

***Last Days of the Mighty Mekong.* By Brian Eyler. London, UK: Zed Books, 2019. Softcover: 365pp.**

Popularly described as the lifeblood that courses through mainland Southeast Asia, the Mekong River has constantly been under threat — whether from the forces of unbridled modernization, human encroachment or the increasingly visible effects of climate change. In addition to sustaining over 60 million people within the basin, the Mekong also serves to nourish a complex ecosystem that underpins the region’s unique biodiversity. Given the river’s centrality to Southeast Asia’s natural environment and socio-economic development, one might expect a flurry of cooperation between the riparian governments and other stakeholders to protect the river and its resources. And yet, the challenges which the Mekong now faces are ones that similarly bedevil other trans-boundary rivers: contending interests, power asymmetries and weak institutional governance.

Brian Eyler’s *Last Days of the Mighty Mekong* is a very welcome contribution to the ever-expanding literature on the Mekong River and the politics that surround its governance. Written in engaging and compelling prose, *Last Days* paints a dynamic picture of the lives, livelihoods and ecosystems that have become intimately intertwined with the river’s — at times, unnatural — ebbs and flows. Through thought-provoking anecdotes and quotes from prominent activists and Mekong experts, Eyler succeeds in weaving together a narrative that, while well-known to those working on the Mekong’s governance, is nevertheless steeped in interesting observations and an important insight: although the construction of hydropower dams is undoubtedly an, if not *the* most, exigent threat to the river, the personal choices of individuals and their consequences can also serve as critical variables that can “disrupt and potentially bring an end to the social and ecological nexus” (p. 19) undergirding the Mekong and the invaluable services it provides.

Indeed, one of the notable themes of *Last Days* is that of “connectivity” (p. 338), understood here not only as the hard infrastructure which Mekong governments and regional organizations like the Asian Development Bank are seeking to build, but also in terms of the environmental and sociocultural flows that intersect within the basin. Over the course of ten chapters, Eyler travels from the Tibetan village of Yubeng down to the Mekong Delta in Vietnam. Each chapter reveals a rich tapestry of historical,

cultural and political stories which have collectively influenced the Mekong's fate.

The first three chapters explore the social and environmental impacts that China's rapid pace of modernization has had on the upper reaches of the Mekong, as well as how these intersect with the transformations — albeit not necessarily positive ones — taking place within Chinese cities and among local communities. Chapter Four looks at the ways of living of the Akha people: how they negotiate between China and Southeast Asia, as well as between development and local traditions. Chapters Five through Seven examine, in turn, the localized effects of Chinese business interests in the Golden Triangle and lax governance in Laos, as well as the pursuit of hydropower development across the region.

Chapters Eight, Nine and Ten then delve into controversial cases that have headlined regional news reports in recent years: the Boeung Kak Lake project in Phnom Penh; the dual problems of overfishing and hydropower in Cambodia's Tonle Sap; and the challenge of developing sustainable agricultural practices in the Mekong Delta at a time when the region is faced with dams and saltwater intrusion. Taken together, these chapters reveal how local, national and regional processes converge and appear to be moving towards the prospect of an even more "developed" Mekong River. However, they also offer moments of hope through insights into how figures like Niwat Roykaew or "Khru Tee" (a Thai environmental activist and leader of the Rak Chiang Khong community preservation group) and other local communities have managed to remain steadfastly committed to finding solutions and ultimately "saving" the Mekong.

One aspect which could have benefitted from further investigation, particularly in the latter half of the book, is the role that Chinese civil society has been playing in raising awareness on the Mekong's plight. Although Eyler does try to maintain a balanced tone throughout the book, there are times when the contribution of Chinese river activists could have been acknowledged and discussed to better maintain this balance.

For those who are not too familiar with the situation of the Mekong, *Last Days* may prove to be an eye-opening read. The fact that Eyler does not focus exclusively on hydropower or the river itself, but also considers the local practices and tributary politics that define the river as both a cultural and natural resource, is intellectually meaningful. It is also helpful, as readers new to Mekong issues are provided with the necessary background

knowledge. For those working on the Mekong, Eyler's central message — how the Mekong is more than just a river and how its conservation needs to happen immediately — might not be an especially surprising or groundbreaking one; and indeed, much of the data and cases referred to in the book have been rather well-rehearsed by experts and extensively studied. Even so, *Last Days* remains a highly valuable contribution in its ability to vividly and eloquently demonstrate how the Mekong River's significance reaches far beyond its banks. This is a book that challenges the reader to reflect on what needs be done to safeguard the river at not only the level of governments, but also at the level of the individual.

PICHAMON YEOPHANTONG is an Australian Research Council Fellow and Senior Lecturer at the University of New South Wales at the Australian Defence Force Academy. Postal address: Northcott Drive, Campbell ACT 2612, Australia; email: p.yeophantong@adfa.edu.au.