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Spatial Politics and Economic Development in the Mekong Sub-Region

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This collection of seven thematically-linked papers has its origin in the 2007 conference entitled ‘Critical Transitions in the Mekong Region,’ organized by the Regional Center for Social Science and Sustainable Development (RCSD) in Chiang Mai in northern Thailand. That this volume – there is a companion volume named Transcending State Boundaries:
Contesting Development, Social Suffering and Negotiation – did not appear until 2011 indicates some of the problems that editors have in bringing together a completed work of this sort. That there are just seven papers but they have to be divided into three sections further indicates these difficulties and there are various other forms of internal evidence which highlight the difficulties which editors can face and with which I feel considerable empathy. Not the least of the problems is that of timeliness: a conference paper presented in 2007 may be using data gathered in 2004 or 2005 and relying on or at least influenced by conceptual frameworks and ideas prevalent at the time. For such papers to appear four years later, no matter how extensively they may have been revised in the meantime, exposes them to the risk of having become outmoded intellectually or challenged by changes in laws and the relentless progress of events. Nevertheless, the book contains much to recommend it, not the least is the importance of supporting events by the RCSD, which is based at Chiang Mai University and which is one of Thailand’s leading seats of learning outside of Bangkok. A second source of commendation derives from the different approaches to the central concept of the interaction between spatial politics and economic development in the Mekong Region. The first decade of the current century witnessed very significant changes in the political settlement of the various countries of the region. Vietnam and Lao PDR explicitly added market-based mechanisms to continuing monolithic political control in ways that echoed the previous movement in China, which was in turn finding that the adoption of capitalism in its economic system inevitably drew it into altered and, in some cases, conflictual relations with geographic neighbours and sometimes ideological allies. Cambodia and Myanmar took steps, although perhaps more limited steps than might be desired, away from authoritarianism and towards becoming regimes that recognised the legitimacy of some additional
voices. Thailand, meanwhile, reached an apogee of contemporary democratization in the region only to be dragged back to regressive dictatorship by a deeply-entrenched elite and its useful idiot allies. Not all of these issues or countries are explicitly addressed in this collection but the events described nevertheless from the context in which the research described should be seen.

The first decade of the twenty-first century was also the period when it became impossible to discount the dangers of man-made global climate change in rational political discourse. This is manifested in one of several dimensions by which spatial politics has been addressed here and this is the case of environmental management and burgeoning conflict over scarce and diminishing resources. Water is perhaps the most potent symbol of this conflict. The Mekong Region has been characterized historically by the reliance of its societies on wet paddy rice farming and by their ability to expand and form their states by bringing previously unused (and often dangerous) land across the other side of the water barrier. Water issues are explicitly addressed by Carl Middleton in “The ADB/WB/MRC ‘Mekong Water Resources Assistance Strategy:’ Promoting Large Water Infrastructure with Trans-Boundary Impacts” and by Han Hongyun and Sitanon Jesdpipat in “Cooperation between China and the Lower Mekong States for Shared Water: Problems and Challenges.” The latter touches upon issues raised by Grant Evans in “The Southwest Drift of the Chinese,” although with a rather more optimistic set of assumptions that have yet to be verified in reality. A significant body of water is also the centre of attention in Mak Sithirith and Carl Grundy-Warr’s admirably self-reflective “Representation and Contestation of Space: The Tonle Sap,” which draws upon an extensive series of interlinked research projects. Perhaps the only disappointing note is with the opening paper, which is from
Jim Glassman, who is one of the most well-respected and trenchant scholars of the political economy of the Mekong Region but whose contribution here, “The GMS and Thailand’s ‘Spatial Fix’” is something of a pale imitation of the fully-developed version of his thesis. Nevertheless, all the papers do add to the collection and, if they are some noticeable editing issues, these are relatively unimportant in the context of producing the book altogether.

One of the more notable issues relating to understanding the Mekong Region is that so much of the generation and distribution of knowledge is conducted by people from outside the region in locations outside the region. Consequently, any meaningful attempt to produce knowledge within the region is a step towards redressing that imbalance. The development of the capacity and competency required to produce such knowledge is a long-term effort and this is another milestone.

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