

Winners and losers of development: considerations for Southeast and southern-East Asia

The discourse on globalization (Thai: *lokaphiwat/lokanuwat*, Vietnamese: *toàn cầu hóa*), weak vs. strong states, the nature of socialism, the nature of capitalism or other integration into a neo-liberal economic framework and ‘free market capitalism’, still prevails in many discussions about Southeast and East Asian economies. In particular, discussions about socialist societies (China, Vietnam, and Laos) are too-often labeled ‘post-socialist’, whereby economic integration into the global market and capitalist economy are thought to be the solution to the woes of drastically unequal populations. Statistically more rare are calls for class-based analysis, representations of oral histories, and the concerns of those who are most likely to be affected (for the worse) by the outgrowth of some of the world’s most rapidly developing markets. Nevertheless, a rich literature in the field of Southeast Asian studies, and the potential for a new area of ‘Zomian studies’ – or studies of a relatively common experience in the Asian highland massif – have combined to form a critique of common perceptions imbedded in English language press and certain academic discourse of, as Glassman states, “globalization studies” (5,41).¹

William Noseworthy

Reviewed publication: Glassman, J. 2010. *Bounding the Mekong: The Asian Development Bank, China, and Thailand*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 280 pp., ISBN: 9780824834449 (hardback)

SOUTHEAST ASIA is the ‘world’s genetic rice bank’, sporting government subsidized HYV seeds, maize, rising crops of rubber (at plantation proportions) and an increase in black cardamom (*Amomum aromaticum*); all have played integral rolls in supporting food deficiencies (Michaud and Forsyth, 70,112,116). Meanwhile, continuing inequalities of access to drinking water, shelter, basic food supplies, medical care, education, and the ability to make one’s voice heard publicly have evoked questions as to the nature of academic methods. In response, methods of participant observation, oral history, and historical analysis of political economy have been recently recombined through the works of Glassman, Michaud and Forsyth (2011), Baird (2010), and Walker (1999). Together these works bring new light to the discussion of the impact of development in regions that preserve highly valuable biological diversity for the sake of local livelihoods. This study relies upon a reading of this rich body of literature on the topic.

Literature on geographical discourse

Studies of geographical discourse can be linked to communal needs for the preservation of identity. In the history of Southeast Asian studies the discourse of geographies has been linked to the formation of national identities (Thongchai, 1994). Baird has referred to this tendency as “irredentism” or “the doctrine that people or territory should be controlled by a country that is ethnically or historically related to it” (Baird, 167). Therefore, it is not without surprise that considerations of new geographical and historical foci: the South China Sea, Zomia, *Suwannabhum* and the Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS) all come with necessary burdens of historical and contemporary political motivations. One wishes that Glassman had space in this already impressive theoretical discussion to place the GMS in conversation with such other geographically based concepts in Southeast Asia in a way that was not so Thai centered. Nevertheless, Glassman does provide quite adequate critiques of standing and historically Thai centered geographies.

Suwannabhum, for example, is a concept that is quite clearly irredentist in a way that arguably differs substantially from other geographical concepts discussed in this piece. It harkens to the nationalist era of Thailand wherein Wichit Wathakan and Phibun Songkram re-imagined a historical reference to South-east Asia from Sanskrit (‘the land of gold’), as a Thai centered space. This point becomes particularly important to understand as the Royal Institute of Thailand reaffirmed this viewpoint through a selection of *lokaphiwat* (Thai-centered globalization) over the course of *lokanuwat*, a more neutral term proposed by Chai-anan Samudivanija in the 1990s (Baird, 195; Glassman, 68-69).

The vantage point which one chooses for the centrality of analysis is crucial as Walker has argued that previous territorial ambiguity arose “as a result of spatial competition” (Walker, 34). Therefore, the study of the South China Sea as a geographical unit is generally accepted in all English discourse, and is the recognized name of the region by virtually all Southeast Asian states. However, to take the perspective of the Vietnamese-language sphere, the study of this region would dramatically shift. The Vietnamese name is the *Biển Đông* or Eastern Sea. Simply by shifting linguistic spheres, the focus of the study shifts away from the centrality of China. Similarly, studies of Zomia and the GMS are inherently problematic in the centralities that they presume, although they are not necessarily irredentist. For example, while studies of Zomia often propose to be studies of the highlands in a way that is completely admirable (and necessary), the very name Zomia,

Below: The Mekong Delta. Courtesy Google Maps.



derived from Zo-mi, an old Chinese language term for mountain peoples assumes the centrality of the lowlands. Meanwhile the GMS is even more problematic as Jim Glassman points out in *Bounding the Mekong*.

Bounding the Mekong

Bounding the Mekong is a rich combination of raw data interwoven with excellent narration and backed by a firm theoretical analysis. As Glassman argues, the GMS is simply a brainchild of the Asian Development Bank (ADB), which seeks to bring a neoliberal economic miracle to East and Southeast Asia that symbolically trickles down the flow of the Mekong and the Lancang rivers. While the winners in this case will not be the colonial officials of days past, there is, as Glassman argues, an integrated network of elites closely tied to ‘the state’ in each case (Vietnam, Laos, China, Thailand, and Cambodia), although in some cases the highest of elites have also broken from the state. Nevertheless, as Glassman argues, it will be the Southeast Asian, East Asian, or otherwise foreign elites, who ‘win’ from development.

The ‘winners’ are the few individuals who have the ability to support new “regimes of regulation”, to borrow terms from Andrew Walker. Some examples of ‘winners’ include the Royal Family of Thailand; Thaksin Sinawatra and the Shin group; the leaders of the Siam Cement Group (with 130 subsidiaries in China and Southeast Asia by 1998); the richest non-member of the royal family in Thailand, Charoen Sirvadhanabhakdi (head of Thailand’s ‘king of beers’, Beer Chang); the Yunnan Hongta Group (with a 12% share in the Xiaowan dam and a 30% share in the Yunnan Dachaoshan Hydropower Corporations); the advocates of the West to East Transmission Project (WEETP) (China), the Western Regions Development Program (Chinese: *Xibu Dakaifa*) and the *Đổi Mới* economic reforms (Vietnam); and an elite class of businessmen that have benefitted from reforms in the Southeast Chinese provinces from the Deng Xiaoping era onward. They may even include the *Lao Luom* who advocate the Laoization of highland peoples through the adaptation of traditional dance (Lao: *lamvong*) and skirts (Lao: *sin*), and deem the banning of animal sacrifice to be ‘counterproductive’. They certainly include investors in the hydropower and mining industries (mining was the greatest increase in Laos from 1998-2005; Michaud and Forsyth, 55-73; Glassman, 59-62, 71-87, 144). And the advocates of NAFTA and the so-called ‘1%’ of the global north. In Southeast Asia this economic system operates, according to Glassman’s analysis, upon a US-Japanese aligned hegemony, which controls an average of 25% percent of the voting shares in the ADB, effectively forming a block against new member states if they wish. Only three states – Japan, China and the US – are guaranteed positions on the board of governors. Meanwhile, Indonesia is the only country from Southeast Asia that operates with notable power in the ADB (42-44). This structure effectively eliminates those who live within the GMS from the discourse of the path that will be taken in the region’s development.

Glassman argues that, within the GMS, elite classes and national governments have successfully avoided rebellion to date through making mild concessions to the ideals of social welfare, such as the 30 baht health care policy and the million baht village fund program. Other attempts at placating the petitions of formerly ‘rebellious’ groups have been seen in Vietnam with decisions (Vietnamese: *quyết định*) that allowed for the teaching of Cham and ethnic Khmer minority languages, up to University levels in rare cases. The University of Quy Nhơn opened a branch to train teachers of Cham language in 2007 and the Open University in Ho Chi Minh was allowed to hold Cham language classes in 2010-2011. However, funding for such programs remains low, and the preference for English language instruction throughout Southeast and southern East Asia has the potential to flatten the intense linguistic diversity of the region.

Glassman has a clear view of the losers as well. They are the Cham, Vietnamese, Khmer, Chinese, and Malay fishers on the lower Mekong, whose livelihoods will be severely affected by the restriction of water flows on the Mekong River. They are ethnic Lao in Cambodia who have been subjected to decades of Khmerization, and the communities of Khmer in Laos, who experienced the backlashes of Lao officials against this process (Baird). They are the *songtaew* drivers in Chiang Mai, who are often portrayed as a single class, and therefore drivers with loans for their equipment often bear the brunt of trickle down consequences of actions that have created an anti-union atmosphere. They are also the migrant workers that “constitute the backbone of the labor process” (89, 151). Such populations often experience employment biases, as Glassman notes in one case in Thailand, “the head of the Tak chapter of the Federation of Thai Industries (FTI) ... claimed that it is legitimate to pay Burmese workers below minimum wages because their work is of poor quality” (154). Even in Glassman’s work, little analysis is given to their day to day struggles to preserve their livelihood.

In Vietnam, they are members of minority populations who struggle to gain international support for the teaching of their