

Challenging the Limits: Indigenous Peoples of the Mekong Region

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Challenging the Limits: Indigenous Peoples of the Mekong Region

Edited by Prasit Leepreecha,
Don McCaskill, and Kwanchewan
Buadaeng. Chiang Mai, Thailand:
Mekong Press, 2008. ix + 379 pp.
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974-8418-20-9.

Challenging the Limits is a volume of papers arising from a conference held in Chiang Mai, Thailand, in 2004. The same conference also yielded a companion volume (McCaskill et al 2007) and was supported by a Rockefeller Foundation research project. The Mekong Press Foundation, through which *Challenging the Limits* is published, is itself an interesting venture. It was founded in 2005 by Trasvin Jittidecharak, who also established the well-known Thailand-based publishing house Silkworm Books. Mekong Press is also supported by the Rockefeller Foundation and states on its website that “its aim is to encourage and support the work of local scholars, writers, and publishing professionals in Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam, and the other countries in the Greater Mekong Subregion.”

Challenging the Limits contains 12 papers by people with both depth and breadth of understanding of the greater Mekong Region, particularly its upland areas, and each paper individually presents a strong level of discussion about the ways in which “globalization” intersects with local practices, beliefs, and systems of representation. It is perhaps surprising that there are not more local voices among the papers, given the stated objective of the press (only 3 of the 12 are written by scholars from the region). However, this possibly also reflects the difficulty of getting local voices published in English, which the press, in the longer term, hopes to address.

The book is divided into two parts. The first addresses the ways in which development policies have been introduced by various states of the region, specifically Laos and Vietnam, and how these have had unintended consequences. The second part deals largely with the cultural response of local communities to global and national forces, or what Mikael Gravers refers to as the “tactical device within a wider strategy” (p 153) relating to representations and rights. It is in Part I that those interested in the details of mountain development policy will find much to interest them, as 3 of the papers (by To Xuan Phuc, Bernard Moizo, and Paul T. Cohen and Chris Lyttleton) deal in some depth with efforts by these states to implement policy relating to slash-and-burn and shifting cultivation. Where these chapters succeed is in the fact that they do not lose sight of the response to these policies within the communities that have been affected by them. The result is that, even in this section, the notion of the interaction of local communities and national and global forces is still emphasized. However, this also makes the division of the book into two parts seem somewhat artificial, and one wonders whether this reflects its one major drawback: that it needed more rigorous interventions by the editors to extract and refine its intellectual purpose. Any editors involved in the publication of 2 large edited volumes over the course of 2 years are going to have their work cut out, and perhaps this rather too obvious division of the texts into “from within” and “from without” is one of the consequences. Part II covers a range of contexts from education and literacy (Scott O’Brien, Judith Pine), to a very dense sociological discussion of network analysis (Nathan Badenoch), to discussions of the fluid nature of historical representations (Ma Jian-xiong), to the shifting role of Theravadan Buddhism and its relations with popular culture (Roger

Casas and Wasan Panyagaew). As with Part I, all of the papers are interesting and informative, but the standard of writing and analysis and the length of the papers are more uneven. Again, however, there was little sense of integration between the papers, and by the end of the volume, I started to tire of the case study element and wanted much more to be said about the issues raised and those issues to be more broadly drawn.

Some of the papers will last the test of time better than others; 2 papers in particular stand out in this respect, those by Charles Keyes and Mikael Gravers. Both are senior academics who have produced seminal works in their field, and one would expect them to produce high-quality papers. However, the reasons why these papers worked most successfully were that they did speak to broader issues and were not so embedded in a local ethnographic approach that they lost sight of the bigger themes of the book. Even Gravers, who writes in detail, and at length, about the Karen context in Thailand, manages to pull these threads of analysis into a bigger discursive picture concerning the ways in which we understand the response of local communities, especially their utilization of the categories “tradition” and “modernity” in their political discourses. Keyes’s paper continues the analysis that he has already developed elsewhere concerning the history of ethnic structuring in Southeast Asia, here focusing just on Thailand and Vietnam (Keyes 2002). As a historian myself, I find this kind of contextual analysis vitally important if we are to give depth to evidence-based lines of research, and it is a shame that this chapter could not have extended its scope to consider the other states that are included in this volume. It that sense, it only does half the job it could have done, but no doubt issues of length must have come into play.

Southeast Asianists are notoriously self-conscious about their use

of geopolitical models to define the scope of their region and of their studies. In recent years the construct “Mekong Region” or “Greater Mekong Region” has been used as a means of facilitating a concentration on Laos, Thailand, Vietnam, Cambodia, and Southwest China, with Burma being included rather awkwardly when needs must. There is nothing about the Mekong here per se, and the definition seems to be used instead to carve out mainland Southeast Asia without Malaysia and Singapore (and Burma). This can be seen as a regional construct that is an alternative to calling it the Southeast Asian Massif, for example, as promoted by Jean Michaud (2000, 2006), or the Southeast Asian uplands, or more recently Zomia, as suggested by Willem van Schendel (2002) and latterly James Scott (2009). As such, the reference to the Mekong region is rather artificial and its value as a framework of interpretation is not made clear. However, this also goes back to the main difficulty with the book mentioned previously: that it needs a much stronger editorial voice and a much stronger introduction to draw out

the relevance of its geopolitical model, to explore what facets of nationalism and globalization are under discussion and thus what we can draw from all these case studies at a theoretical level. This would also help the volume to be of use to a wider range of specialists. Too much relating to the issue of globalization is implied here, resulting in a burden upon the reader to make all the necessary inferences. Critically also there are no cross-references between the papers: the authors give the impression of being entirely unfamiliar with each other’s work. This is, of course, the typical drawback of edited volumes arising from conference presentations. However, given the objective of the Mekong Press to produce high-quality discourse and training for local practitioners in best practice in publishing, it is something which should perhaps have received more attention from the editors than it did. Anyone interested in Southeast Asian development policy, ethnography, and ethnic politics will find this volume useful and informative. Others will find value in individual case studies but will perhaps struggle to work their way through the entire volume

without more explicit, incisive intellectual linkages being made to encourage them to do so.

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