Kittima Chareeprasit

pollination

Rivercomber

a visual reflection on a trip along the Mekong

01 The Hunter's Tale

In days long past, before the drawing of contemporary national borders, there was a hunter named 'Ta Jung Kung Dang Daeng', his name translating to 'very red nose'. Tall and powerful, the red-nosed hunter was supremely skilled in his craft. One day, as the hunter stalked a silver buffalo (named for its ability to excrete silver) down from Luang Prabang.

Coming upon his quarry on the banks of the Mekong River as it stopped to drink, the hunter notched his bow and took aim, only for a local villager's passing boat to obscure his view at the last moment. Startled by the boat's arrival, the buffalo fled up into a nearby mountain (hereby referred to as Silver Buffalo Mountain). Ta Jung Kung Dang Daeng shot after the buffalo, only to miss and hit another nearby mountain, shattering a portion of the mountain top and creating a steep cliff that locals called 'Phu Pha Ban'. Angered by the passing villager who allowed his prey to escape, the hunter blocked the Mekong's flow through the villager's settlement by constructing a dam from huge boulders as payback for their discretion. As he was about to complete his task, a passing monk noticed what the hunter was trying to achieve. Wishing to put a stop to the hunter's schemes, the monk tricked the hunter into using a special type of bamboo to create the carrying pole he used to move the boulders. Unbeknownst to the hunter, the bamboo he used had extremely sharp edges chopped, and the carrying pole cut a deep gash in his throat as he tried to use it. The hunter ultimately succumbed to his wounds, and died lying in a foetal position by the banks of the Mekong, and would be the origin of the river rock formation locally known as 'Kaeng Khut Ku'.

An illustrated sign depicting the origins of the name 'Kaeng Khut Ku', founded in front of Kaeng Khut Khu pier.

In many parts of Thailand, the history of local peoples and communities, as well as the 'historical origins' of various landmarks, tend to be told through the lens of myths and folklore. The same can be said for the story of 'Kaeng Khut Ku', which uses a fantastical tale or legend to explain how things came to be. Take the term 'Kaeng Khut Ku' – the word 'Kaeng' refers to the rock formations within a river, while 'Khut Ku' refers to the foetal position used by the hunter in the story. The area is a famous tourist attraction along the Mekong river, located in the Baan Noi village within the Chiang Khan district, Loei province.

As Tourism became the locals' primary source of income, many chose to create lodgings like these close by

The Big Buddha at Phu Kok Ngiew

The statue depicts the Buddha as he is giving out blessings, a symbol of protection and guarding, standing approximately 19 meters in height. It is located at the delta where the Hueang river meets the Mekong, and was built by the Royal Army's Second Division in conjunction with civilian efforts in honor of the late King Bhumibol Adulyadej Rama IX and Her Majesty Queen Mother Sirikit.

Once a barren patch of land, the area was first settled over 100 years ago by 5 families, sustaining themselves by farming cotton and tapioca, as well as fishing. Later, once roads were paved and travel became more accessible, the villagers began setting up refreshment stalls along the riverbank, before the Tourism Authority of Thailand took charge and renovated the area into a proper tourism hotspot in 1990, erecting a shrine and a large statue of 'Ta Jung Kung Dang Daeng' to act as a landmark for visiting travelers.

Phu Kok Ngiew Skywalk, a new tourist destination.

Photo credit: a Facebook user, Rattakit Malathong.

Kaeng Khut Khu (taken 2014)
Photo credit: Mthai

Kaeng Khut Khu (taken 2019)
Photo credit: MGR online

But the creation of this monument to 'Ta Jung Kung Dang Daeng' isn't just to create a compelling prop for photos, but also contributes a certain significance to the 'symbolic fengshui' of the area. With an imposing height of over 10 meters, the statue depicts the hunter as he pulls back his bowstring, the arrowhead pointed towards the direction of the Laos border as if in warning. As such, the statue also acts as a sort of talisman for the sake of border security, warding off any would-be invaders. Such morbid symbols can be found throughout the border areas, such as in Loei where a sight-seeing skywalk was created for tourists, featuring a large Buddha statue at Phu Kok Ngiew, which – as if by accident – is also faced towards the Laos border.

02 Nobody's 'just a fisherman'

The image of a dried-up Mekong became the topic of much discussion on Thai social media, followed by the alarming photos of the river changing colors from orange to blue[1] in 2019 after the Xayaburi Dam moved forward with their hydro-electricity trials. The clear and radical changes occurring to the scenery of the Mekong fascinated artist Ruangsak Anuwat-wimon, as well as myself when I had the opportunity to witness them with my own eyes.

Ruangsak Anuwatwimon — Artist
Natalie Organ — Intern

Our journey began at the start of June, after the government lifted the pandemic lockdown measures that restricted travel between cities due to the Covid 19 outbreak. I volunteered to drive, with an intern there to help me. We traveled from Chiang Mai, crossing regional borders into the Isaan area to pick up the artist, who arrived there by train from Bangkok. He had arrived before us, and was waiting for us at the coffee shop owned by the village's headman.

We chose Kaeng Khut Ku as our first destination. Partly due to the intriguing local folktales surrounding it, but also because we all saw the alarming photos of heavy drought in the area from the news.

Blue Mekong
Photo credit: Post Today

[1] The environmental issues facing the Mekong area were brought to the public's attention thanks to the work of many national news outlets, from BBC Thailand to Thai PBS. Their efforts were also bolstered by the many concerned private citizens in the area who recorded and broadcasted the phenomena through social media like wildfire.

In the early hours of the 7th of June 2020, we went for a walk along the river's stone shores when a fishing boat sailed past. Many of the local fishermen called out greetings to us, inviting us to come along on their boat. But we had other appointments that day, so we asked if they would be willing to come back for us again tomorrow morning. The fishermen gave us their word, and also promised to treat us to some fresh grilled fish.

The next morning, only one of the fishermen showed up to pick us up. He was named Prasert, and was about 60 years old. When we arrived at his raft, Prasert wasted no time in preparing the meal we were promised, bringing out two medium-sized river catfish from the basket hanging off the side of his raft. Prasert lived in a wooden raft house, divided into rooms in such a way that allowed him to dock his fishing raft to it, along with a bamboo bench for sitting. The raft house was large enough to dock maybe four or five boats, as Prasert said he usually lives with other house mates, but they were away that day to claim their 'Rao Chana' (We Win) compensation money from the government, which gave monetary aid to those who earned less than 300,000 Baht per year.[2] However, one had to register through a smartphone application to qualify for that aid using their citizen identification number. Prasert said he wasn't able to claim his aid money as the system did not recognize his citizenship, even though he had the smart-card to prove it. The story inevitably put a damper on our grilled-fish lunch, as we all sympathized with Prasert's plight, left to dry by the government's incompetent financial aid policies which failed to reach those that need it most.

[2] The Thai government has also enacted several other policies to aid those affected by Covid 19, such as the 'Kon La Krueng' (Half-and-Half) program, 'Travel Together' program, 'S. 33 We Love You', and 'We Will Not Leave You'. All of these programs are aimed towards varying demographic sectors, but all of them require registration through the internet while also having limited availability. An example of this would be the 'We Will Not Leave You' program which offered aid to 3 million private employees, part-timers, freelancers, and small-time business owners – a demographic with a total population of 20.4 million people nationwide. The government's policies have been widely criticized for their incompetence and inadequacy, failing to provide equal and sufficient aid to all, as if they are oblivious to the challenges facing their citizens today. More information regarding these government aid programs can be found at: https://www.bbc.com/thai/thailand-52350798

Another resident of Prasert's raft isn't human at all, but was a plucky mother hen that laid eggs all over the raft.

Tucked in another corner is a re-purposed icecream cabinet, used to store fish that were too small to sell.

At the head of the tour boat, there was a vase used in worship of 'Mae Ya Nang', a guardian spirit that existed on every boat and worshipped by every fisherman. The locals believed that 'Mae Ya Nang' can bring good luck to the boat's owner, while also protecting them from any misfortunes.

But Prasert wasn't just a fisherman. He was also a boatsman for hire, taking tourists on river tours to admire the Mekong scenery from Kaeng Khut Ku all the way to Chiang Khan. We hired Prasert as our tour guide, riding in a larger tour boat that Prasert rented. The tour boat was roughly four times the size of the typical fishing boat, and cost about 1000 Baht for a full round trip, though all we were able to observe was the desolation and lifelessness from the lack of tourists.

Another peculiar thing we noticed was the construction of walkways along the Mekong river, which also acted as an embankment preventing the earth from sagging due to the shifting water levels of the Mekong. We followed the path until we arrived at a small community of local crafts workers who created flower accessories from dyed fish scales, a local specialty for the visiting tourists. Barely any parts of the fish were left to waste.

We also met a group of local fishermen, who provided a volunteer to explain to us their traditional ways of fishing, from the tools used to the many rituals involved. This is especially true when fishing for the Mekong giant catfish. Commonly known as the 'Lords of the Mekong', these gargantuan fresh-water fish can grow to the size of a cow, thanks to its herbivorous diet of seaweed. Local villagers believe that these fish are protected by local deities, and that eating these giant catfish can bestow health and longevity to the eater, as well as good fortune.

To rely solely on fishing in the Mekong is no longer sufficient for living, and is no longer a viable option for the locals.

Phaya Nak (Nāga) are considered the patronage of water.

As such, it is believed that one must ask permission from the sacred Naga, the rightful ruler of the Mekong, before a giant catfish can be caught. As such, this isn't merely a process of fishing, but also a religious tribute to the Naga deity, so that the villagers can fish for these giant catfish with their blessings.

An older lady from the fishing group told us that there are no longer any giant catfish to be found in nature anymore. No one has laid eyes on these creatures for over thirty years, due to the ecological changes facing the Mekong for so long, and that these rituals haven't been practiced in decades. So where are these restaurants getting their giant catfish from?

Among the group of local fishermen was a man who had disabilities in speaking and hearing. And yet, everyone else swore that he was the best fishermen on them all. That day, he caught a huge striped barb.

PLA BUEK (Mekong giant catfish)

We traveled to the Loei Inland Fisheries Research and Development Center, where various types of fish – including the giant catfish – are kept. The center also lets members of the public buy baby fish for the purposes of breeding. Furthermore, the center's most important mandate is the breeding and repopulation of local fish populations in various water sources, to preserve what once existed for the future. While releasing artificially-bred catfish into the wild can end up producing imbalances in the ecosystem of the Mekong. The radically shifting water levels of the river are caused by such varying factors that reliance on the Mekong alone for sustenance is no longer viable for the local people.

03 Dead Fish in the Kitty Litter

GETTY IMAGES

Where the Mekong river flows past the Sangkhom district of the Nong Kai province, much of the water in the river has dried up, revealing a mound of sand right in the middle of it. This photo was taken on the 28th of October 2019, before the Xayaburi dam – located a mere 300 meters away – began operating on the 29th.

The dams constructed towards the upper areas of the Mekong river were built in a staggered ladder-like manner. Located within the borders of China, these dams have had significant effects on the water levels in the lower reaches of the Mekong close to the border between Laos and Thailand, which fluctuates based on the Chinese's use of the dam for hydro-electricity and agriculture.

Yet another important catalyst behind the changes in the Mekong's ecosystem emerged in the past two years: the Xayaburi Hydro-electric Dam, which went into full operation in October of 2019. The dam was the first dam in the lower Mekong area that is used for commercial purposes, generating electricity to be sold back to the Electricity Generation Authority of Thailand. Furthermore, another 10 dams are planned to be constructed all along the Mekong by various countries, including China, Laos, Thailand, and Cambodia.

Xayaburi dam (taken July 2019)
Photo credit: Bangkok Biz News

Our little driving trip along the edge of the Mekong was originally planned as a way to help the artist collect the animal carcasses he needed for his work, to reflect the biodiversity that is lost due to the ecological turmoil. But it made us witnesses to all the drastic changes occurring to the Mekong at this very moment.

We drove along Route 211, a paved road that ran all along the Mekong's edge. Along our way, we passed through many places, from Pak Chom, Pan Kod San Krai, Nong Pla Buek, Kaeng A Hong, Sangkhom, Sri Chiang Mai, Pon Phisai, and 'Sa Due Khong' (The Mekong's belly-button). We chose our locations via satellite imagery, while also using our own eyes to seek out ideal places for carcass collection along the way.

Some of the samples we found included:

Mekong Earthworm

Typically, the Mekong Earthworm is known for its gargantuan size, being as thick as an adult thumb while reaching anywhere from two to eight meters in length. When we came across the Earthworm's hole, we dug the specimen up to see if the rumors were true, but was disappointed since the worm we found was nowhere near that size.

Live shellfish

Shellfish Graveyard

We stopped by a small local village during our time in the Sangkhom district, where we found mounds of abandoned shells, along with a peculiar type of shellfish that resembled mussels, but were only the size of our fingernail. The locals shared that these miniature mussels began appearing just two years ago, and that they have never seen the species in the area before then.

Cladophora

A type of Fresh-water seaweed that grows on the stony reefs of the Mekong. While local villagers usually collect Cladophora for sale during the dry season, this bright-green plant is also the primary source of nourishment for many fresh-water fish species. We did not observe any Cladophora throughout our trip along the Mekong. The sample we managed to find came from an indoor tank from the nearby Inland Fisheries Research and Development Center instead, with the center's staff member telling us the plant must have come along when they took water from the Mekong a long time ago.

Dead Mammal Remains

Aside from the many species of fish, we were also able to find bones from various animals, such as a dog bone, a cow's jaw, and a goat's skull. All of these remains were carried along by the river only to get stuck on stone reefs and bushes, as if to symbolize that this body of water is the last refuge for these organisms.

Abandoned Vegetable Farms

Due to the irregular water releasing schedules set by the dams, many local villagers were forced to abandon their long-held traditions of farming for sustenance.

Top: Pan Kod San Krai (taken 2018)
Photo credit: Sanook

Pan Kod San Krai

Named for the common sights of rocky reefs ('Kod' in Thai) and 'Krai Hang Nak' (the name of a plant), a bushy plant that grows along the reefs. The plants typically enjoy high growth rates during the dry seasons. But due to the Mekong's increasingly erratic water levels over the past year, which lead to the loss of seasonal shifts. This in turn lead to the loss of the Krai plants, turning the 'Pan Kod San Krai' (Thousand Reefs, Hundred Thousand Krai) to 'Pan Kod Rai Krai' (Thousand Reefs, No Krai).

Fresh-water Pufferfish

Thailand is home to 9 species of fresh-water pufferfish, 4 of which are highly toxic. The one we found was a Black Pufferfish, which was particularly toxic. There have been numerous cases of locals in the Isaan region losing their lives from eating these pufferfish, as there is yet to be an antidote for their toxins.

1

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Numerous Fresh-water Fish Species

1 Red Clay
2 Xenentodon cancila
3 Goat Skull
4,5 Oreochromis niloticus
6 Trichogaster pectoralis
7 Paralaubuca typus

All these fish remains were collected by the artist in a plastic container that we found along the way, before being moved to a different container filled with cat litter sand, which absorbs all the moisture and odor at the same time. Even so, the stench of rotten fish was overpowering, and turned our car into what felt like a moving grave.

At long last, we arrived at the final destination of our journey: the deepest part of the Mekong, known by the locals as the 'Sa Due Khong' or 'Mekong's Belly-Button", which was located in the Bueng Kan province. It is said that the river reached depths of up to 200 meters here. We also saw a whirlpool, which local legends say marks the location of the Naga's lair.

That night, I had a dream of the Naga, who appeared in the guise of an old lady from the village we stopped by to ask for directions. In my dream, the old lady was holding a Krai branch in her hand, which she lifted to touch her forehead. At that moment, her eyes sprang open wide and without pupils, before her whole body transformed into that of the Naga.

I woke up with a start, concerned that our act of taking things from the Mekong might have angered the deity. The group decided to stop and pay tribute to the local spirits before we left, with the shrine we chose having a water basin with a Naga sculpture as decoration. We requested permission in bringing these items back with us, as well as a safe trip home. Needless to say, we also asked the deity for the next winning lottery numbers.

Kitty litter for Dead fish.

The Mekong river is, in many ways, a large public pool that everyone shares.

04 All River Islands Belong to Laos

The Mekong river can be considered a natural border between Thailand and Laos, the river's deepest trenches acting as the territorial line of each country, as per the treaty signed between Thailand and France in 1904. According to the treaty, Thailand (then known as Siam) forfeited its claim over the lands to the left of the Mekong to the French, along with all the islands found along the river's length (barring 8 islands that the French allowed Siam to keep, such as Don Kiew, Don Kiew Noi, Don Noi, Don Baan Paeng, etc.).

In times when the river has dried up to the extent that the flow of water is broken into multiple smaller streams, the Thai border is considered to be the trench closest to the Thailand side of the shore. Even when the afore-mentioned trenches eventually dried up all the way to the shore, the border is still considered to be the same trench in perpetuity. During our expedition to find these animal remains, we inadvertently stepped over that border line multiple times as we stepped on the Mekong river islands to find what we came for.

Along our exploration of the Mekong, we were generally well received by the locals in the areas we passed through. Many were more than willing to help us out, guiding us through the various river islands with reassuring confidence.

One time when we were trying to travel upcurrent, past Koh Kai and almost reaching Pak Nam Hueng, we came across a small island that seemed like it could be someone's private vacation island. There were simple tents made from bamboo wood and tarp, along with other evidence of habitation that we found, such as the many fish heads that were neatly chopped and stacked. Furthermore, there were small clay sculptures of two people in the middle of the island. One had his hair tied in a bun, while the other's head had hair sculpted in straight lines. Both were decorated with little leaves and twigs, and almost seemed like a miniaturized version of the island and its inhabitants down to the size of a palm, a symbol of those that called this island home.

Which was probably why during our trip, we saw a river police station, with a lot of patrolling boats parked intimidatingly by.

But alas, the locals could not take us to every island we wanted. To step upon these islands is technically considered an act of illegal immigration, and could be grounds for arrest by the patrolling Laos soldiers. If found guilty, we would be subject to at least 1 month in prison, along with a minimum fine of $100 USD per person. Other sections of the Mekong are also used by drug smugglers who ferry drugs over the border, which made us all the more grateful to have our knowledgeable local guides who helped guarantee our safety throughout the trip.

Located on the Mekong pier and decorated with the ASEAN flags, the arch is inscribed with the phrase '1st of January, 2016 Opening the door to ASEAN', with the hopes that the Mekong could serve as a connecting portal between the member nations

Deviating from the established routes along the Mekong could also be perilous for more natural reasons, as even professional fishermen aren't immune to accidents. Near the Kaeng Kla area, we ran into two concrete pillars, standing out from the river like a pair of boots. The pillars were placed on top of a stone reef, which our guide explained was useful for two reasons: it helped passing boats tell where the reef was in high tide, and it also served as a marker of the Thailand–Laos border.

Some of the images were taken by Natalie – whom I would like to share my gratitude for being such a wonderful companions – as well as Ruangsak who has inspired me through out this trip.

As such, it is evident that the management of these various river islands are done through the lens of national security, being a border area. But in another sense, the Mekong area was also supposed to be a connective thread for commerce and interactions between a diverse community of people.

05 The (New) Hunter of the Mekong

It was a sweltering evening, so hot we could see the heat distortion rising from the sand. This area of the Mekong was so parched it seemed like we would be able to cross to the other side by foot. In fact, we saw a man walking across the river from the Laos side towards Thailand. Once he crossed over, he jumped on a motorcycle parked nearby and rode off, as if this was something that everyone did all the time.

As it was in the olden days when 'Ta Jung Kung Dang Daeng' could simply step over the Mekong river freely.

Our entire voyage ultimately ended after 10 days. We drove the artist back to Bangkok, the paved riverside path slowly merging into the main road. From the scenes of nature to the metropolitan sights of the city. Even though it was starting to get dark, the little lights along the road still illuminated the way ahead all throughout the drive, which inadvertently brought up questions as to where all this electricity was coming from. Was this light powered by the Xayaburi dam? How much natural resources are we sacrificing for the sake of this convenience? What changes can we still expect to see from the Mekong?

Our little treasure hunt may have ended. Even so, the large-scale plundering of resources by corporations and super-power nations continues. As I was driving, the story of Ta Jung Kung Dang Daeng suddenly came to mind. It made me wonder; if the hunter had not fallen for the passing monk's deception, would he succeed in blocking the river's flow? Would those stone reefs that he tried to build act like a dam for the river, just as the continued construction of hydro- electric dams spell the end for the Mekong?

There may not be a clear answer as of yet, but we all know that even the smallest of changes upriver can have earth-breaking effects downstream.



Kittima Chareeprasit
(b.1989, Mahasarakham, lives and works in Chiangmai)

Kittima received her MA in Curating and Collections from Chelsea College ofArts and is currently curator at MAIIAM Contemporary Art Museum in Chiang Mai, Thailand. In 2016, she co-founded the Waiting You Curator Lab, focusing on curatorial approaches within contemporary art practices. Her interest lies mainly in contemporary art and culture that revolve around critical history, social and political issues. She has worked on numerous projects with both emerging and established artists within the realm of Southeast Asian Art and its cultural context.

Her recent curatorial work includes *House Calls: Pinaree Sanpitak* at 100 Tonson Foundation (2020) *Breast Stupa Cookery: the world turns upside down* at Nova Contemporary (2020), *Temporal Topography: MAIIAM's New Acquisitions; from 2010 to Present* at MAIIAM Contemporary Art Museum (2019), *In search of other times: reminiscence of things collected*, at JWD Art Space Bangkok (2019), *Occasionally Utility* at Gallery VER, Bangkok (2017), *The Thing That Takes Us Apart* at Gallery Seescape, Chiang Mai (2017)

pollination

Pollination #3 is organized by The Factory Contemporary Arts Centre in Ho Chi Minh City. Commissioned curators LIR (Yogyakarta) and Kittima Chareeprasit (Chiang Mai) invited artists Maryanto (Yogyakarta) and Ruangsak Anuwatwimon (Bangkok) to create the project 'Of Hunters and Gatherers'. After more than a year in field research — beneath Mount Merapi's explosive peaks and the over-dammed Mekong that gives border to Thailand and Laos — 'The Hunters' exhibition opened at the MAIIAM Contemporary Art Museum, Chiang Mai (19 March, 2021) with an online symposia (28-30 May, 2021) and dedicated

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