

Contested Waterscapes in the Mekong Region: Hydropower, Livelihoods and Governance

FRANÇOIS MOLLE, TIRA FORAN and MIRA KÄKÖNEN, eds.

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One of the most important undertakings of this book is that it seeks to understand critical issues of livelihood, development, and governance in mainland Southeast Asia through a focus on *both* water and land resources, in relationship to one another and in their relationship to societies in the region. This de-centers what I would argue is a focus in a large amount of academic literature that, through an explicit focus on “land”—and to a lesser extent “water”—essentializes these categories as distinct resources rather than questioning their division and exploring their connections. The concept that draws this out and binds the book’s chapters together is the “waterscape”: “landscapes viewed through the lens of their water resources, taken as a defining element of both ecosystems and human life” (p. 2).

I believe the concept has been inspired by Erik Swyngedouw’s (1999) important work on the Spanish waterscape where the term is developed as a critique of long-standing academic scholarship that separated the social and natural elements of water (instead of seeing them as connected). However, the term also functions as a critique of the more traditional understanding of scale in water resources analysis by questioning the naturalized scale of the “water basin” or “watershed.” I would also argue that this innovative focus on waterscape owes much to the team of editors and authors that put *Contested Waterscapes* together. The authors are part of the Mekong Program on Water, Environment and Resilience, or M-POWER, network, which combines both activists and academics (and activist-academics) in the Mekong Region which includes Cambodia, Lao PDR, Burma, Thailand, Vietnam and China’s Yunnan Province. Rather than offer pessimistic conclusions, the authors “invite the reader to explore more thoroughly how waterscapes have been, and are being, transformed” (p. 13) through economic change, environmental uncertainty, and grassroots resistance.

Contested Waterscapes is divided into three parts, respectively focused on “Hydropower Expansion in the Mekong Region,” “Livelihoods and Development,” and “Institutions, Knowledge and Power.” Readers already familiar with hydropower development in the region may find the information in Part I increasingly dated in the three years that have elapsed since the book’s 2009 publication date.¹⁾ However, these chapters do provide essential historical background combined with informed analysis of local and region-wide hydropower development and governance issues. The final chapter of this section, by Darrin Magee and Shawn Kelley, provides an overview of

1) Additional resources published since 2009 include: articles in the journals *Water Alternatives* (in particular, the WCD+10 special issue) and *Water Policy* as well as the next book in this series by Lazarus *et al.* (2011).

hydropower development on the Salween River, which runs through China, Burma and Thailand, and which has received much less attention as compared to plans for development of the Mekong.

In Part I, there is also an important discussion of the Pak Mun dam in Chapter 3 (“Pak Mun Dam: Perpetually Contested?”) by Foran and Manarom, two individuals who have been following the issue for over a decade. The project, approved in 1989, has been the focus of much scholarly and activist literature (i.e., various issues of *Watershed: People’s Forum on Ecology* 1995–2008; Sneddon and Fox 2006; Foran 2007) and was one of the case studies chosen for analysis for the World Commission on Dams report issued in 2000. One issue that this chapter adds to previous discussions about Pak Mun is a critique of the way that fisheries livelihoods have been over-emphasized. Livelihoods have often been too narrowly defined, and studies and campaigns on Pak Mun that focused exclusively on fisheries impacts have neglected impacts on other activities, such as riverbank gardening, and have failed to account for the widespread necessity of undertaking several livelihood strategies simultaneously. A focus on fisheries has effectively resulted in “the nuances of smallholder livelihood strategies” being ignored (p. 75).

Parts II and III discuss some of the inter-related issues of water and land development, including an important chapter on the Mekong Delta (Chapter 8) by Biggs and colleagues which introduces the idea of the “Delta Machine” to illustrate how models of water management in the delta have materially (and permanently) transformed the landscape. The authors advise that decision-makers better incorporate both understandings of the history of the Delta’s making, and perspectives of local water users to attain more sustainable water management plans. Starting Part III, Chapter 10 offers a kind of critical genealogy of irrigation in Thailand’s northeast. Molle *et al.* illustrate the colonial connections to narratives that link large-scale irrigation development (the so-called “greening” of the northeast) to poverty alleviation, and question whether these narratives are actually a way to address poverty, or if they might more accurately be described as state building projects that generate wealth for elites. Also focusing on Thailand’s northeast, Chapter 7 by Blake *et al.* highlights the importance of the Songkhram wetlands as both land and water resources. Blake *et al.* also compare different ways of knowing about these diverse wetlands, comparing different approaches that have been used by environmental organizations.

One highlight for me is Chapter 13 by Kakonen and Hirsch which offers a critical discussion of the links between participation, knowledge and power, particularly regarding the institution many see as “responsible” for the Mekong River—the Mekong River Commission (MRC). The authors see the MRC playing a largely depoliticized role through the anti-politics of scientific knowledge production. Following Ferguson’s anti-politics analysis (1994) and Foucault’s governmentality analytic (1991[1978]), Kakonen and Hirsch explain that “Ironically . . . the participatory turn in mainstream institutions such as the MRC has another side to it. It is at constant risk of being far from a counterbalance to the expert knowledge . . . participation tends to mirror a type

of development-driven participation that can contribute to the de-politicization of knowledge in support of a particular governance agenda” (p.334). They raise two critical points: first, that participation is not always a productive move towards more democratic or equitable decision-making; and second, that increasing local participation also produces new forms of governance, providing a Southeast Asian echo of Agrawal’s (2005, 7) argument that de-centralizing decision-making is not about making less government, but about more and different government.

Some of the minor critiques that I can offer include the lack of a perspective on China, whether intentional or un-intentional. Dams constructed in China on the upper Mekong are mentioned as a critical challenge, and it would be useful to include a chapter on China’s place within the region’s evolving water politics and social hydrologies. Also, although the M-POWER network does aim to influence decision-making and foster democracy of water governance in the region, this is a book for specialists and is not necessarily accessible reading for non-experts or even for those who speak English as a second or third language. One strength of this collection is the detailed historical context provided for each case, which communicates the importance of historical specificity in each of the cases. Moreover, the analysis and details of case studies compiled together here are not found elsewhere in academic literature. I should also note that the next book available in this series, *Water Rights and Social Justice in the Mekong Region*, was published as of February last year (Lazarus *et al.* 2011).

Finally, with reports over the past year that hydropower is “enjoying something of a global resurgence” (Galbraith 2011), *Contested Waterscapes* is well positioned to be useful, thought-provoking reading for those who continue to address the challenges associated with hydropower development and the ways that waterscapes are being transformed worldwide.

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Population Policy and Reproduction in Singapore: Making Future Citizens

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There is growing awareness that persistent low fertility constitutes a significant threat to the future of developed societies. Birth rates well below replacement level are leading to declining populations and aging. That awareness is late in coming because so much attention has been focused for so long on the dangers of overpopulation. Ironically, some of today's lowest fertility rates are found in countries that only recently suffered from what was deemed to be excessively high birth rates. Singapore is one of those countries: three decades ago, the government of Singapore was still implementing policies aimed at depressing fertility. Yet today, Singapore suffers from lowest-low birth rates, with a total fertility rate of around 1.3.

What makes Singapore especially interesting and important as a case study is that it has been such a success story in terms of economic development—and that its success has been largely the result of activist policies followed by its government. There are many countries whose governments have followed a hands-off approach to population or have been faint-hearted in their approach, enacting legislation that is ineffective or not enforced. Singapore is not such a case. Its government has been interventionist in population policy just as it was in economic policy, but with far less success. Understanding the failure of Singapore's pronatalist policies is not only important for Singapore; it is important for other countries facing the same problem. This issue has been widely discussed before, but until now no one has done the kind of empirical research among concerned populations that can explain this policy failure. That's what makes Shirley Hsiao-Li Sun's book so important. Shirley Hsiao-Li Sun's work with women enables us to find out what they think about government policy and why they are not responding to it by having more children.