This dam belongs to the neighbour
A research note

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It was around 1997 when I first saw the Mekong river with my own eyes during a family trip to Vientiane. We crossed Thai–Lao Friendship Bridge, the newly built bridge that had opened a few years earlier, connecting Nong Khai with Vientiane. While I was amazed by the sheer size of the river at the end of the rainy season, I had no idea that beside the newly constructed border bridge, another dam had opened. Manwan Dam was the first dam on the river system finished in 1995.

Most people do not know the Mekong and Lancang are the same river. Lancang is the name of the northern stretch of the Mekong river in Yunnan, China. The river is 4300 kilometers long, over half of it flows through China before entering Myanmar, Laos, Thailand, Cambodia and Vietnam. The source originates in the mountain ranges of the Qinghai - Tibetan Plateau. When the environmental impact from Manwan Dam on Mekong river was released, the two different names created confusion for many Chinese as to why downstream countries were so critical of how China was treating the Mekong River.

Regardless of environmental impact, China relentlessly develops hydropower dams on the Lancang river and its tributaries. Despite the ecological effects, these hydropower dams are the main contributor to the country's struggle to reach its carbon emission reduction target. As of 2020, there is a cascade of 11 dams on the river's mainstream in operation. The dam developers are targeting the installed capacity of all power stations in the region to reach 63 gigawatt with over 130 billion cubic meters of reservoir by 2030.

In 2012, there was a big protest in Bangkok, against the construction of Xayaburi Dam in Northern Lao, as the project was awarded to a major Thai construction firm. The protesters demanded that the Xayaburi Dam - the first hydropower station on the lower Mekong river – be stopped. I surmise that this construction push forward was due to the investment of USD 4 billion, which was put forward by CH-Karnchang, one of the biggest Thai construction companies (it is interesting to note that the GDP of Laos in 2012 was USD 7 billion). This investment falls under the 2005 Lao government economic plan titled 'The Battery of Southeast Asia', envisaging 9 dams along its country's river system. Without financial capabilities, the Lao government is giving concession of these sites to foreign investors.



The river mark, a concrete pole built by French for navigating the river during the colonial era.

Although the Xayaburi is the first dam on the lower Mekong river, the attempt to control the river can be dated back to 1865, when French explorers searched this waterway to establish trade routes between Indochina and Yunnan (however the narrow gorges and roaring waterfalls were too difficult to navigate). To this day a concrete pole still stands in the middle of the river (see fig. 1), which served as a navigation mark during French colonialism (1893-1953). In the 1950s, the USA proposed a plan to dam the Mekong river for hydroelectric power to accelerate economic growth against advancing communist influence. The plan was scrapped due to political instabilities.



The view of the mountain range north of Yubeng Valley where the Mekong river originated.

In December 2015, my trip to the source of the Mekong river started after I landed in Kunming. The 800 kilometer road trip was divided into two parts. First, from Kunming to Lijiang, the last big city before Tibet. Followed by a seven-hour bus ride via a new mountain highway. Here I observed the old Quchong highway which had been replaced by the modern Xiangli expressway. The highway cuts straight through the mountain range via a tunnel and bridge, to avoid a curvy mountain road. The town of Deqen is the perfect spot to observe the Meili Snow Mountains, where the Lancang/Mekong River originates.

During a short break study in 2018 I decided to drive to Xayaburi. It was an interesting time, for the commission of Xayaburi Dam was due for completion in less than a year. Completion of the dam marked an important milestone for the development of the lower Mekong River. As I was most interested in its landscape transformation, I started my project by searching for the relation between the landscape, the dam and the people on this river.

Traveling on the ground allowed me to connect to the rural context of Laos and the direction of development in the area. The bumpy Route 4 from Thailand's Phu Doo international crossing point, towards Xayaburi, took almost 5 hours to cover its 200 kilometer stretch. Along the side of the road there were high voltage electricity grid towers, ready to export 95 percent of electricity produced from Xayaburi Dam back to

Thailand. There was clearly preparation for this upcoming hydropower plant.

In Xayaburi, a small mountain blocks the town from the dam. Reaching the Xayaburi Dam requires a 30 kilometer detour further north. The main structure of the dam reveals itself on the hillside parallel to the mainstream river, after rows of camps and workshops for its workers. The construction had been divided into two phases with the first half consisting of flood gate and boat lift, which had already been finished. The second part of the structure, housing the power plant and fish ladder, was over 80 percent complete and the process of removing the cofferdam had just started.



The fish ladder on Xayaburi dam. The structure is design to allow fish migration through the dam and reduce the effect on ecosystem and fishery. Most part of this structure will be underwater when the cofferdam that hold out the stream during construction is removed.

The quarry on the dam construction provides a good quality rock, which allows the builder to make one of the best quality concrete in Southeast Asia. Except for the rock from the quarry on site, most of the construction material is imported from Thailand. I passed by a few dam builder convoys on the road to Xayaburi, each consisting of 8 to 12 eighteen-wheeler trucks. I collected stones from the quarry and sampled concrete blocks from the dam, as documentation of the movement and transformation of the material from the mountain to the monumental dam structure on the Mekong river.

In 2019 this dam was in operation with its reservoir filled with water. The hillside, where the workers camp ground used to be, was empty, as most of the green metal sheet sheds had been demolished during the previous year. At the peak of its building, more than 10,000 people were living and working here. Compared to the Xayaburi population of 16,000, this construction site functioned as a small city on its own. It reminds me of the interview I had done in 2018 with the project mana-

ger of CK Karnchang, who said “when the project started, all of the trees had been documented before cutting them down, in order to replant the landscape at the end of the project.” Maybe such tactics not only cleared up the trace of construction, but also rubbed off the story of the thousands of workers who were once there.



The empty hillside land where the worker camp had been cleared out. Dam developer is preparing the reforestation process.

In 2018 I met Boonsri, an amiable man in his mid-40s at the resettlement village on the bank of Nam Khan, one of the main tributaries of the Mekong river. This is one of many resettlement villages that was built for the villagers whose homes had been flooded by the dam reservoir. He could be considered a lucky one, since he adapted to a new life quite well, subsequently working as a village guard. He and his family used to live upstream, growing rice for a living. In this resettlement village, they received a half-wood half-concrete house, after relocating here three years ago. All the houses in the village are near identical. Boonsri tells me, “The surveyor from the government came to our village and documented the condition of our home. They gave the new house to us according to our previous one. So the government can save their budget since they can scale down some elements on the most basic home. That is the reason why some of these stilt houses do not have a ground floor. His wife runs a small village shop, as opposed to their old livelihood where food can be acquired from the river. Regardless of having a school, electricity and much better infrastructure, the villagers are still left without access to fishery areas and adequate paddy fields. Many are not so lucky and have to travel back to their old field to grow the rice for feeding their family. At the end of our long conversion, I made family portraits for him and some of his friends. I was warmly received when I brought them the prints on a later trip.



Boonsri's family looking at their family portrait and passing it around the table. And the most basic stilt house in the resettlement village.



Somes of the new houses in Xayaburi where the foreige architecture element can be spotted. As a result of economic boom many Laotien are able to accumulate and show off their wealth

Even though the city of Xayaburi seemed quiet, new buildings are popping up everywhere. People are showing off their new wealth, evident in vivid-colored houses decorated with Roman columns, away from their traditional wooden-stilt houses. These 'wealthy' houses reminded me of the buildings I saw, during my trip to Yunnan, whose villages had a similar approach. The sudden surge in the local economy made people quickly pick up foreign influences, as a social status. One government officer who just moved into his new home told me "the economy is booming and he is happy about it."

Interestingly, in Xayaburi, the three-areas of housing - the worker camp, the resettlement area, and Xayaburi city - reflects how the development of this dam has vastly affected people in various ways. From the remains of temporary worker camps that no longer serve any purpose, to the colorful houses in the city of Xayaburi, the Mekong Basin population con-

tinue to experience economic uncertainty due to the unstable health of this river's ecosystem. Unfortunately, it is the villages who undergo resettlement, whose livelihoods are at stake, becoming more socially and economically vulnerable.

I am not here to define the good nor the bad of this dam. As Southeast Asia is hungry for more electricity, change is inevitable, but there is a need for increased dialogue between its landscape, the dam and its affected communities. As an artist I would like to pass on the awareness of the transboundary issue of The Mekong Basin. We need to realize the building of these dams to serve our lifestyle requires huge mobilization of capital, manpower and resource, which comes with significant consequences, both desirable and undesirable.

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Author's Bio

Wut Chalanant's artistic approach involves research into the historic, political and economic based activities and a physical exploration of these spaces on the edge of the normal experience, and he is working around the theme on the relationship between humans and space in the modern age. He is also interested by the ideology of urban development and how it alters space. Transformation of the land, through the shifting demands of the global economy, creates a void of context and opens up room for new interpretations. In order to search for the statement of our trace, he captures elements of the realities, which are later reconstructed.