

WALL STREET JOURNAL  
3 May 2019

## **‘The Last Days of the Mighty Mekong’ Review: A River’s Own Long Journey**

Filled with vivid descriptions of the places its author visits and the people he encounters, Brian Eyler’s book reads like a travelogue but also a stark warning that the longest river in Southeast Asia is heading for irreparable ruin.

By Jon Swain

The Last Days of the Mighty Mekong

By Brian Eyler  
Zed, 384 pages, \$25

Some rivers are so still, so complacent, so dead that they leave the heart indifferent. Not the Mekong, the longest river in Southeast Asia. Fed by the melting snow and mountain streams of the Tibetan Himalayas, it tumbles down sheer-sided gorges in southwestern China, winds through the jungle hills of Laos, descends a series of rapids into Cambodia, then flows serenely into southern Vietnam before merging into the South China Sea near Ho Chi Minh City, formerly Saigon.

The Mekong is no longer the wild and remote river that enchanted Henri Mouhot, the French explorer famous for rediscovering the fabled temples of Angkor in Cambodia some 160 years ago. As he traveled beside the Mekong, Mouhot wrote lyrically of hearing parakeets calling to the moon and a panther crying to its mate. You have to go a long way to hear these sounds on the Mekong now. The rise of China, and peace in Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam after years of war, have irrevocably transformed the lives of the millions who live in the Mekong Basin and rely on its waters for their livelihood.

Materialism, tourism, massive urbanization and ill-conceived Chinese hydropower projects have all intruded with their fateful touch. Megadams, some already completed and many more being built along the Mekong’s upper reaches, are strangling the river’s ecosystem, displacing tens of thousands of people for little or no compensation. Dwindling fish populations are impoverishing riverbank communities.

In “The Last Days of the Mighty Mekong,” Brian Eyler has written a breathtaking account of a journey down the river, from high up in the Chinese province of Yunnan to the Mekong Delta more than 2,700 miles away. Now based at a Washington think tank, Mr. Eyler worked in the Mekong region for more than 15 years. His book reads like a travelogue, filled with vivid descriptions of the places he visits and the people he encounters. But it is also a stark warning that the river is heading for irreparable ruin.

Mr. Eyler’s journey starts in Yubeng, a village near the Mekong’s source in Yunnan—once a veritable Shangri-La filled with sacred sites. But Yubeng’s beauty and ancient spiritual way of life have been forever tarnished by waves of tourists, mostly lowland Han Chinese who despise

the tribes of this remote Chinese region. The visitors regard the locals as “barbarians,” but they are the ones who have smothered the area beneath mountains of garbage.

In neighboring Laos, an acquaintance working in the finance industry tells Mr. Eyler that everything is now “Made by China, Made for China.” Fifty thousand Chinese workers have moved in to help build a railway between Kunming in Yunnan and Vientiane, Laos’s commercial capital. In some cities along the river, Chinese migrants now account for as much as one-fifth of the population.

The author pins the damage to the Mekong largely, though not exclusively, on China, which controls the river’s headwaters and its longest stretch. Years before Beijing signed the Paris Agreement in 2016 and committed to begin reducing total carbon emissions by 2030, the country was already building mighty dams on its great southwestern rivers—including the Mekong—to address its growing electricity needs. But with carbon-emission reduction now high on the agenda, the construction of dams along the Mekong, both within and beyond China’s borders, has increased apace and taken precedence over people’s lives and the preservation of natural resources.

The proliferation of dams along the Mekong creates rapid fluctuations in river levels when dam operators upstream suddenly release surplus water from the Himalayas, often with little or no warning. During the 2011 dry season, Mr. Eyler notes that the river at Vientiane was so shallow that people could almost cross it by foot and enter into Thailand on the other side. At other times floods have swept away homes and livestock, devastating the livelihood of riverside residents.

It’s not just people who are being displaced. The giant Mekong catfish, the world’s largest freshwater fish and one of the river’s great treasures, is another victim. As part of its Belt and Road Initiative, China has been blasting rapids and rocks to make the river navigable for cargo vessels, destroying spawning and breeding grounds in the process and endangering the catfish. The situation in Cambodia’s great Tonlé Sap Lake, the “beating heart” of the Mekong, is especially dire. Dams have blocked and removed the sediment essential for plant growth and egg survival. With 11 mainstream dams in the pipeline, one study has found that Cambodians risk losing up to 60% of their protein intake. When tributary dams are taken into account, the impact on Tonlé Sap Lake could raise this figure to as high as 100%. Mr. Eyler warns that the proposed construction of a giant Chinese-backed dam at Sambor, in the Cambodian province of Kratie, could be the “final nail in the Mekong’s coffin.”

In all, more than 66 million people depend on its waters. It is home to more than 1,000 species of fish; its annual catch is “13 times more than the catch that comes out of all of North America’s rivers and lakes combined.” No river on Earth, Mr. Eyler tells us, attracts more migratory fish than the Mekong.

Saving the Mekong has never been more urgent. Solar and wind power, as well as battery technology, are readily available as alternatives to hydropower. Their adoption could halt further damming of the river and its tributaries altogether. But will the countries of the region have the vision to take them up? Will they engage with each other and with China for a responsible course for change? Their response over the next five years, Mr. Eyler says, will determine the fate of the Mekong.

—Mr. Swain is a journalist and the author of “River of Time: A Memoir of Vietnam.”