

The Lancang-Mekong River as a transboundary hybrid commons: Competing collective actions and ethical principles

Since the early 1990s, the Lancang-Mekong River has increasingly been transformed from a free-flowing river to one engineered by large hydropower dams (Middleton and Allouche, 2016). To date, in the Lower Mekong Basin (LMB), shared between Cambodia, Laos, Thailand and Vietnam, almost sixty medium or large hydropower dams are in operation, with over twenty more under construction. Meanwhile, on the Lancang River upstream, China has unilaterally constructed six large hydropower dams. Extensive hydropower construction is changing the river's hydrology and ecology. While state and private-sector project developers are increasingly proposing benefit-sharing mechanisms, the harm from resource redistribution and degradation are overwhelming borne by the poorest riparian communities (Suhardiman et al., 2014).

The economic and political rise of China holds significant implications for the transboundary governance of the Lancang-Mekong River. A new China-led intergovernmental initiative – the Lancang-Mekong Cooperation (LMC) – incorporates transboundary water management as a work program, primarily defining the river as an economic resource (Biba, 2018). This challenges an existing intergovernmental institution in the LMB – the Mekong River Commission (MRC) – that is broadly guided by the UN Watercourses Convention and associated principles of sustainable development. Meanwhile, across the multiple political contexts of the region, community and civil society movements seek to defend mobile and in-situ commons from the local to the transboundary scale, drawing on various principles such as community rights.

How ethical principles are embedded within transboundary water governance are seldom rendered explicit, but are increasingly the subject of critical analysis (Neal et al., 2014). Accounting for the complexity of state and non-state actors, interacting ecological and social scales, and plural sources of governance in play, this paper analyzes the transformation of the Lancang-Mekong River as a hybrid transboundary commons (Miller et al., under revision). Contextualized to the political economy of hydropower in the region, this paper examines the forms of collective action organized around the LMC, MRC and community/ civil society movements to draw out contesting ethical principles of justice claimed for transboundary hybrid commons governance. The paper argues that rendering visible these principles is a necessary step to inform transformative critical dialogues on the future of the Lancang-Mekong River and the institutions that compete to govern it.

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