach to analysing a phenomenon that has mostly been addressed in isolation within disciplines. Third, the chapters provide a geographically variegated overview of changes in each of the Mekong countries focusing on the revival of China’s socio-economic and political relations with Vietnam (Chapter 2 by Nguyen Van Chinh), Laos (Chapter 3 by Bien Chiang and Jean Chih-yin Cheng, and Chapter 4 by Pinkaew Laungaramsri), Thailand (Chapter 5 by Aranya Siriphon), Myanmar (Chapter 6 by Khine Tun), and Cambodia (Chapter 7 by Touch Siphath). The new links between China and the other Mekong countries are explained not only in terms of intensified interactions between local state and non-state actors and old and new Chinese migrants, but also in relation to China’s internal processes of modernization, supposed political restructuring, economic growth and social engineering (Introduction by Yos), as well as China’s foreign geo-economic strategies within regional integration frameworks, such as the Greater Mekong Sub-region initiative and the ASEAN-Plus 1 agreement (Chapter 1 by Hsing-Chou Sung).

Yet, although intending to foreground “the complexity of the rapidly emerging Chinese presence” (Nguyen, p. 54) in the Mekong region, most of the authors do so more by relying on sets of figures and mere accounts of facts rather than drawing on ethnographically rich details or on a theoretically sound analysis, producing what I consider an oversimplified and ideologically biased depiction of the socio-economic and political reality under examination.

“Ethnographic thinness” characterizes, for instance, the chapter by Bien and Cheng, where, in discussing the changing Chinese ethnoscape in Laos (p. 85), little detail is provided on how the old and new Chinese communities are socially produced and reproduced, apart from a short description of the institutions that are the pivots of such reproduction. Even where there is some “ethnographic thickness”, this remains partial, as in the chapter by Pinkaew, where voice is given to the victims of the Chinese-established Golden Triangle Special Economic Zone (GTSEZ) in north-west Laos (p. 132) or to “greedy” Lao government officials (p. 127). We are not offered the perspectives of those who, belonging neither to the victim nor to the culprit category, have been able to creatively reinvent their livelihoods through the idiosyncratic process of Chinese modernization. During fieldwork I carried out in the GTSEZ in June 2015, I became close to a few residents of villages within the zone, who had independently created new lucrative income-earning opportunities by taking advantage of Chinese presence. This proved that, along with resistance, violence and exploitation, individual’s agency is also part of the Chinese production of change in the Mekong. It should therefore be taken into account if we are to provide a complex analysis of such change.

Theoretical shortcomings are manifest in the Introduction by Yos. In alignment with the other contributors’ view, particularly Pinkaew’s, Yos identifies the source of “China’s rise” in neoliberalism (p. 8), a fashionable, much used, abused and variously defined concept in the social sciences over the last decade to make sense of a wide range of contemporary phenomena. By pointing to the socio-economic asymmetries in the Mekong that seemingly result from granting large land concessions to Chinese investors, using bribery, coercion, and deception, both Yos (p. 8) and Pinkaew (p. 120) draw on David Harvey’s definition of neoliberalism. This is “a system of accumulation by dispossession”, dominated by free market logic and minimal state interference, whereby the élite redistributes wealth to its own advantage and at the expense of the poor (pp. 8–120). Yet, as both authors admit, such a framework

is inadequate to explain the Chinese case, because, in China, the market economy remains subject to centralized state control and authoritarian governance (p. 8). Still, they push the neoliberal idea through, giving it Chinese connotations. They espouse Aihwa Ong's (2007) view that in Asia, neoliberalism is a flexible technology of governing that authoritarian states deploy to forge self-actualizing and self-enterprising, educated subjects who can compete in global markets (pp. 10–121). Asian-style neoliberalism involves spaces of exception where normalized governing is suspended for selectively chosen groups of individuals. The GTSEZ is interpreted as a deterritorialized embodiment of the Chinese model of neoliberal spatial exception (p. 124).

In my forthcoming book on governing the China–Laos frontier, I argue that spatial exception is embedded in the history of China's Communist rule, as well as in pre-modern power relations between centres and margins in the Upper Mekong. In China, today's exceptional economic and governmental rule can be traced back to a pattern of “decentralized experimentation” undertaken by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) since the 1930s. This mode of governance refers to a process whereby local officials are encouraged to experiment with new policies. When efficacious, local experiments are integrated into national-level policies. Perpetuated today, this is a model of post-socialist, rather than neoliberal, governance that I call “experimentation under authority”. It is within this unpredictable “yet productive combination of decentralised experimentation with ad hoc central interference”¹ that I believe we should understand China's rise on the Mekong Region.

Note

1. Sebastian Heilmann, “From Local Experiments to National Policy: The Origins of China's Distinctive Policy Process”, *The China Journal* 59 (2008): 29.

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