

Chapter 2

Salween: What's in a Name?



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2.1 Introduction: Decolonising Development and Renaming the Salween?

In this short chapter, I walk the reader through the ways the river conventionally referred to as ‘Salween’ is called upon differently in distinct places by many people.¹ I consider the significance of the act of naming a place, a river in particular, and the ways through which this naming can change or influence perceptions of the place being named. I invoke the many names of this river as represented in a series of geographical sites, films, and local knowledge projects, which in many times emerge alongside colonial studies and developmentalist names for the river, internationally known as a single entity by one name: the Salween. I present these euphonious invocations of the river as a way to highlight the multiple meanings of/ in place and to consider who or what they privilege, and what they displace.

The debate about the power of place naming is long-running and contentious, engaging residents, states, cartographers, activists, and academics (including Geographers, like myself). The name of the region “Southeast Asia”, as Emmerson (1984) argued, for instance, privileges the perceptions of European powers rather than those of the people in the place so-named. ‘South’ of China, ‘East’ of India, Southeast Asia was primarily named by outsiders and imagined as a region through acts of war and nation building, which also influenced subsequent studies and invocations of the term. Naming places not only invokes a history, it also has implications, potentially displacing other histories, or in many instances homoge-

¹The original concept for this chapter came from a shorter commentary written in 2014 on Mekong Commons (<http://www.mekongcommons.org/politics-of-place-naming-salween-river/>). That piece and this chapter benefitted from editorial comments from Mekong Commons editors.

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nizing diversity for more legible cartesian lines and states with only one name. Geographer Tuan (1991: 698) contends, however, that “The most striking evidence of naming to create a seemingly coherent reality out of a congerie of disparate parts is the existence of Asia.” Named at the end of the 17th century, Asia “was defined negatively as all that was not Europe. Asia’s reason for existence was to serve as the backward, yet glamorous ... Other”. Foundational work by Said (1979, 1985) took this argument further to consider how on the construction of another geographical region, the “Middle East” (how the West sees the East), was explicitly named as linked to asserting imperial order and defining who could speak on behalf of place. As a result, those who imagined and became experts on the “Middle East” did so by understanding this place as a British colony, and the accompanied configuration of knowledge and power positioned those who resided in that place as less knowledgeable, as less in a position of expertise (Mitchell 2002).

In this short piece, I draw on these approaches to consider what is at stake in naming and developing the ‘Salween’ River. Seemingly “left off the map” in the development sense for a long time (Paoletto/Uitto 1996), the name and term Salween is now being more visibly contested, mapped, and stabilized. I argue that it is important to pay attention to the names we use, as well as those names we discard, questioning who or what they privilege. In particular, I consider how local residents across the basin differently name and produce knowledge about this river to show the multiple meanings and invocations of ‘Salween’. This is increasingly important in the context of increased development and international attention, where there is both risk for homogenizing the multifaceted histories of the river basin, and an opportunity for multiple invocations of the river to be considered and circulated.

2.2 Names of Control and Controversy

To be clear, these controversies over naming and the work they accomplish are not limited to geographical regions like ‘Asia’ or to just the river Salween. In North America, a river known by hundreds of names by indigenous residents became one river system after colonial contact, known as the Mississippi. This was accomplished as “French explorers in the seventeenth century carried the word ‘Mississippi’ (of Algonquian origin)² all the way from the source of the river in Minnesota to its mouth on the Gulf. In time, ‘Mississippi’ had displaced all other names (both Indian and Spanish) that applied to only limited stretches of the river” (Tuan 1991: 688). Tuan explains that as a result, the Mississippi going forward “evoked an image of a vast hydrological system” (1991: 688). I raise this example not to contend that the name ‘created’ the entire river system (for that would mean that it did not exist to indigenous groups prior, or only existed due to the ‘material transformation of nature’), but that this naming did the work of bringing together

²Baca explains that specifically, Mississippi is Algonquian (Ojibwa/Chippewa) for “big river” – *misi (mshi)*, ‘big’ and *sipi (ziibi)*, ‘river’ (Baca 2007: 58).

what might have been seen as disparate places, with different names and histories, under one system, to be acted upon and managed – *the* Mississippi.

At the mouth of ‘the’ Salween River, where it emerges in the Tibetan uplands, it is and has been better known as *Gyalmo Ngulchu*. In 1938, a British geographer named Kaulback came with an assistant to “explore as much as we could” and to trace and map the river courses. This was written and documented in the *Geographical Journal* published by Great Britain’s Royal Geographical Society (Kaulback 1938: 7). Kaulback explained that venturing on previously undocumented routes “enabled us wholly to change the general shape of this piece of country as shown in previously existing maps” (Kaulback 1938: 99). The maps and knowledge produced at the time show *his* journey across the countryside, highlighting ‘pieces of country’ that were novel to British geographies. As one of the earlier instances I can locate in modern geography which names this stretch of the river ‘Salween’, it certainly represents one step towards a cartography of a single river system.

In other parts of the upper stretches of the river, however, it is still not known as ‘Salween’. In China, for instance, it is known as *Nu Jiang*, and as it flows down through Thailand and Myanmar, the river is known by many names, including *Thanlwin*, *Nam Khone* (Shan State, Myanmar) and *Salawin* (Mae Hong Son, Thailand).

In Myanmar, stories about the way that the name ‘Salween’ emerged are noteworthy. It is traced back to 1800s British cartographies as a British corruption of the Burmese word *Thanlwin*.³ Before Kaulback’s 1930s visit to the uplands where he mapped the river there as ‘Salween’, the name ‘Salween’ was enshrined in colonial documents and maps of Southeast Asia in the 1800s. It was then circulated and propagated across Europe and beyond, reaching the work of Kaulback and others. In many ways, this naming invokes the critiques by Said and Emerson of constructing regions: it honors outside colonizers, not the peoples and places of the region. Furthermore, as Said argues in *Culture and Imperialism* (1993), the privileging of Western perspectives on the ‘East’ was part of the accomplishment, alongside or as constitutive of the map: now, the experts who are seen as best positioned to construct knowledge and name places are positioned outside, as objective observers, in service of a distant center.

2.3 Names and Their Implications

Presently, however, the Salween is being defined more in terms of its potential to contribute to economic and energy development for the region (see, for instance, Middleton et al., Chap. 3, this volume), rather than in relation to the British control,

³I have heard the words “Than Lwin” linked to the word ‘olive’ and linked back further to possibly Sanskrit.

or in relation to the river's local values – it is a different set of relations invoked. As the region's nation-states pursue economic growth via resource extraction, the Salween is being invoked as a 'natural resource' and energy development planners are increasingly paying attention to the basin, with at least 20 large dams now proposed by investors from Thailand, China, and Myanmar for this as yet still un-dammed mainstem of the river (Middleton et al., Chap. 3, and Yu et al., Chap. 4, this volume).

This work to develop "the Salween", however, cannot be accomplished without the naming, understanding, and decision-making of the river as a particular kind of system, whether it is a single Salween system, or separate systems divided by political borders, such as *Thanlwin* and *Nu Jiang* systems. The feasibility and efficacy of energy developments on the river for electricity generation require the water flows of the upstream to be managed as a system. Yet, none, of this, can proceed "in the absence of words" (Tuan 1991: 692). And, as noted above, not all names or stories necessarily accomplish these same ends. Across the basin, the river is and has been a significant source of food and livelihoods for residents and this is articulated by residents themselves, in the different ways the rivers is used and invoked (as seen in many of the contributing chapters to this book, for instance, the important study of ethnobotany of indigenous ethnic groups in Chap. 10 by Drs. Mar Mar Aye and Swe Swe Win; Saw John Bright's study of "rights and rites" in Karen State in Chap. 5, or Ka Ji Jia's study of naming and cultural practices in Tibetan uplands in Chap. 15, this volume). I also consider these names and the ways they are used in a range of local knowledge projects which I focus on below.

2.4 Euphonious River Labels

Thanlwin. Mother. Eater of people. Natural resource. Border. Gyalmo Ngulchu. Angry. Energy rich flow resource. China's Grand Canyon. Nam Khone. Salawin.

These are just some of ways I have heard this river invoked in my studies and visits across the basin (see Fig. 2.1: Names of the Salween). These multiple names reflect the river's cross-border position and the region's multifaceted histories and residents' connections to place. What else do these multiple names and phrases tell us about the river? How do these names index different ways of coming into relation with the river? Do the different names of the Salween not just indicate multiple meanings, but also, different ways of relating to place?

In the mid-2000s in Karen State, there was an important naming project conducted near a bend in the river called *Khoe Kay*, where the river forms the political border between Myanmar and Thailand. This collaborative research endeavor by indigenous ethnic Karen residents, activists, and academics focused on biodiversity, emphasizing links to a particular place, *Khoe Kay*. The team was the first group of researchers to be permitted by the local community to write down and systematize



Fig. 2.1 Names of the Salween. *Source* Cartography by Chandra Jayasuriya, University of Melbourne, with permission

the knowledge and expertise of local residents. Their research was published by the Karen Environment and Social Action Network (KESAN 2008).

One of the most compelling features of this collaborative research project was the way that species identification—a form of naming—was conducted. Local researchers helped conduct research based on a local set of parameters that focused on the researchers' five senses: sight, hearing, taste, smell, and touch. For instance, whether or not a plant species was hard or soft, hairy or itchy, or what sounds tree leaves made in the blowing wind, were relied up on as identification markers. While this is not unlike more conventional scientific assessment that look to properties or particular markers in species identification, it does represent a certain shift in terms of who the experts, or 'namers', are. Even though academics specializing in plant species identification might be better positioned to provide or identify Latin names

for local plants, local residents identified species names in local languages and provided identification related to, for instance, the sounds that leaves make.

This link between identification, expertise and “who can name” are seen not only in research, but also in more popular presentations of the river basin. Names can maintain and enhance meaning, as in literature and film. For instance, the names and experts portrayed differ greatly across and within films about or featuring the Salween. This includes a full range, from the Hollywood cinematic production of the Salween River as illustrated in *Rambo IV* (2008) to the earlier Thai film *Salween* (1995), to more recent local documentaries, including *River of Ethnic Minorities* (2007).

One local film of note focused on perceptions of the river-border emerged from a local participatory project called, *Ngan Wijay Thai Baan* or Villager Research (Committee of Researchers of the Salween Sgaw Karen 2005). Not all that different in its approach from the *Khoe Kay* study, Villager Research brought local residents to collaborate with NGO staff and academics to conduct research on issues of ecological significance as defined collaboratively early on. The ‘villagers’ undertook the research through photography and keeping record of their daily activities, and NGO staff acted as research assistants, assisting in identification, facilitation, and systematization of the villagers’ work. In this film, local residents who led in the research invoke the river by multiple names; as, for instance, ‘Salawin’, ‘Khone’, and ‘Salween’, as well as in multiple ways, as the “river of life” and the river as “my home”... “gives us everything we need”... “is not only for us”... “peoples of the Salween basin have been protecting natural resources.” In these films, the focus is on the everyday activities of residents and their significance. Multiple names are remarked and the Salween as a basin is invoked as a mobilizing force for local resource protection.

In quite stark contrast, consider Hollywood’s rather aggressive portrayal of the Salween in *Rambo IV*. This, the most recent of the *Rambo* films, takes place along the river where it forms the political border between Thailand and Burma, introducing us to Rambo’s “temporary home” at the Salween where he has lived since his last exploit. The images and narrative here conjure and emphasize histories of violence and oppression, with the area as largely inhospitable and full of danger, in contrast to the river as ‘home’ and providing for local residents.

In Rambo’s telling, outsiders are both the main characters and, in typical Hollywood fashion, portrayed as the “last hope” for the region. As the narrator notes, “Burma’s a war zone”... “You know his name”... “A warrior will come.” Residents, their livelihoods, and the river are part of the backdrop for the action to unfold.

Rambo’s portrayals of the Salween as a place are distinct from the depictions in the local research film in ways that are both expected and important. When you realize that Rambo is portrayed as living in the same area that the abovementioned film documents, the distinctions are all the more striking. Local residents, when involved in producing films about their own lives and the river, are not shown fleeing violence and are not indistinguishable parts of the landscape. Instead, villagers are positioned as experts who are connected to an important place and who

represent themselves as agents of river management. In the vein of the *Khoe Kay* research, local residents in the Villager Research film are themselves agents in naming and place-making.

This relationship between naming, place-making, and expertise—as seen in different names and portrayals of this river across the basin—emphasizes that the distinctions matter. A name does not simply exist; it is constructed and used with meaning, sets of relations, and with implications for who can ‘know’ about it. These films invoke different histories, different namers, and I would argue, alongside different versions of expertise are different kinds of interventions.

2.5 Decolonising the River’s Name, but for What Kind of Change?

While the name Salween has been relied upon in many development agreements, in 2011 the government of Myanmar officially changed the river’s name to Thanlwin. This move is related to the way that the name ‘Salween’ emerged, as described above, which we can also trace back to British *misunderstandings* of local invocations of place. It is worth asking what did it take for the river to be re-renamed? For, as Tuan notes, “Normally, only a sociopolitical revolution would bring about a change in the name in a city or a nation” (Tuan 1991: 688). At the time of this ‘return’ of the name to Thanlwin, a social-political transformation was, in fact, taking place in Myanmar and continues to present. This was the same year that Myanmar moved towards democratic rule (and away from decades of authoritarian regimes) with the first elections held in at least three decades. Even if the opposition party, Aung San Su Kyi’s National League for Democracy, could not participate in the 2011 elections, this experience laid the groundwork for their eventual participation and win in 2015. This, of course, does not indicate that the new name, even in its move away from a colonial power’s misnomer, is uncomplicated and uncontentious. In fact, it in some ways represents something of an imposition on local indigenous groups, whose own names for the river are obscured for the rise of a common, “Myanmar” name and associated national rules and policies related to one river system: Thanlwin.

2.6 Concluding Points

There is much at stake at the moment for the river. Many of the large projects discussed in this volume would irrevocably change the river flow and function, and are being planned in the basin without adequate studies or knowledge of local ecologies and their existing management regimes, and without the participation and knowledges of local residents. Moreover, there are questions about how the river

will be acted upon – will it be seen and studied as a “single river system”, the Salween, as a site for large-scale hydropower development? Will the river be mapped as dual systems, first, the *Thanlwin*, with federal or domestic Myanmar policies and processes responsible for its future, and then, the *Nu Jiang*, with separate Chinese policies for hydropower and or conservation? Or, could the river be imagined as ‘home’ to many, with distinct values, uses, and multiple names, but as part of a broader set of relationships even, ‘friendships’?

Moving forward then, as the river is further studied, mapped, and named, in addition to naming, there is at stake the corollary sets of relations and people who will provide expertise and speak on behalf of the river going forward. As Mitchell explains in *Rule of Experts*, the tasks of producing expert knowledge and development outcomes are linked, “expert knowledge works to format social relations, never simply to report or picture them” (2002: 118). In other words, who are included or made as the ‘experts’ on the river going forward will not only configure the possibilities for development (Paoletto/Uitto 1996) but will also influence who are involved and how. Will the basin’s residents be experts and researchers, as residents with strong connections to place, or as victims and part of the backdrop for which national or international ‘development’ unfolds? To attend to the names we use and consider how this has the potential to honor multiple histories, but also to better acknowledge the transformations taking shape—that rivers, naming, and development can be done differently, is possibly a small contribution to also better understanding the relationships between peoples and ecologies of this multifaceted region.

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