

Chapter 16

Future Trajectories: Five Short Concluding Reflections



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16.1 Concluding Commentary: State of Knowledge and Geographies of Ignorance of/in the Salween River Basin

Chayan Vaddhanaphuti

16.1.1 *Introduction: Observations on the Status of “Salween Studies”*

In the past five years, I have watched the work on the Salween take shape. The center I lead, the Regional Center for Social Science and Sustainable Development, and I have helped organize and support various events. The “First International Conference on Salween-Thanlwin-Nu Studies” held 14–15 November 2014 at Chiang Mai University, Thailand was a landmark meeting – the first of its kind to put “Salween Studies” on the map.

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Moving forward, I argue that what we need overall is to look at the whole Salween River Basin and identify certain areas for case study research so that we can learn more about the complex relationships between people and their environment, between water and culture. We need to use a multidisciplinary approach to these studies.

16.1.2 Knowledge ‘Needs’ and Gaps: What’s Lacking in Our Salween Knowledge?

In terms of physical science, Myanmar has been ahead of us in Thailand. Professor Maung Maung Aye of Myanmar is leading a team to look at the geomorphology of this important river system along with others at the University of Yangon (e.g., Bird et al. 2008 foundational study on Irrawaddy and Salween geomorphology). In China, we are learning more about the river’s biodiversity (Xiaogang et al. 2018). Whereas, in Thailand, we have seen a much greater focus on social science research. For instance, of late we have new case studies (e.g., Hengsuwan 2012, 2013; Lamb 2014a, b). Even as early as the late 1990s, though, we saw studies of the Salween start up in Thailand. These studies were not led by academics, but by a group of NGOs like SEARIN in collaboration with local residents, who led a study on the Thai side of the Salween River (e.g., TERRA 1999, or the Thai Baan ‘Villager’ research published by SEARIN in 2005). In Thailand, we have also seen emergent archaeological studies within the Salween River Basin (Shoocongdej 2006; Lampert et al. 2003), with ancient pottery uncovered near the Salween. This evidence of human and environmental history must also exist in Myanmar and China.

16.1.3 Social and Cultural Meanings of the Salween River

What of the people of the Salween? The diverse ethnic groups, who are they? Shan, Pa’O, Danu, Kayan, Karenni, Karen, Ta-ang, Inthar and more. What of the ethnic relations within or among these groups in the Salween River Basin? What of the conflict between the state and the ethnic groups? What is the likelihood their agricultural practices will continue?

The ethnic people in the Salween River Basin have different ways of adapting to the ecological systems. There are different types of shifting cultivation, different land uses, different types of land tenure systems, different types of community forest management, and the paths they are entering into, such as an agricultural transition. What has happened to these over and through time? We have limited knowledge on this, we should do more.

Another key issue is the cultural meaning of the river. Yu Xiaogang et al., Chap. 4, this volume, raise the issue of world cultural heritage sites and the way in which the Chinese government envisions the Nu Jiang as a ‘green’ watershed, an area focused on preservation of resources, not a dam area. But how do people fit into this vision? What is the perception or meaning given by local people? Do they recognize sacred places in the Salween River where people pay respect? In Thailand, local people ordain trees to protect the forests along the Salween. Tree ordination ceremonies link cultural practice to practices of forest conservation.

People also have special relationships with the river. They have local knowledge and certain ways of using the river. We need to know more about these complex relationships. People living along the Mekong River have an area where they call ‘luang’ or customary practice, or community rights to fish in the area. It is not private ownership of the river, but for common use. But there are also parts of the river that can be owned privately or owned by groups of people. What kinds of customary laws are in practice along the Salween? How do Peace Parks or World Heritage designations recognize those laws and customs?

There is need for intensive, qualitative or ethnographic studies on these communities building from local histories, and their livelihood practices.

16.1.4 Economy of the Salween River

I also have identified a need to study the Salween economy, based upon different resources such as fisheries, forestry, sand mining, rice-growing, handicrafts, riverbank gardening, local trade and cross-border trade. Can we estimate the income generated annually from the river basin? What are the main livelihoods of people in the Salween River Basin? The Salween fishing economy is a very interesting topic that I would like to take up personally. We should know how much income is generated by fisherman in the lower Salween river; even the economic values of the forest and so on, are just some of the things we do not know yet, but which demand further study.

16.1.5 Politics

When we talk about water governance, we must discuss politics. In Myanmar, for example, we cannot talk about only one state. There are states within a state. There are what Callahan (2003) called ‘state-like agents’, ethnic armed groups, BGF (border guard forces). What about the political economy of border land areas and cross border migration, dam construction in relation to militarization, and state and

non-state actors in the contestations around dam construction? All of these issues need to be addressed. The question of refugees and internally displaced peoples (IDPs) has also been raised by many researchers, including some in this volume, but not as a topic of study on its own. This requires further work. It also requires recognition of the history of the Salween and resource development, that there is also a history of conflict, and that it is linked to dam building.

16.1.6 Gender

It is also worth highlighting that there has been movement to include gender perspectives in Salween Studies. At the 2018 Salween Research Workshop at least two papers brought in gender perspectives: one by Hnin Wut Yee (2018) about gender inclusion in social justice, and Nang Shining's (2018) ecofeminism evolution and the readiness of gender evolution in the case of Mongton Dam Project. We also have an important chapter presented in this book on intersectional feminism (El-Silimy, Chap. 8, this volume) and recent work on feminist political ecology (Lamb 2018). So, we have this important gender perspective emerging in the Salween River studies.

16.1.7 Pathways

I think it would be interesting to look at the whole Salween River Basin and identify certain areas, to take a closer look using case studies so that we can learn more. At the leading panel at the 2018 Salween Workshop, we heard several papers presented around the development model in the Salween River Basin. For instance, Middleton (2018) and colleagues introduced the distinct pathways of development for the Salween from local perspectives and from the perspective of states. This was a way to consider the multiple perspectives and modes of development for the river basin, and that they are ongoing simultaneously. It was the first time I heard about the pathways concept, but it helps to think about not only existing pathways, but the way to move forward.

16.1.8 Collaboration and Concepts

In bringing these diverse topics together – politics, knowledge, water, people, gender – I think that the challenging concept of Zomia is best positioned to help us in our thinking and collaborations.

van Schendel (2002), and later Scott (2009), have developed the term ‘Zomia’. van Schendel argues, for instance, “In order to overcome the resulting geographies of ignorance, we need to study spatial configurations from other perspectives as well” (2002: 664).

If you look at this area, the Salween is representative of a ‘border area’. There are people who do not want to be governed. You can look at the people along this border, between Thailand and Myanmar along the Salween River, who resist the control by the state. Not only in the Burmese/Myanmarese state but also the Thai state. What Saw John Bright, Chap. 5, this volume, shows us about the Peace-Park is that it can be understood as an attempt to set up self-autonomy or self-governance, which I also see as part of the art of *not* being governed. Of course, at the same time, people in the basin, and even in the Peace Park, may also want to have some state support. People in the basin should have the opportunity to do both.

Moving forward, what I see is that in the spirit of overcoming the ‘geographies of ignorance’ we need a kind of collaboration between scholars from different disciplines, to be not only spatially distinct but also distinct in approach. I want to emphasise this: scholars working together on certain issues in the Salween River Basin should be multidisciplinary. I am not speaking of a ‘sum of studies’ or a kind of systematic review, but there should be an attempt to cross-fertilize ideas between disciplines or to transcend disciplines. You cannot talk about fish species, river governance, and ethnic perspectives on ecology separately; these need to be in conversation with one another. Instead, more interesting would be to have, as a starting point, discussions about how ethnic groups make use of the river, and to highlight their local knowledge of fisheries. What is the meaning of fish, what kind of income (monetary or not) is derived? More than that, we can ask about the seasonal variation throughout the year, the different activities in dealing with the ecological change or river change and the different kinds of resources available at different times of the year. There is a need to work together from different disciplines.

In terms of multi-disciplinarity or transdisciplinarity, the emphasis is on people from different disciplines investigating on one issue, or more than that. This also includes working together with non-academic actors. Here is the call for collaboration between non-academics and academics. Academics from different disciplines working with non-academics, be they policy makers, local officials, or villagers.

I would like to conclude that this may be significant to find ways, resources, and further collaborations in learning more and I hope that this knowledge would be helpful for us to work to preserve or to protect the Salween River; to make it run free.

16.2 Positioning the Salween in Myanmar's River Politics

Khin Maung Lwin

16.2.1 Myanmar's New River Politics

With democratic change coming to Myanmar, its citizens are being pushed into “river politics.” The first major event was the suspension of the Myitsone Dam in 2011, which is located at the confluence of May Kha and Mali Kha Rivers that form the headwater of the “Mother Ayeyarwaddy,” as it is known by people from all walks of life dwelling in the river basin.

The suspension of the Myitsone Dam by order of President U Thein Sein encouraged citizens and activists. For the first time in Myanmar's history, people successfully raised their voices in protest against a mega-project. The government is lucky to hear the voices of the people, as these voices signal an early warning for the potential failures of development plans. The government should facilitate them to raise their voices and share evidence to ensure that decisions are properly informed.

Following the government's decision on the Myitsone Dam, waves of river politics followed. Project developers from India withdrew their plans to build the Htamanthi Dam on the Chindwin River, and on the Salween River the Hatgyi Dam was reportedly also suspended.

A growing body of research has been another important dimension of these new river politics. One important contribution of this book is to help us know the Salween River better, so as to keep our natural and social environment safe and livable, and to develop our economy with ethics. For example, Chap. 10, this volume, by Mar Mar Aye and Swe Swe Win shows how various medicinal plants are valuable to ethnic groups in the Lashio area of Shan State. Yet, unfortunately, this type of knowledge is commonly neglected by hydropower project developers. Hence, when the cost of constructing a hydropower dam is calculated, project developers often exclude valuable assets such as these. This insight reveals why hydropower seems to be the cheapest option on the menu when potential energy sources are considered.

16.2.2 Conflict and Peace on the Salween

The Salween River basin is one of fragmented sovereignties (Middleton et al., Chap. 3, this volume). Some actors talk of the long history of the basin and the people within it, while others want to push quickly for a modern vision of development. These different groups find it difficult to dialogue, and unfortunately some

choose the way of armed conflicts. The victims are many ethnic people in the basin, who end up having to run for their lives from conflicts. Myanmar is attempting a process of national reconciliation to create a peaceful federation. However, the ceasefire arrangements to date are only a temporary and superficial solution. The Salween River basin must become a test area for more constructive engagement.

Here too, this book makes some useful contributions. For example, Saw John Bright, Chap. 5 this volume, offers the concept of ‘Rights’ and ‘Rites’ in his analysis of communities living near the proposed Hatgyi Dam in Kayin State. He shows how people there currently generate income without destroying nature, but are now facing a double threat from armed conflict and also the planned Hatgyi Dam.

Experts from the National Water Resources Committee (NWRC) have continued to work on a National Water Law since 2015, although it is still not yet finalized. This work is an effort to protect the rights of the people to receive timely information, be involved in project design processes and to receive a decent share of the benefits, and to ensure the right to claim for any losses to property and livelihoods.

As Saw John Bright rightly mentions in his chapter, Myanmar’s National Water Policy, passed in 2014, did not address the subject of armed conflicts related to water. However, the draft law does seek to address this more directly. Legislating for the decentralization of water resources management to the state and regional governments, self-administered regions and local administration is a step that should enable various scales of dialogue. It should be based on the principles of federalism.

Another important step in Myanmar would be to review the current situation of each of the country’s existing 581 dams of various sizes for their sustainability, for their revenue over investments, and for their outcome and impact. While awaiting the results of such an assessment, it would be advisable to keep the Salween River running freely without major dams built.

16.2.3 Five Salween River Scenarios

Reflecting on the future of the Salween River, there are at least five potential scenarios.

16.2.3.1 Scenario 1: Unregulated Development and Fragmented Sovereignty

This, unfortunately, is the present scenario in the Salween River basin. Though the Myanmar Union Government has legal sovereignty, there are many other actors also exercising political power all along the river. The past experience of ceasefires has resulted in a black economy including deforestation, narcotics, and the extreme exploitation of natural resources. If this continues, the Salween River will pass a

point of no return in the not-too-distant-future, with elites benefiting at the expense of ethnic communities who will face poverty.

16.2.3.2 Scenario 2: Shared Ownership Symbolizing Sovereignty Under a Federal System

Recent developments in Myanmar's politics have opened a renewed process for peace negotiations with the goal of peaceful coexistence. It opens the possibility of working towards shared ownership of the Salween River among the Shan State, Kayah State, Kayin State and Mon State governments with the Union government in the form of a Federation. However, the task ahead should not be underestimated. While the cessation of fighting, when it happens, should be considered a success, nurturing a Federation will be even more painstaking.

16.2.3.3 Scenario 3: Diverse Actors' Influence over the Salween

As discussed above, Myanmar has entered a new phase of river politics, within which local people's voice and activism have gained more influence. Regarding more responsible business practices, initiatives such as the "Business for Peace" initiative is a game changer for domestic regulatory policies on Corporate Social Responsibility. Furthermore, the activities of university researchers who are collaborating between countries, as well as other regional research initiatives, are producing new insights that could shape present and future policy.

16.2.3.4 Scenario 4: A Nu Jiang-Salween River Commission

Recognizing that the Salween is an international river, there could be a regional engagement to integrate governance of the river that is shared between Myanmar, Thailand and China. There is, after all, already nowadays intergovernmental engagement, including under the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN), and more recently the "One Belt One Road" initiative. Thinking positively about these geopolitical developments, the three governments sharing the Nu Jiang-Salween River should engage in a constructive engagement as soon as possible for defining meaningful sustainable solutions. One step to take would be to ratify the United Nations Watercourses Convention, which until now none of the countries have signed into national law. In the meantime, cooperation on the Salween River must be peacefully solved bilaterally in good faith as friendly neighbors.

A Nu Jiang-Salween River Commission could begin bilaterally and then expand to a tripartite arrangement among the Governments concerned. It should also partner with a wider range of other organizations including ethnic armed

organizations (EAOs) in the Salween basin, local professionals and international experts, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), community-based organizations (CBOs), civil society organizations (CSOs), activists, businesses, including the tourism industry, and development institutions such as various United Nations agencies, the World Bank, and the Asian Development Bank (ADB).

While there is a logic for government cooperation, it is also important to recognize that the whole “Nu Jiang-Salween River” is animated by the people living along it, who often belong to each other as family members, relatives, and friends, including across borders. Their lived experience of the river, not always bounded by borders, should also count in terms of decision-making towards its future.

16.2.3.5 Scenario 5: The Nu Jiang-Salween River as World Heritage

Human beings depend on the environment for their survival. As many of the world’s major rivers are under threat, the Salween River is a crucial environment that should be protected and nurtured for the present and future generations. To add to efforts at the local and national level, the global community should also advocate for the sustainable future of the Salween River and promote it as a “World Heritage” Site. Their support could be via conducting research to generate reliable data and information about natural resources, biodiversity and ecology, green development potential, and about ethnic diversity and livelihoods.

In Myanmar, in 2014, the National Water Policy developed by the NWRC set an objective to “Provide national policy and stand point on use of shared water resources and develop cooperation among riparian countries” (2.4 (vi)) (NWRC 2015). This policy objective should encourage Salween River stakeholders to coordinate towards a National Policy on the Salween River in Myanmar, and beyond that a Nu Jiang-Salween River basin policy. Developing such comprehensive policies seems to be almost impossible without strong support from the global community.

16.2.4 A Road Map for the Salween

From my perspective, it is time to look at the Salween River holistically. We need to quickly move beyond the first scenario described above of unregulated development and fragmented sovereignty, and work towards the status of “World Heritage” for the whole Nu Jiang-Salween River basin and protect it and develop it with sustainability and social justice. To conclude, I offer five suggestions for next steps.

16.2.4.1 Develop a National Policy for the Salween River in Myanmar

Building on the growing body of research about the Salween River, including the studies presented in this book, data related to the Salween River should be utilized as an initial input to formulate a National Policy on the Salween River in Myanmar. This should emerge from discussions with researchers, consultative meetings with key NGOs and CSOs, and individuals with different and diverse opinions. The draft should be submitted to policy makers and politicians for dialogue. Subsequently, a wider range of expert opinions with experience in river politics, for example from the Mekong River Commission (MRC), should also be invited to comment. This draft should also be widely deliberated with riverside communities to gather their contributions, and also consult with EAOs for their point of view and to identify entry points for collaboration.

16.2.4.2 Create a Plan for Collaboration

During the ceasefire period, regular engagements could take place between the EAOs and local governments representing the Union Government as well as themselves, with facilitation by representatives from the central government, to plan and implement activities according to the collectively identified priorities. The expected outcome would be a concerted effort to guarantee the ecosystems and livelihoods of the local population, while safeguarding their territories. Experiences learned from these actions can be utilized as tools for finalizing the National Policy on the Salween River in Myanmar that would be followed by feasible development programs.

16.2.4.3 Peaceful Coexistence on the Salween River

Involvement of third parties, such as researchers, civil society and government officials from Thailand and China could potentially be critical to play the role of arbitrator if there are conflicting ideas and actions in Myanmar. Since Myanmar's borders with Thailand and China are quite porous, and various actors have close relationships across the borders, this can serve as an opportunity for regional engagement in solving conflict and lead to sustainable development in the whole region.

16.2.4.4 A Salween Development Project

The Myanmar and Thai Governments could take the lead in forming a Bilateral Commission for Salween River Development. The shared part of the river along the border is 81 miles long, and the basin on both sides could be developed by communities there with the support of international agencies and development partners.

The Myanmar and Chinese Governments could also form a Bilateral Commission, and bring ethnic groups from both sides to strive for mutual development, for example using green technologies proposed by Chinese professionals. The idea of forming a national park in Yunnan Province (Yu et al., Chap. 4, this volume) could be replicated in Myanmar. Meanwhile, the Salween Peace Park was established recently in one ethnic area in Kayin State (Bright, Chap. 5, this volume). This initiative could be shared along the Salween River, while the Union Government builds closer ties towards forming a federal democratic state.

16.2.4.5 The Nu Jiang-Salween River as a “World Heritage”

Time is running out to protect the whole river as one. Beyond bilateral arrangements, all three governments could form a tripartite Nu Jiang-Salween River Basin Commission and develop partnership programs in collaboration with the global community and UN Agencies. This initiative could make the Nu Jiang-Salween River eligible for “World Heritage” status building on the “World Heritage Site” awarded by UNESCO for the Nu Jiang as part of the “Three Parallel Rivers of Yunnan Protected Area.”

16.3 Concluding Commentary: What’s Next for the River? Is the Thanlwin ‘Under Threat’ or ‘on the Thread’

Nang Shining

16.3.1 Introduction

My name is Nang Shining. I am a Shan woman living in Mong Pan Township nearby the site of the proposed Mong Ton hydropower dam at the Thanlwin (Salween) River basin in Shan State, Myanmar. In this commentary for the book’s conclusion, I want to assess the situation for the Thanlwin River basin from my perspective – as a woman who has carried out advocacy work and research across the basin, who has had the opportunities for graduate study, and who is now intentionally based in Taunggyi, my home-state in Myanmar. I also will put forward my thinking for future work and action on this significant river.

I am a Co-founder of Weaving Bonds Across Borders and Director of the Mong Pan Youth Association. Our mission is to collaborate with partner organizations and alumni of our programs to empower women and youth along the Thanlwin

River basin, and to support these groups in taking a more active role in peace building and sustainable development. We are also working to advocate for a healthy Thanlwin River through action-based research, awareness raising within the local community, engagement with government and policy makers, and networking with the people across the Thanlwin River basin.

We also deliberately chose the name of our group, *Weaving Bonds Across Borders*, to illustrate how we were thinking of developing networks as hopeful and meaningful, as work that spans across borders. The word ‘thread’, like in the title of this piece, is meant to link to the work of weaving, an activity known to many groups worldwide, particularly women. A weaver brings different threads together, to create something new, something strong, from disparate strands. Weaving, like networking and supporting young people, requires the work of transformation. Even if a small ‘thread’ alone may break, when combined together, in the process of ‘weaving’, it will be stronger.

We are strengthening women’s participation in development decision-making as a way to provide capacity on social justice-related issues, and to support affected communities to advocate for sustainable development practices in their local areas. We really need young women who not just know the information and legal issues, but we must support them to find this information, connect with networks, and develop their leadership skills so that they can take action on behalf of their community. We strongly believe that if women have access and networks, and are supported, they will be able to build peace not only at home, but also in their community and society as a whole.

In order to do so, we also offer training programs to build leadership skills for marginalized and vulnerable young women in the Thanlwin River basin. At our office in Taunggyi, I work with youth volunteers from different ethnic groups such as Shan, Pa’O, Danu, Lahu, Tanaw, and Inthar across Shan, Mon, Kayah, and Kayin ethnic States along the Thanlwin River Basin. Many young people are interested in the environment, in development, and they want to document what’s happening in their communities through film and other means, like action research or photography. The reason is that there are many big development projects, such as coal and mineral mining, coal power plants, and hydropower plants which will have social and environmental impacts. Yet, even though there are many development project activities, the majority of people have not been fully informed about the projects, nor have they been consulted.

This includes the Mong Ton dam project, near my hometown, a large hydropower dam proposed to be built on the mainstream Thanlwin River. It will be the biggest hydropower dam in Southeast Asia, but the potentially affected community like those from my hometown and villages next to the dam site, like Wan Sala, have not been consulted about the project. We produced research and video documentation to reveal overlooked gender issues of new development projects (Mong Pan Youth 2017), which can be shared to wider audiences, both international and domestic, at film festivals and network meetings.

In our own research, we found out that many people believe in the value of the river, but they have very little information about the big development plans for the

river. Many do not have access to information related to the project as well as the impacts of the dam. One of our interviewees, a young woman from Mong Ton township, said, “Though Wan Sala village is the closest village and is only 19 miles away from the dam site, the consultative meetings have not been conducted and the people have not been targeted to participate in the meeting” (March 2016). Another interviewee, a middle-aged woman from Kun Heing township, explained, “Because of the Mong Ton Dam project, the natural beauty of one thousand islands will be flooded under the water forever. Not to mention other places, only in Kun Heng Township, the population around 50,000 will have to relocate to other places. It is only highlighting one small spot of the overall affected area” (March 2016).

The active participation of a diverse range of voices in local governance is critical to securing social justice and sustainable development. However, ethnic minority women in Myanmar, like those quoted above, face significant barriers to actively engaging in local governance. Even though women’s daily life activities are strongly linked to the natural environment, they have little recognition in society and have little decision-making power within water and natural resources management. Women will be the one who suffer the most from development projects without meaningful participation in the decision processes. The rights of men and women appear to be equal when we look at them from the surface level, but based on the findings of our researchers, there are many facts that are not visible. Many women do not realize that their rights have been structurally violated within the existing system. Some regulations within the governance system also ignore the value of women. Thus, gender analysis should be considered in hydropower project planning because resettlement often means loss of access to resources like farmland, clean water, firewood and non-timber forest products which are regarded as the obligation and responsibility of women.

It is essential to understand the context of gender issues on the ground where the hydropower projects are proposed. The root cause of gender inequity derives from different aspects of society such as social customs and public policy. The social customs and traditional culture in Myanmar have a significant influence on attitudes towards women in leadership roles and in the public policies. Without addressing how social norms influence public policies, and without considering gender inclusion in hydropower projects, it will be a barrier in efforts to promote and protect the human rights of women.

16.3.2 Why Youth?

While there has been long-standing research on the role of women in the region, the roles of youth seem to be less visible. In South and Southeast Asia 15–24 year-olds make up around 20% of the population (Wagle 2018). The UN reports that in the countries of Indonesia, the Philippines, Vietnam, Thailand, and Myanmar “together

have over 90 million youth or close to an average of 17 per cent of each country's population." But, young people deserve our attention for more reasons than just their numbers or that they are understudied. Youth¹ play a significant yet understudied role in creating and shaping environmentalism, activism, and development across the region and we need to better include them in discussions about our future. In India, recent research reveals that youth are important change-makers (Dyson/Jeffries 2018: 573), and that young people "played important roles as mentors, political activists and social helpers. They served as exemplars, seeking to alter the behaviour and attitudes of those around them at the everyday level."

In Southeast Asia, youth in rural areas are leaving villages for a number of reasons, not limited to employment opportunities, education, and land scarcity (Rigg 2006; Barney 2012). That rural youth in Southeast Asia are more likely to travel for work and education is important to consider in decisions around policy relating to urban development, agricultural and land support, education, and broader governance issues.

Much work has focused on the challenges that young people face when they move outside of the rural village or as migrants to the city, and only few researchers are studying, instead, the new possibilities and dreams that youth are part of creating (Simone 2008; Guinness 2016). However, what my experience shows is that if we looked to the ways in which youth create possibilities—such as community organizing, developing cross-border networks, or the more informal work of mentoring and teaching children and siblings—we might better understand their potential contribution to civil society. We already have evidence of this work and its impacts in the region.

For instance, the Mekong Youth Assembly has emerged as a regional voice on the Mekong River. The Mekong Youth Assembly was developed by youth from the six countries along the Mekong River, namely: Cambodia, Myanmar, Laos, Thailand, Tibet/China, and Vietnam, with the aim to "encourage all youths in the Mekong countries to bring about change in environmental concerns by working with their communities." The work of Mekong Youth to include young people and support them as leaders is not dissimilar to the work of Mong Pan Youth and Weaving Bonds Across Borders.

In a group statement, they write of their dreams for the future, including freedom of expression, peace, equality, and participation in decision-making. In their own words, Mekong Youth (2017) explain that "We dream that today's adults, especially those in power, would bear in mind that "you do not inherit the Earth from ancestors, you borrow it from us, your children". Make sure our mother earth shall be returned to us with prosperous life elements. In this regard, always respectfully consider our lives." It is my opinion that we should be taking these dreams seriously.

¹Youth are typically defined as part of a loose age range as those under age 30 or 35 (distinct from 'children' but not with a fixed age limit).

16.3.3 My Observations and Ways Forward: Crossing Borders Together

As I noted at the start of this piece, networking and developing women and young people, like weaving, requires the work of transforming disparate small pieces together, to be stronger when combined. In the examples above, of the Mekong Youth Assembly, Mong Pan Youth, and Weaving Bonds Across Borders, the networks being established are ‘woven’ across borders and basins. This is important because the Thanlwin River belongs to all ethnic groups, genders, and ages living along it and within its basin. Therefore, the development projects proposed on the Thanlwin River in Shan State are not simply a domestic issue for Myanmar, this goes beyond physical and political boundaries, beyond social and political demarcations.

A transboundary river requires cross-boundary agreements and treaties, a potentially higher level of cooperation among different stakeholders and collaboration than we have at present. From my perspective, the Thanlwin River is vulnerable and under threat. Despite its status as a transboundary river, it still lacks a treaty and cooperation among the water users along the river basin. The point I want to stress is that instead of competition, the basin countries would do better to collaborate in building a relationship or network. At the same time, it is essential to ensure that those who live in the basin and depend upon it – including women and youth – are not only included in those collaborations and networks, but are positioned to influence pathways and transformations going forward.

16.4 Concluding Commentary: The Salween as a Site for Transboundary Justice and Activism in the Face of Militarization

Pianporn Deetes

16.4.1 Introduction

Behind the enveloping morning mist lies the river that meanders around valleys and along the Thailand-Myanmar border. Against the backdrop of morning sunlight that glitters across the sandbars, a group of people who identify as “Karen-Thai” are wearing bright red, handwoven dress. They have positioned themselves along the water’s edge to participate in a ceremony to ‘extend the life’ of the Salween River.

Nearby, a spirit house made of bamboo stands at the point where the Moei River meets the Salween, before it flows down into Myanmar's Karen State.

This ritual is held annually by residents in Sob Moei (or, 'Confluence') Village to mark the International Day of Action for Rivers. Today's rite is the 12th of its kind. Residents want to make clear that they stand for the preservation of river resources and that they seek to uphold their fundamental rights, including both UN fundamental rights and Thai constitutional rights, to make decisions that impact their lives, like on water, land, and matters of justice.

The only difference this year is they have been told by the Thai security forces to refrain from holding protest signs or to organize any acts of protest. The ritual proceeds even as these concerns of 'protest' are expressed, linked to the increasingly limited political space in Thailand under military rule; participants want to avoid their ritual being interpreted as an illegal act of political protest and so they focus on the ritual. After the river ceremony concludes, school children stand in a row silently. Each one holds a character, which when combined reads "Keep the Salween Flowing". While complying with the request of the Thai officials, the children are able to convey this message from this border community to the outside world.

In this concluding commentary, I am writing to highlight these small but long-standing acts of activism of and for the Salween River because I believe this work matters. More than this, I would also argue that these rituals present a way of seeing and relating to the Salween River, and to transboundary justice, that we—as civil society actors, international activists, development practitioners, researchers, and policy makers—should spend more time listening to.

After the ceremony, a member of the Sob Moei community explained to me that, "We live off the Salween. It helps us survive. Our family catch fish from the Salween and fish from the Salween swim into Moei and Yuam Rivers and other tributaries. During the dry season, we could grow food on the riverbanks. We can also grow tobacco there which helps to earn us tens of thousands of baht per year. It was enough for us to live without any problem" (March 2017).

Sob Moei's village leader, Mr. Somchai (pseudonym), is only in his early 30s. He explained that there are many of his sisters and brothers living in different villages inside Myanmar. Driven by armed conflicts, some decided to cross the Salween to seek refuge in Thailand. However, the community now in Thailand is concerned about proposed development projects along the river, sited both upstream and downstream of his village, as negatively impacting their community. One project, the Hatgyi dam, is proposed less than 50 km downstream. It is expected to impact Sob Moei village in terms of livelihoods, specifically fishing and riverbank agriculture.

"If this dam is built," he explained, "our lives would be completely destroyed. Our sisters and brothers who have fled elsewhere shall never return."

16.4.2 *Thailand's Role on "Both Sides" of the River*

As Mr. Somchai is aware, the Salween is one of a few remaining rivers that still run free.² Yet, as has already been described in detail in this volume, over the past two decades, efforts have been made by the governments of China, Thailand, and Myanmar (Burma) plus state enterprises and private companies to push for the construction not only of Hatgyi, but of more than 20 hydropower projects, both in China and Myanmar (Shan State, Karreni State, and Karen State) with seven projects on the Thailand-Myanmar border.

Upstream, China's stretch of the Salween is geographically significant and gorgeous, teemed with natural abundance and cultural richness. Efforts have successively been made by environmentalists and academics in China to oppose the 13 hydropower development projects in Yunnan.

On the lower reach of the Salween River, Thailand has been playing a major role. Thailand's electrical authority, the Electricity Generating Authority of Thailand (EGAT), has pushed forward two major hydropower development projects on the Thailand-Burma border in Mae Hong Son, the Weigyi and Dagwin Dams. The two projects would operate with a combined installed capacity of over 5,000 MW. This part of the Salween is an ecologically significant area, home to the Salween National Park and a Wildlife Sanctuary, as well as one of Thailand's richest teak forests.

It is not clear that EGAT is taking the significance of this area into account in its development plans, particularly in terms of ecological values or in terms of values to residents of Sob Moei. For instance, while EGAT has not been vocal recently, more than 15 years ago, EGAT's then Governor told the press that it is important to have these dams developed while democracy is yet to be restored in Myanmar. He was quoted as saying "I have promised myself to see the Salween Hydro project realized when I am the EGAT governor. The project is huge that I might not have another opportunity to be part of it [sic]" (Samabuddhi, 9 April 2003). He emphasized what a rare chance it was for EGAT. The message even back then was clear: Thailand's electricity utility put profits and energy development above the democratic rights of Myanmar citizens.

But, as a result of public campaigns by community-based organizations on both sides of the Salween River, we were able to shine a light on the impacts of these projects on the protected areas and on the constitutional right of communities in Thailand. To this day, these two projects proposed on the border have not been completed.

One of the hydropower development projects being publicly pursued at present is in nearby Shan State; it is the Mong Ton hydropower project (also, Mai Tong and previously Tasang). With an installed capacity of 7,000 MW, the dam may lead to inundation of a huge swathe of land—an area as large as the territory of Singapore.

²The mainstream of the Salween is not dammed, but there are hydropower projects on tributaries in Yunnan, China (see Middleton et al., Chap. 3, this volume).

The flood may even reach the ‘thousand-islands’ of the Pang River in central Shan State, an area of ecological and cultural significance. This is also the same area where, two decades ago, more than three hundred thousand people were forcibly displaced by the Burmese army. These individuals have become internally displaced people (IDP). Some remain living in IDP camps in Myanmar, while many have instead decided to cross the border to Thailand. This issue of displacement, not only of those directly displaced by a reservoir, but of a people displaced by conflict over the past several decades, is a pressing issue of justice that we need to strive to better understand and listen to.

In recent years, Shan State’s human rights and environmental groups have taken opportunities to be increasingly in the spotlight to heap praise on the picturesque beauty of the thousand-island area and its geographical uniqueness marked by its large expanse of jade-colored water and cascades of waterfall covering tens of kilometers. Such unique beauty, possibly the only one in the world, would also be inundated upon completion of the Mong Ton Dam.

16.4.3 A Chance for Change?

These impacts have prompted EGAT to redesign the Mong Ton project, from one gigantic dam turned into two much smaller dams, with the plans at present still subject to negotiation with the Myanmar government. Human rights activists in Shan State, however, have expressed concern that any dam on the Salween, which proceeds without their input or decision, is not suitable for their hometown.

The Hatgyi project, noted above, is another of the projects with EGAT support. Located at the lower end of the basin, this hydropower development has had a contentious history. During the preliminary survey at the dam site, in 2007, EGAT lost two of its staffers as a result of land mines in Karen State. Such risk and loss of life should already send a signal that the area’s conflicts need our attention and are not suitable for hydropower development.

As the project progressed, several years after this incident in 2009–2010, I was party to a series of meetings to get at the ‘truth’ of the Hatgyi project and its impacts. I was a member of the Thai Prime Ministers’ Office (PMO) committee on Hatgyi dam. During one meeting at the PMO, a high-ranking officer from EGAT stated that a study was being conducted to ensure that no impacts could be felt in Thai territory. In the subsequent study report on the Hatgyi dam project, the report claimed that less than ten households in Mae Hong Son will bear the brunt from the project. As a member of the committee investigating the Hatgyi situation, I was skeptical. We could see in our own visits to the river-border, such as the village of Sob Moei, that any shift in the water levels and seasonal flows of the Salween would negatively impact the community who depended on the river for their livelihoods, particularly fishing and riverbank gardening.

This was reiterated in concerns expressed by community members. For instance, one female villager, Ms Salai, explained, “Even though they claim our homes will

not be flooded, but fish from down there cannot swim [migrate] here. And there will be no land left for us to till. How could we survive? We have seen other examples where the villagers displaced by dams have been left to our own devices. They could not help themselves and have to work as hired labor. They have to even buy drinking and domestic water, not to mention rice.”

I also wondered how the impacts of the project in this independent study could be so clearly ‘known’ before the outcome of the independent study. It made me argue that we needed, and still need, more fully independent academic and civil society research on these impacts.

For, it is not only the impacts, but also the idea that the project can proceed without proper assessment, that have implications for justice. As Ms Salai explained further, with her voice trembling, “[The experts] who came here to do the survey could not answer any of our questions. This has made us feel concerned. It has been worrying us for more than ten years. We wonder if they are going to build the dam or not.”

Her comments attest to how little information about the dam’s impacts have been made available, especially for affected peoples, who we know should be at the center of transparent and accountable—more just—development decision-making.

16.4.4 From Thailand to Myanmar: Concerns for Justice and for Peace

The overlapping and complex political powers in Myanmar’s Salween River Basin have further complicated management of the river basin. The water as a resource falls under the domestic Myanmar jurisdiction, even though the river crosses international boundaries. Also, while the country has just undergone a transition from a military junta to a civilian-led government, many questions for justice and peace remain. For instance, there exist patches of land along the river under the influence of ethnic forces; these groups have been struggling to assert their territorial rights in the ethnic states of Shan, Karenni or Karen State. At the same time, while the ongoing peace process aims to bring these groups together, there exist efforts to rush through the proposed dam projects on the Salween River before agreements can be made. Such moves could increase militarization, which in turn would only jeopardize the path toward peace.

According to a military officer with the Shan State Army whom we interviewed by the Pang River in Shan State in June 2016, the Salween and Pang River Basins, and the area along their tributaries in the west which will potentially be impacted by the Mong Ton Dam, have already witnessed the catastrophic impacts from the Burmese Army’s ‘scorched earth’ military campaign over the past two decades (see also, Shan Human Rights Foundation 1998). People have been displaced and have sought refuge in various places including in Thailand. Less than a half of those displaced have so far managed to return to their homeland.

He further explained, “On one hand, a narrative is being touted by the Burmese government to assure the international community that political transformation and a peace process are a work in progress there, but on the other, they are signing deals to build these dams claiming to give a chance for neighboring countries to invest there. I could only say that their actions will simply make life much more vulnerable among these peoples. This is yet to mention the extensive damage inflicted by the Burmese Army in central Shan State in the past 20 years, which has yet to be acknowledged or remedied. Now, they want to build dams that will bring us floods. No one could accept this” (June 2016).

These ongoing tensions he highlights reflect that this decades-long conflict is still very much a part of the present-day decision-making around resources in the Lower Salween.

In such a context, where agreements for peace need to be prioritized, it is quite challenging to develop a framework to strike the balance between the preservation and the development of the Salween River Basin as a transboundary basin.

16.4.5 Moving Forward

In closing this commentary, I suggest we return to the site of international action for rivers described at the start, where local residents have been demanding their rights to protect their natural resources. Here, the Moei River continues to slowly empty into the Salween, which in turn, meanders around the mountains in the distance. On the Burmese side, a small boat full of passengers is spotted navigating through the twilight toward a pier on the Thai side.

Mr. Somchai, the leader in Sob Moei, explains to us, as we wait alongside the river, “Our sisters and brothers are gradually returning to their hometown [in Karen State]”. But as I noted above, this is happening while the terms and agreements for peace are ongoing, and Mr. Kyaw still has concerns regarding his brothers and sisters, and what Karen State will be like for their children. For me, such concerns underline that these plans for large scale development of the basin cannot proceed without first ensuring a peaceful existence for ethnic peoples in the basin, and clear pathways for justice.

16.5 Concluding Commentary: Salween as Source, Salween as Resource

R. Edward Grumbine

16.5.1 Introduction

River are alive. Of course, many people, especially those who live far removed from running waters, often see rivers only as flowing H₂O, or a nice place to take a cool bath on a hot day in the dry season, or an ecosystem that yields fish for the table and the marketplace. The nature of being a “natural resource” is that yielding benefits for humans, whatever those may be, comes first.

But, in general, the closer humans live to rivers, the more we tend to view them not as resources, but as sources—of sustenance, of foods and fishes, of the unique power to flow and flood and change the nature of land and livelihoods with silts and sediments. A ‘resource’ is a stock or supply of material assets that can be used by people. A ‘source’ is a place of origin, full of creative energy, mystery, and surprise.

The Salween River is no special watercourse in light of these basic characteristics. People did not create the Salween, make it up out of thin air. The river was following its watercourse way for at least several million years before people ever came to live on its banks and drink and bathe in its waters.

But we do construct stories about the Salween, and engage in multi-faceted relations with it. We do decide, knowingly or not, about the nature of these relations and whether they will be inclusive or exclusive, sustaining or degrading, broadly reciprocal or narrowly utilitarian. No matter how we make choices about these things, the Salween is always a source—of fish, food, and floodwaters for millions of people—before it is a resource. It pulses with the dry and wet seasons, and people learn how to live with it. And because rivers are alive and changeable, people living close to running water learn how to adjust and adapt to them over time.

Today, as the contributors to this book spotlight in great detail, we are doing poorly in our relations with the Salween. We are favoring the exclusive, the unjust, the opaque, and the narrow over inclusivity, justice, transparency, and the broad rights of people to healthy livelihoods on a free-flowing river. It appears that we humans in this modern age are less able to conceive of the Salween as an actor with its own mandate to flow. Upstream, until recently, China had plans to build mainstream dams with little regard for how these structures capture sediments that sustain fish, the riverside gardens and paddies of ethnic nationality peoples, and the biomass demands of thousands of wild animals and plants. Multilateral consultation across international boundaries is anathema to the Chinese government. Even current initiatives to create protected areas along the river in Yunnan Province to generate wealth for entrepreneurs and officials while local people scramble for service jobs in the new economy, have more than a whiff of industrial-scale tourism about them. And while the planned dams are off the table for now, they could reappear whenever the government wants them to; there is little in the way of participatory process in China.

Things are more complex downstream in Thailand and Myanmar. The Thai government believes that hydropower-generated electricity from five large dams on the mainstream Salween will provide the power that will drive the country into a

new round of 21st century industrial growth. If all these dams were built, they would triple the megawatts now used in Myanmar. On the face of it, that would be a good thing; Myanmar has the lowest rate of per capita available electricity in Southeast Asia. But the Thai cut deals with the former Myanmar military government some years ago to buy the majority of this new power and send it to Bangkok once the dams are constructed. And Chinese companies would reap most of the economic benefits from constructing the dams. Given the growing impacts of climate change, maybe Thai leaders will finally notice that other forms of renewable energy offer more to bolster their country's future. Maybe not.

As for Myanmar, you have the Union government with The Lady as its nominal leader. But the military remains in control of important national decision making, and the *Tatmadaw*, the semi-autonomous military, wields power in many areas of the countryside, including parts of the Salween around proposed dam sites. Add in multiple Ethnic Armed Organizations and their various splinter groups, all fighting against central government control (and sometimes each other); state governments that are influenced by one or more of the above actors; national and transnational businesses looking for windows of profit; and, finally, local people who want to sustain their livelihoods in the face of the forces above. In fact, more and more river-based people cannot find work anymore in the Salween, and are migrating out of the watershed and Myanmar in search of cash income to send back home. And if people want to stay in their river homelands? The environmental and social costs of the dams would be great. The projects are expected to flood 1000 km² of land upstream of the new reservoirs and disrupt 690 km² of the main channel. No Environmental Impact Assessment for any of the five mainstream dams has ever been released for public review. How could one not side with most of the Salween's local ethnic minorities as the river loses its capacity to be a resource under so much ecological transformation in service of unsustainable development?

The odds are stacked against the Salween and local peoples' rights to participate in decisions about the future of their homelands.

But for more than a century, the political odds have always been against the river and local people. The British held colonial sway from 1886 to 1948 and residents of British Burma did not fare well. The next years of shaky independence represented a relative lull politically. But this was followed in 1962 by the infamous coup of a repressive military junta bent on creating a 'socialist state', ushering in the most repressive conditions in the country's history. Since the elections of 2015, Myanmar has struggled to open up and get out from under the legacy of the generals and the economic shambles they left the country in, even as the 2008 constitution continues to give the military ongoing power and control.

And yet, as this volume details, there are alternative movements afoot that can bring a measure of environmental and social justice to life in the Salween. The dams are yet to be built and there are other pathways to develop than economic growth through flooding peoples' homelands in service of 'resource extraction' for outside interests. The first hint of this alternative future was Myanmar's decision to pull the plug on the massive Myitsone dam in 2011, alienating the Chinese government and its' dam building companies in the process. The second hint was

China's decision to hold off constructing the long-planned string of dams in Yunnan Province in the Salween's upper basin.³ This was followed by the May 2018 release of the draft Strategic Environmental Assessment of hydropower development in Myanmar funded by the International Finance Corporation (World Bank Group) (available at www.ifc.org). This most detailed study of the benefits and costs of the nations' full suite of dam building proposals (including the Salween) cautions against constructing *any* large hydropower projects on the mainstems of Myanmar's major rivers. (Building dams on tributaries is another matter.)

If these several recent decisions and new advice hold, then the Salween and the people who depend on it have a chance to become engaged in the future of their riverine homes. The river has a chance to continue to flow relatively unimpeded, to continue to be a source of nourishment for all who live within the basin. It will take more than local, equitable, and just participation to secure the transboundary Salween; the river needs coordinated planning upstream and downstream, as well as strong links established between local, regional, and multilateral decision making. But that is what people must do when a source is a stake.

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³See China's National Energy Administration current 5-year plan at: http://www.nea.gov.cn/2016-11/29/c_135867663.htm.

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