

## Media Discourses of Mekong Dams: A Thematic Analysis

### Dyskursy medialne o zaporach na rzece Mekong: analiza tematyczna

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#### **Abstract**

Economic and political stability in Southeast Asia has led to a surge in Mekong dam development and construction in the 2010s. But, not only has the logistics of dam construction changed dramatically in the 35 years since Mekong hydroelectric development began; the public discourse surrounding hydroelectric development in the region has also expanded and diversified. The Mekong, while still seen by some throughout the region as a source of untapped economic opportunity, is also a source of growing concern for states who are losing control of the dams' ecological impact. Both of these visions of the river are framed in the public imagination of various states by their respective media's chosen depiction of the issue of dam development. Through an examination of the discourse surrounding Mekong hydro development in the four Mekong River Commission (MRC) states, this paper explores the divergent interests of states currently engaged in a complex water diplomacy. Themes drawn from the English-language press coverage in Laos, Thailand, Cambodia, and Vietnam are compared to determine how the unique geographic and economic positioning of each state shapes their media's depiction of Mekong dam development. Shared concerns about environmental damage, MRC weakness, and economic futures are also explored.

**Key words:** dams, discourse analysis, Mekong, Laos, Cambodia, Thailand, Vietnam

#### **Streszczenie**

Ekonomiczna i polityczna stabilizacja w południowo-wschodniej Azji doprowadziła po 2010 r. do podjęcia decyzji o budowie zapór na rzece Mekong. Od czasu, gdy 35 lat temu rozpoczął się rozwój energetyki wodnej na rzece Mekong wiele się zmieniło i to nie tylko od strony logistycznej, także dyskusja publiczna odnosząca się do przyszłości hydroenergetyki w regionie uległa rozszerzeniu. Rzeka nadal postrzegana jest przez wielu jako potencjalne źródło ekonomicznego wzrostu, zarazem jest przedmiotem rosnących obaw dla krajów, które wydają się nie być w stanie utrzymać pod kontrolą ekologicznych konsekwencji budowy zapór. Oba podejścia trafiają do obiegu publicznego w poszczególnych krajach dzięki doniesieniom medialnym. W niniejszym artykule dokonano przeglądu dyskursu wokół rozwoju hydroenergetyki na rzece Mekong w czterech krajach należących do Komisji ds. rzeki Mekong (Mekong River Commission. MRC), ukazano rozbieżności w preferencjach poszczególnych krajów, zaangażowanych w skomplikowaną dyplomację wodną. Porównano treści publikowane w anglojęzycznej w Laosie, w Tajlandii, Kambodży i Wietnamie, w celu ustalenia, w jaki sposób unikalne położenie geograficzne i gospodarcze każdego państwa kształtuje obraz ich mediów w kontekście budowy kolejnych zapór na rzece Mekong. Omówiono również wspólne obawy dotyczące szkód wyrządzonych środowisku naturalnemu, słabości komisji MRC i konsekwencji tego stanu dla przyszłości ekonomicznej regionu.

**Słowa kluczowe:** zapory, analiza dyskursu, Mekong, Laos, Kambodża, Tajlandia, Wietnam

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## Introduction

Long before there were borders and governments, the Mekong connected peoples along its banks in both ecology and livelihoods. The Mekong ties the history, economics, and futures of Laos, Cambodia, Thailand, and Vietnam, forcing regional cooperation or conflict. The river winds through the landscape of these modern nation-states, while discussion of this waterway's future winds its way through public discourse and local media. The river and its development has long served as a symbol of identity and economic promise, and in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, water diplomacy has become symbolic of the larger economic relationships in the region.

The construction of hydroelectric dams along a river that travels through multiple states both requires and implies regional stability and consultation. In many ways, the Mekong River, and discourses around it, have become emblematic of larger regional cooperation and conflict. Development and dam-construction mean that the river is seen as either an opportunity or an obstacle, depending on how much agency a state's government maintains in directing the flow of the river. Dams also result in environmental damage in both the country hosting the dam, and countries downstream. Indeed, while hydroelectric dams can potentially make a contribution to sustainable development, they are also associated with high environmental and social costs (Delang, 2011; Delang, 2013; Skudder, 2012) which make them particularly contentious. All these factors combine to shape the discourse surrounding dam development, resulting in some shared themes between regional English-language presses and some country-unique debates shaped by geography, economic situation, and energy needs.

While there are some early examples of Mekong dams dating from the 1970s and 1980s, the last decade has seen a significant increase in the number of new dam projects being developed, especially in Laos. The resulting coverage in the English-language presses of the four Mekong River Commission (MRC) countries (Laos, Thailand, Cambodia and Viet Nam) illuminate the values and concerns of their respective publics. Through discourse analysis, some overarching themes emerge, albeit to varying degrees in each country's press: uncertainty about the future of hydroelectricity; fear of environmental damage; mistrust of the MRC; and belief in the importance of water diplomacy. The degree to which states control dam development also plays a role in media coverage. By examining central themes in each press, and then comparing coverage between states, this paper demonstrates how geographic realities shape media coverage of massive public infrastructure projects. While some differences in discourse are due to political relations between the involved states, each country's press coverage and public discourse surrounding Mekong dam develop-

ment is most heavily dependent on its geographic and ecological location, as well as its position as a buyer or seller of hydroelectricity.

## Geography and History of Mekong Development

The Mekong River is born from the waters of China's Qinghai province, travelling over 2,700 miles through six countries. After moving through China, it forms the border between Myanmar (Burma) and Laos, and then Laos and Thailand, before cutting south through Cambodia and emptying out through Vietnam's fertile Mekong Delta region into the South China Sea. It remains the 10th largest river by volume. Over 80 million people throughout six countries in the region share the river and its tributaries, utilizing the Mekong for food, water, transport, electricity, and other daily activities. The river is also a collection of irreplaceable ecosystems, with a diversity of fish second only to the Amazon. China plays a major role in controlling dam development on the Mekong. Chinese dams are opened and closed at the will of the Chinese government, at times causing flooding that severely impacts agriculture in Thailand, Cambodia, and Vietnam. This power dynamic sours how Thailand, Cambodia, and Vietnam view Chinese investment in, and support of, regional dam development. Chinese funding is involved in nearly all dam projects in Laos and Cambodia, while more and more NGOs are conceding that Chinese interests are overwhelming the MRC (Harris, 2018a).

When discussing the construction of dams along the Mekong, scholars and policy-makers alike generally divide their analysis between dams on the Lancang, or Upper Mekong as it travels through the Yunnan province of China, and dams on the lower Mekong, constructed in Laos, Cambodia, and Thailand. Dams which are up river in China have had a major impact on the flow and volume of the Mekong downstream, and are thus of interest to all countries in the region. But for the countries of the lower Mekong river, regional cooperation and conflict stems from shared planning through the MRC.

The lower Mekong region, consisting of the watershed areas downstream of China and Myanmar, includes parts of Thailand and Vietnam and almost all of Laos and Cambodia. This region constitutes roughly 75% of the total catchment and contributes approximately 80% of the river's flow (Rothert, 1995), mostly in Laos. The population of the lower Mekong region is approximately 60 million, with nearly 40% of that population within 15 km of the water (MRC, 2018), and much of this population survives at a poverty level that, when faced with ecological damage to their livelihoods, cannot easily adapt.

Plans to develop the lower Mekong began in earnest in the 1950s. The United Nations, the US Department of the Interior, and private companies ran hy-

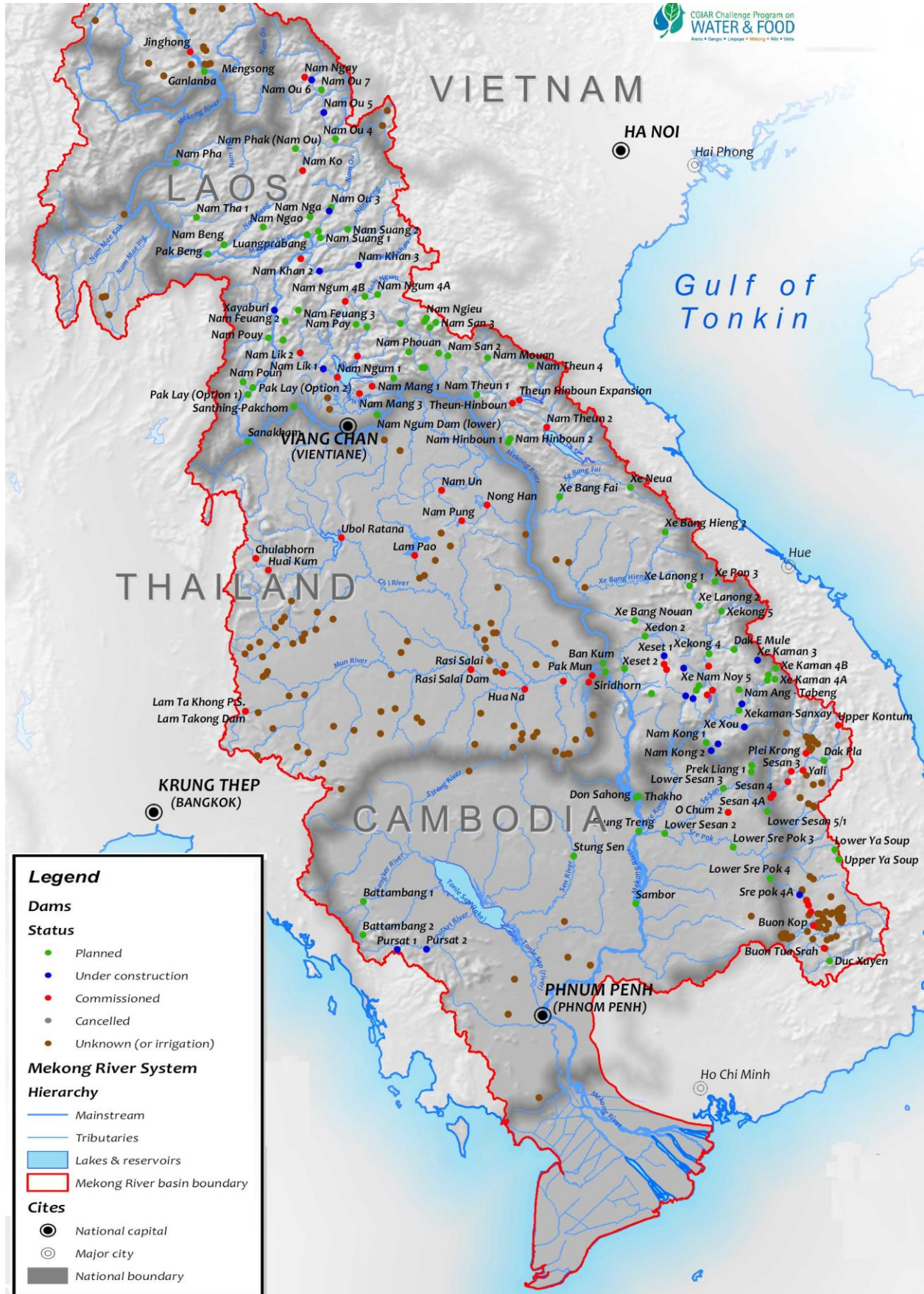


Figure 1. Mekong dams, planned, under construction, commissioned and cancelled Source: CGIAR Challenge Program on Water and Food (2013)

dro-development studies, focusing primarily on irrigation and agricultural development (Schaaf and Field, 1963). Using the Mekong to create seaport alternative for landlocked Laos was also considered (Chomchai, 1987).

An initial Mekong Commission was formed in 1957 between Cambodia, Thailand, Vietnam, and Laos, guided by the international community. The vast majority of its projects never came to fruition. The Indochina conflicts that dominated the region for decades largely stalled any development of the Mekong downstream other than those constructed in Thailand. In 1978, Thailand, Laos, and Vietnam agreed to form an Interim Mekong Commission without Khmer Rouge Cambodia.

In 1991, the Paris Peace Accords brought an end to regional conflicts between Cambodia and Vietnam, and global economic and political patronage relationships changed as the USSR disbanded. Vietnam joined ASEAN in 1995, Myanmar and Laos joined in 1997, and Cambodia joined in 1999<sup>1</sup>, heralding an era of regional cooperation not only on issues of security, but also in regards to environmental policy.

In 1995, the Mekong River Commission (MRC) reformed, including the four riparian states of Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam. The organization serves today as a scientific, economic, and social cooperative effort to ensure fair and environmentally-secure development of the river and its tributaries. China began sharing flood data and other information with the MRC in 2002, and acts as a *dialogue partner*, though the ability of the MRC to question or affect China's policies is negligible (Käkönen and Hirsch, 2009).

The mid-1990s also brought the growing importance of water diplomacy to the fore. Water diplomacy refers to the political negotiations and cooperative frameworks that result from the need to develop environmental policy, water management strategies, and engineering solutions to address water-resource problems. For riparian states that share a joint waterway, successful water diplomacy ensures minimized environmental damage and diminished impact on local livelihoods. Water diplomacy occurs at all levels, from the local level as the state negotiates with displaced citizens to the regional level as states condemn how flooding is caused downriver. Water diplomacy is a mentality that connects resource management with the political actions of state governments (Middleton Garcia & Foran, 2009).

The overall result of political shifts and new alliances in the 1990s was that major dam projects in the region that had been delayed for decades could be considered again, creating new opportunities for resource development and regional conflict or cooperation. The delay in development also means that

much of the rhetoric surrounding the Mekong focuses on its state as *pristine* and *natural* (Bakker, 1999, p. 211-214), a trend which is beginning to change.

In recent years, investment, both regional and from further afield, has funded dozens of projects with varying success, many of which have required international cooperation and the use of collaborative engineering and planning. Projects have included land and water transport networks as well as various forms of energy development, including hydroelectric generation and natural gas transportation (International Rivers, 2017). Individual state's development programs, as well as the rhetoric which surrounds each of them, are laid out in more detail. First, however, it is necessary to examine the discourse surrounding Mekong dam development from previous decades, before the most recent resurgence of dam construction.

### Previous Content Analysis of the Mekong River Basin Discourse

Traditionally, in *Southeast Asia*, water provided a bridge rather than a barrier between distant communities (Rigg, 1992, p. 1), and the river has become a cultural symbol of sharing and cooperation with other peoples in the mythoses of many of the riparian states. Many of the empires and peoples who lived in Southeast Asia existed independent of the territorial divisions created during the Indochina period of French colonization in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century. Previous to this, the river was a connection for these peoples rather than a boundary of territory. Unsurprisingly, most media coverage across the region in regards to dams recognizes the interconnectivity of all the riparian peoples along the Mekong.

Much of the discourse surrounding the Mekong river and its hydroelectric development through dam construction was highly optimistic in the 1990s, with emphasis on the energized, exciting opportunities of dam construction, even when at the expense of citizens. Lohmann (1998) outlines several themes surrounding optimism and energy in public discourse during the 1990s. He argues that Thai public discourses surrounding dam projects require constant reimagining of those projects to counter any unrest in the face of flooding and damage. He compares this discourse to a theatrical drama, in which unrealistic dreams give way to dissatisfied citizens and government manipulation, all played out on the stage of the Thai public sphere. Today, Thai media coverage of Mekong dams avoids this drama altogether by focusing on dams in other countries; many other states, however, are at the tail end of similar trajectories from optimism to rejection in their discourses.

<sup>1</sup>Cambodia was originally slated to join in 1997 with Myanmar and Laos, but wide-spread rioting in the summer of

1997 resulted in a delay. Thailand was already in ASEAN, joining as a founding member in 1967.

Previous analyses of the debate surrounding Mekong dams notes that this discourse overemphasizes themes of regional cooperation and a wild, underdeveloped river. Bakker (1999) argues that the narrative of the Mekong as an underdeveloped resource requiring regional cooperation is exaggerated, to the benefit of both individual states and their collective regional efforts. She argues that narratives surrounding Mekong development were less about the actual dams themselves, and more about reaffirming the regional political order. She argues that the shared narratives of the 1990s served to *legitimise a new post-Indochina War set of regional geopolitical relationships* (Bakker, 1999, p. 220). Bakker continues by noting that several states, including Thailand, China, and Laos, had already built dams on the Lancang/Mekong by 1999, yet still claimed in their discourse that the river was untapped and unutilized. In the public discourse of the 1990s, *the river is thus more heavily utilised than the language of underdevelopment implies* (1999, p. 220). Her points regarding the political nature of Mekong dam development discourse reflect the river's role in regional water diplomacy.

One conclusion of the analysis done of recent riparian states' media is that these themes of underdevelopment and untouched nature have largely disappeared from regional discourse. Nevertheless, understanding how themes of proper and improper development, rather than underdevelopment, are woven through various 21<sup>st</sup> century national narratives is important to understanding how countries are choosing to portray their role in regional water politics. While the exact language has changed, using the Mekong as a symbol in regional geopolitical posturing is still common practice in public discourse.

Flooding is vital to agriculture throughout the region but especially in Cambodia and Vietnam. Conceptually, floods are both natural processes familiar to residents, and now systematized events controlled by powers upstream (predominantly China); this is changing how the Mekong is understood on a physical, ecological, cultural, and even spiritual level. Floods, especially massive ones, traditionally have been characterized as a *hazard* or *danger* to be *controlled* in media sources (Jacobs and Wescoat, 1994), and remain a central topic in regional media coverage today. The anxieties surrounding flooding, and the notion of flooding as a controllable/uncontrollable process, currently permeate the public discourse of many Mekong riparian states.

In order to examine modern discourses, this paper utilizes English-language media from the four MRC countries, examining the themes that are unique to each before comparing overarching trends in the debates present in regional presses. As Bakker (1999) notes, dam construction and the consequences of dam construction are more public than other forms of resource extraction (such as mining) because the entire river and all who live along it are affected; yet

the public understanding of dams and surrounding issues is weak because the science behind dam construction and maintenance is extremely complex.

The countries which make up the MRC are at very different levels of industrialization, infrastructure networks, and market integration, meaning that the discourse surrounding dams will be very different throughout the region. The current status of energy development within the region was concisely articulated in the Vietnamese English-language press:

*In Cambodia, the priority is to substitute domestically produced hydropower for expensive diesel and electricity imports. In Laos, the priority is to generate revenue by drawing in foreign investment in dams and export excess electricity to its neighbors, with Thailand as its biggest market. In Viet Nam, which has already built out most of its hydropower potential, the priority is to meet a projected tripling in energy demand by 2030 while protecting the economically vital Mekong Delta from the impacts of upstream dams* (VNS, 2018b).

Understanding how each country's English-language press coverage of Mekong dams differs thematically can help to understand how each population conceptualizes Mekong dam development. It is also important to examine public discourses surrounding dam development because these discourses shape the public imagination that motivates the environmental activism and local protest actions that are themselves topics regularly featured in press coverage.

### Laos: Government-Mandated Optimism

After the Lancang travels through China, it enters Laos, becoming the Mekong and traversing the country. Thus, the vast majority of non-Chinese dams on the Mekong and its tributaries have been in Laos, and the majority of new construction projects have been proposed or started in Laos. There are over a dozen large-scale dams on tributaries of the Mekong throughout Laos that have been completed or nearing completion, the most notable of which is the controversial Xayaburi dam. Nearly all of these dams were built after 2000, financed by Chinese, Thai, and even Vietnamese investments. Though there has been speculation and potential development of several dozen dams, there currently appear to be nine dams with significant financing, development, and construction underway, including the Don Sahong dam, which has been under construction since 2016. These more recent projects are overwhelmingly funded by Chinese and Thai investment, with almost no funding from the Laotian government itself. General regional consensus is that Laotian dam development has progressed with little regard for environmental impact.

There is very little press coverage of Mekong dams in the Laotian English-language press, even though Laos is the country which is seeing the majority of

construction today. This is primarily because the only wide-scale English-language press in Laos, the *Vientiane Times*, is produced by the Laotian government. When there is coverage, Mekong dams are always discussed in terms of Laos' economic future. Not only does the Laotian government believe in the economic potential of hydroelectric production, but the English-language press informs Laotians that the international community agrees, explaining that, *a World Bank economist team has projected that economic growth in Laos will start to recover from 2019 onwards after major hydropower plants begin commercial operation this year* (Phouthonesy, 2018). China is described as a partner in this economic opportunity. Specific numbers are rarely used, and the promised economic benefits seem vague and long-term.

One theme related to dam development projects that runs throughout the government-produced *Vientiane Times* is that the MRC is a successful, efficient coalition of equal states, working to ensure proper Mekong development. This perspective stands in stark contrast to the non-governmentally controlled English-language presses of every other member of the MRC; each heavily criticizes the MRC for incompetence. For example, according to the *Vientiane Times*, *the Mekong River Commission (MRC) will remain a key driving force in bringing unity and sustainability to the development of areas along the mighty river despite the reduced budget projected for the upcoming decade* [the MRC's CEO Pham Tuan Phan] *denied speculations that international organisations were cutting their funding because of the MRC's inability to ensure sustainable development of the Mekong region* (Phouthonesy, 2018b). What in other countries is described as a breakdown of trust in the MRC, Laos reimagines, declaring that *in the joint declaration, leaders of the Lower Mekong nations reaffirmed their support for the MRC's ongoing institutional reform, which will see the Commission transform itself into a lean, efficient, and financially self-sufficient organisation* (Phouthonesy, 2018a).

The impression the reader is intentionally left with is that Laos is complying with the MRC, cooperating with other regional players at their behest, and improving its economic future. The details of dam development are largely absent from the *Vientiane Times'* coverage of Mekong dams. Unlike in the Cambodian or Thai presses, the funding of dam construction is not debated publicly in Laos' media. Likewise, unlike in the Vietnamese and Cambodian presses, environmental impacts of dams are not brought to the public's attention in Laos. Regional concerns about Laotian dam construction are miss-

ing entirely, and unsurprisingly, from the government-backed *Vientiane Times'* coverage.

### Thailand: Ready to Shop Elsewhere?

Because of elevation and landscape, Thailand does not have significant stretches of Mekong for its own hydroelectric development. Small dams on tributaries have been constructed since the 1970s, but Thailand's interest in dam development in the region is that of an investor and a consumer. Thailand's energy consumption is much larger than that of its regional neighbors, though recent economic growth in Vietnam has also increased their demand. Dam construction in Laos in particular is heavily fueled by Thai investment; Thailand is also the primary market for Laotian hydroelectricity. Bakker (1999) notes that energy consumption was one industry that was less hindered by the Thai 1997 financial crisis. However, recent interest in alternative energies with less environmental impact might be the cause of a slowdown in Thai dam development investment since 2017.

The Thai English-language press<sup>2</sup> regularly present stories which emphasize that Thai citizens should be engaged with dam construction, protesting the environmental impact, and determining how energy is purchased and distributed in the region. Thais in the Chiang Rai region were given favorable coverage for protesting Thai governmental support for dam construction in Thailand (Ngamkham, 2017). The *Bangkok Post* argues that [Thai] *women's voices must be central to decision-making on hydropower, and in broader energy planning for Thailand and the region because impacts of hydropower and other large infrastructure projects can disproportionately affect women, particularly women from minority ethnic and indigenous communities and rural areas* (Harris, 2018b), when dams cause environmental damage that affect the horticultural activities of women. Thai citizens are described as understanding that dams will impact their future and willing to demand accountability from their government; for example, *people in the northeastern region relying on fish in the Mekong and its tributaries realise what could happen to them* (Marukat, 2018) if fish spawning patterns are disrupted. More so than other countries' presses, the Thai press calls for active citizen engagement.

One of the central themes of Thai English-language press coverage of Mekong dams is that Thailand is part of a trio of Mekong regional powers: Thailand, China, and a conglomerate Indochina region. This worldview includes concerns that the Indochina trio is falling into increased discord, as *divergent inter-*

<sup>2</sup> The two most important English language newspapers are the *Bangkok Post* and *The Nation*, both of which are independent and rather critical of the government. *The Bangkok Post* is one of the oldest newspapers in Thailand, being well-respected since they began publishing in 1946. *The*

*Nation*, founded in 1971 and part of the Asian News Network, often features complex quantitative and policy analysis op-eds which are oriented toward as educated audience.

ests have brought the three countries into increasingly open disagreement (Brunner and Eyler, 2018). However, it is also the case that Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam can each offer its neighbours something they cannot achieve by themselves (Brunner and Eyler, 2018), meaning cooperation is still possible. Thailand, however, is usually described in ways that suggest it is above such frays.

Instead, the Thai press often depicts China and Thailand as the primary forces shaping Mekong development. Thai activists opposed to Thai funding of controversial dams in Laos are quoted saying that, *the post-war Lao alliances to Cambodia and Vietnam may be taken over by Thai and Chinese corporate interests* (DPA, 2013). When Thailand's delays in funding stopped dam construction in Laos, the press claimed Thailand's impact was so massive that it *calls into question the future of hydropower development in the Mekong region* (Eyler and Weatherby, 2018). On the other hand, opinion pieces by International Rivers, the leading regional Mekong development NGO, supporting China's role as leader of regional energy development strategies argue that, *China is showing global leadership in building solar and wind power capacity at home, and has financing and technological expertise that is sorely needed to drive the energy revolution in Lower Mekong* (Harris, 2018a).

Thus, Thailand and China are, in the Thai press, depicted as two sides fighting over the Mekong: in some cases, articles emphasize that, *Thailand's rising energy demand has been the major driver for damming the Mekong* (Eyler and Weatherby, 2018); in others, the Thai prime minister is warned to be vigilant against *alleged insistence by Beijing to be the controlling – perhaps the only – voice in management of the Mekong* (Bangkok Post Editorial, 2018) Mekong dams are discussed as a hydroelectric opportunity, but not in the same way that they are in other regional English-language presses: the Thai press presents Mekong dams as an opportunity for Thai investment to lead regional interests; and dams could create electricity that will then be available for sale in Thailand to boost the Thai economy (Ngamkham, 2017). Either way, the Thai press depicts Thailand as a country which controls the actions of other states, as opposed to one which asks others to consider their actions (as both Cambodia and Vietnam are depicted by their respective presses).

However, there is also an underlying current of frustration that hydroelectric development may not be necessary for Thailand, meaning that environmental

damage caused by Mekong dams is not necessitated by energy requirements. Because the Thai government has overestimated how much electricity has been used in the country during the last several years, some in Thailand are questioning the need for further dam development. The economics of energy have also changed in recent years. Jake Brunner and Brian Eyler (2018) argue in the Thai and Cambodian presses that *whether or not these dams make economic sense is increasingly open to question given the dramatic decline in the price of solar and wind power, which have contributed to Thailand's decision to suspend the power purchase agreement for the Pak Beng dam in Laos* (Brunner and Eyler, 2018). The Thai English-language press publishes opinion pieces which argue that, *a review of Thailand's energy plans reveals an abundant electricity supply that vastly exceeds demand. So in the midst of this energy glut, why are we pushing hard to build more problematic hydroelectric dams in our neighbours' territories?* (Deetes, 2017) This and other commentaries also call on the Thai government to strive for more accuracy when predicting future energy needs in the first place.

### Cambodia: Damming Coverage of Dams

While Thailand may be looking for other energy futures, Cambodia is only beginning to seriously address its energy needs. Because the Mekong first traverses China, Laos, and Thailand, the people of Cambodia are heavily impacted by foreign dam development, and are only beginning to develop a discourse around their own hydroelectric future. Indeed, hydroelectric development of Cambodia was not even a topic of interest in the country until the end of the war in 1992; planning began in earnest in 2006, and significant construction of Cambodian dams on the Mekong did not begin until 2014. In November 2017, the Cambodian government completed construction on the Lower Sesan 2 (LS2) dam on the Sesan tributary; it is expected to be completely operational by the fall of 2018. Construction is planned for three additional dams on the Mekong: the Stung Treng, the Sambor, and the Lower Seko Treng, all funded by businessman Kith Meng's Royal Group (Zsombor and Sokhean, 2017).

Mekong dams are discussed in the Cambodian English-language press<sup>3</sup> in reference to two phenomena: dams built/being built upstream in Laos and Thailand, and dams undergoing construction in Cambodia. In both cases, dams are discussed negatively and

<sup>3</sup> The main English-language Cambodian news sources are the *Cambodia Daily* and the *Phnom Penh Post*. Founded in 1992, the Phnom Penh Post is heavily read by Cambodia's educated citizens, foreign expatriates, and NGOs. It continues to provide generally unbiased coverage of Cambodian government and society, at times publishing significant criticisms of the prime minister and his government. The *Cambodia Daily*, the outlet of the pair that was more

scathing of the Cambodian government, was forced to shutter its Cambodian offices and move exclusively online on Sept 4, 2017 as a result of intense government pressure. The publication now only reposts externally produced content. Unsurprisingly, some of the harshest critiques of the LS2 dam and the consultation process were published in the *Cambodia Daily*.

consistently described as *dangerous* and *controversial*. The Cambodian press argues that the bodies which construct and regulate dams, including the Cambodian government and the MRC, are not to be trusted. The Cambodian press is notably antagonistic toward the concept of Mekong dams, as evident by their choice of focus and use of evidence from NGOs and anonymous sources that are critical of dams.

One of the main themes surrounding dams in the Cambodian press is that dams cause environmental damage; in many cases, discussions of this theme include the accusation that dams are built in spite of reports that they will have a significantly negative ecological impact. In particular, Laotian dams are critiqued for destroying fish passages and stocks (Retka, 2017), while NGO leaders are quoted questioning the Thai funding of Laotian dams and imploring the country to *seriously rethink Thailand's investments in environmentally destructive energy projects* (Nachemson, 2018). Vietnamese environmentalists are quoted voicing concerns about saltwater intrusion, and are described as predictive of future environmental concerns for Cambodia (Narim, 2016). Other effects, both short and long term, are put into the context of how specific dams will damage the immediate region and the peoples within it. The most likely reason that the discourse over Mekong dams in Cambodia in particular is so critical is that the first major construction project – the Lower Sesan 2 (LS2) dam – has caused massive environmental change, displaced thousands of Cambodians, and disrupted livelihoods, without any clear benefit to Cambodians themselves. Citizens pushed to relocate are described as being forced to *say goodbye to ancestral homes* (Seangly, 2017) and made to *rue their losses* (Seangly and Nahemson, 2018). Even when Cambodia's significant power shortages are acknowledged, the power produced by the LS2 dam is contrasted with the pain caused to those forced to relocate (Maza and Seangly, 2017).

One of the central critiques of dam construction centers around distrust of the construction process and the organizations tasked with ensuring that the environment and Cambodian people are protected. The Mekong River Commission is rarely portrayed positively in the Cambodian press; the most common evaluation is that the MRC is *weak* (Kossov, 2016) and *still reeling from the blowback over its handling of the consultation process around the Don Sahong and Xayaburi dams in Laos* (Down, 2016) with little ability to force its member countries, especially Laos, to follow guidelines or behave responsibly. Discussions of MRC guideline enforcement demonstrate little confidence in the organization, with the Cambodian press quick to note that *conservationists*

*expressed doubts about whether such guidelines would make a difference* (Sassoon, 2018). Anti-government conservationists are openly quoted in the Cambodian press; when expressing skepticism that the prime minister would fulfill a promise to stop environmentally dangerous dam construction, the Cambodia Daily boldly published a quote that, *the government's greed and ignorance eventually supersedes all decision-making and all relevant laws, as we have seen time and again in Cambodia* (Zsombor, 2017).

In the Cambodian Press, a consistent theme discussed is that the MRC consultation process is a sham, and should not be trusted. The Phnom Post quotes an anonymous source that *"Mekong member countries consider the [MRC] 'consultation process' as a complete failure and will imminently take benefit of this weakness to promote and carry out their own controversial projects* (Roeun, 2017). After reporting that Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen was consulting with the Laotian government on a controversial new dam near the border, the Cambodia Daily countered by noting that, *with much of Stung Treng already buying cheap electricity from Laos, however... Cambodians should be informed about what exactly they should be thankful for, and how the [new dam] will change electricity access and costs* (Roeun, 2017). The consultation process is largely described with cynicism and mistrust.

### Vietnam: Diplomacy and Environmentalism

The people of Vietnam are heavily dependent on the Mekong Delta as a source of food, transportation, and identity. The ability of China and Laos to control the flow of the Mekong, causing flooding at their will and affecting the livelihoods of millions of farmers and fishermen in Vietnam, is a source of great frustration as expressed in the Vietnamese English-language press<sup>4</sup>. There are several dams on tributaries in Vietnam, but these are discussed primarily in relation to local power generation; the majority of the discussion in the press focuses on the implications of upstream dams, rather than on the dams themselves. Because dams along the Mekong are primarily in China, Laos, and Thailand (and soon in Cambodia) rather than Vietnam itself, the discourses regarding Mekong dams in the Vietnamese press focus on hydropower, environmental impact, and water diplomacy.

With far more consistency than in other countries, dams are directly connected to the idea of hydropower in the Vietnamese English-language press; they are often referred to directly as hydro-electric dams, a term rarely found in other English-language

<sup>4</sup> The primary English-language news source in Vietnam is *Viet Nam News*, which began its publication in 1991. Today, it publishes a daily paper in the country and provides up-to-date coverage online. Though the editors are critical

of government failings, the publication is not known as oppositional. Most of the coverage is not attributed to specific authors, however, providing some coverage to express harsh critiques of environmental impacts of dam in particular.



presses. The Vietnamese readers of English-language press are aware that large amounts of Vietnamese electricity is purchased from other countries' dams; therefore, foreign dams are always discussed in terms of a hydropower vs. environmental calculus. The Vietnamese press also covers other energy alternatives, such as solar and wind, placing hydropower into a larger discussion of Vietnam's energy strategy (VNS, 2018b). This includes limited development of potential Vietnamese dam sites, with the Vietnamese English-language press reporting that, *in a major shift in perspective, the Government is viewing small scale projects as the best, most sustainable way of tapping the nation's hydropower potential* (VNS, 2018).

Perhaps the most prominent theme in the Vietnamese press coverage of Mekong dams is the focus on livelihoods, especially in relation to livelihoods directly connected to the environment. Dam development is praised by quoted government officials as an opportunity for *livelihood diversification* (VNS, 2017b). On the other hand, ecological damage such as *significant decline in fish stocks and even the disappearance of many species and depletion of alluvial soil and the vital nutrients it brings* (VNS, 2018a) is so dangerous that the livelihood of 18 million people is at stake (VNS, 2018a). Livelihoods imply a way of living, an identity, not just an economic position, lending gravitas to discussions of the pros and cons of dam development.

One of the central themes in the Vietnamese press is the idea that Mekong dams are an environmental disaster, which the press describes and quantifies for readers. The Mekong is usually described as *blighted* (VNS, 2017a) by dams, with coastal erosion, sand loss, and saltwater intrusion discussed as *dangerous* (VNS, 2017) consequences of other countries' policies. Major cultural cities and tourist attractions like Hoi An are described as under serious threat as *too many hydropower projects, poor environmental impact assessments of their dams, and overexploitation of sand are haunting Hoi An City* (VNS, 2016). Environmentalist groups are often quoted in the Vietnamese English-language press, in almost all cases attributing environmental damage to other countries, such as arguing that the upcoming Don Sahong dam *would be meaningful on the economic side of Laos, but it will ruin the ecology in the Mekong sub-region, as well as the future of affected communities in neighboring Cambodia and Viet Nam* (VNS, 2015). Thus, environmental damage is conceived of as part of a diplomatic calculus.

Another theme in the Vietnamese press is the importance of water diplomacy. This water diplomacy extends beyond the dams themselves, as discussed earlier, but also to mitigating the ecological damage of dams and adapting to other, related ecological challenges. For example, government officials are quoted as arguing that, *it is imperative to develop different scenarios or projects on climate change with*

*neighbouring countries* (VNS, 2017b). Not only does the Vietnamese press encourage water diplomacy by publishing articles on the subject (VNS, 2017b), but it also publishes MRC press releases and statements (VNS, 2017d) which support dam development and international cooperation, thus allowing the newspaper to become a part of the water diplomacy itself. Above all, the press often emphasizes the importance of water diplomacy to prevent future disasters and mitigate damage, arguing that *smart planning can save Mekong Delta from worst effects of dams* (VNS, 2017c).

## Discussion

The governments and peoples of all four countries of the MRC care deeply about the future of Mekong dam development, which is why the topic appears heavily in each of their respective English-language presses. Each country's coverage focuses on different core themes, which have been described above. However, there are some significant discourses and themes which appear across the regional English-language media scene, reverberating differently in each press but connecting in core ways.

Ultimately, a country's media stance on a given issue roughly correlates with geographic location. While Laotian media shows little concern for environmental impact downstream, concerns about environmental damage are a dominant theme in the Vietnamese press. The further upstream a country, the more likely dams are described as an opportunity; the further downstream, the more often they are described as a threat.

In the majority of these comparative themes, the Laotian English-language press is an exception, often contradicting the tone of the other three presses. While Laos' specific geographic and developmental characteristics shape the Laotian English-language press's coverage of many relevant aspects of the Mekong dam issue, governmental control and censorship are the reasons the Laotian press's coverage deviates from the other three MRC's states so consistently. One would not expect the Laotian government to produce English-language press coverage that was negative or contradictory to the government's position. The other three presses, however, participate in some striking shared discourses.

One common discussion is whether or not hydroelectricity is the best route to regional energy independence, especially as solar and wind prices drop. Buyer countries (Thailand and Vietnam) have English-language presses which are openly debating alternative energies. Seller countries (Laos and Cambodia) still primarily describe dam construction as an economic opportunity worth the environmental threat.

One interesting similarity between the Thai, Cambodian, and Vietnamese English-language presses is

that they all rely heavily on Vietnamese environmentalists for quotes and statistics. While international NGOs and external research is occasionally discussed, Vietnamese environmentalists serve as the *regional authorities* to be trusted throughout all the MRC countries' presses. For example, when the Thai press is discussing whether to support dam construction in Laos, writers choose to cite environmental studies of fish stocks, flooding damage, and soil degradation researched and produced by Vietnamese groups (Marukatat, 2018).

The issue of water diplomacy, as Bakker (1999) notes, has always been a part of the discourse surrounding Mekong dam development, and this still rings true in the regional English-language presses. The MRC is consistently described as necessary for water diplomacy but incompetent at it (except in the Laotian press for reasons discussed earlier). In the Thai, Cambodian, and Vietnamese press, governments are encouraged to engage in water diplomacy beyond the purview of the MRC (VNS, 2017b). The tenuous positions of each state were well summed up by Jake Brunner and Brian Eyler (2018) in the Thai and Cambodian English-language presses:

*We seem to have reached a stalemate. Vietnam has adopted a victim mentality, protesting against dams but without presenting any alternatives. In Laos, hydropower is almost entirely dictated by foreign, mostly Thai and Chinese, firms and receives very little revenue from dams built under 30-year build-own-operate-transfer contracts. Cambodia is keeping its options open. Instead of bringing these countries together, the discordant development of the Mekong is pushing them apart.*

Discourse analysis of the English-language presses of Laos, Thailand, Cambodia, and Vietnam confirms Brunner and Eyler's position. Vietnam's concern for the environment and inability to control flooding from upstream dams shades the public discourse surrounding dams. Laos's government mandated coverage projects an image of opportunity and progress, in discordance with other, less censored regional press coverage. Cambodia's coverage is perhaps a bit more pessimistic than Brunner and Eyler project, while Thai coverage validates the Thai public's belief that their economy is still regionally dominant.

## Conclusion

Each country's English-language media represents these central concerns and values through the way they choose to present the issue of Mekong dam development to their respective populations. For Lao-tians, government-mandated optimism stems from a bright economic future. For Thai readers, new economic opportunities in alternative energies might be a better route to stay competitive with China. For Cambodians, public interest is a necessary part of protecting livelihoods from an over-eager govern-

ment and hazy foreign interests. And for the Vietnamese, water diplomacy is the best hope to mitigate environmental damage caused by forces beyond Vietnamese control. Understanding how these interlocking goals and discourses inform public opinion throughout the region is an important part of understanding how dam development will be conceptualized by the peoples of the Mekong.

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