

# Retrofitting the Mekong: Community-based environmental responses to Chinese transnational infrastructure in a Thai border town

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*For decades, the Mekong River has been a site of ongoing tensions between China-backed infrastructure and communities relying on the mighty Mekong for their lives and livelihoods. In Thailand, tensions have escalated into actions against ecologically damaging hydropower dam development and the blasting of river rapids for Chinese navigation in a Thai border town. This article examines how Chinese transnational infrastructure has been reconfiguring power relationships among actors at multiple scales. Based on my fieldwork, I offer a narrative of the concerted efforts by one small community-based environmental group in northern Thailand, some of whose activism has prodded Chinese planners and project managers into responding to widespread criticism of ecological damage caused by its hydropower and riparian infrastructure and ignoring the needs of downstream local communities. The interactions between Chinese agencies and local NGOs will be discussed through the concept of a moral ecology of infrastructure, which contributes to transcending infrastructure and the environment, enabling a broadened understanding of human and nonhuman relations in more recent retrofitting of the dams and waterway projects. I argue that the reconfigured 'Green' Belt and Road Initiative is a contingent process in which multiple transnational actors claim decision-making power over the retrofitting and redevelopment of the Mekong's ecological infrastructure.*

Since the Belt and Road initiative (BRI) was launched in 2013 as a cornerstone of China's foreign policy, large-scale Chinese infrastructural projects have been hyped as part of a lucrative grand vision to boost economic growth worldwide. Chinese leaders have presented the BRI as an excellent opportunity for South–South cooperation, claiming that the BRI projects will improve connectivity, leading to inclusive development in some 150 member countries. As a result, the massive investments in

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infrastructure and potential plans have received significant academic attention for a decade.

Many scholars have questioned these aspirations, emphasising the need to expand our understanding of the BRI and China's transnational infrastructure using grounded approaches.<sup>1</sup> A significant number of studies have examined the BRI's broader geopolitical and geoeconomic implications, but they rarely examine how smaller states and local agencies, as crucial actors, have reacted and improved their strategies to engage with China.<sup>2</sup> Thus, there have been more calls for in-depth explorations of 'sites of struggle' that the project encounters.<sup>3</sup> In short, scholars urge more in-depth studies of how locals experience and respond to these China-backed transnational infrastructures on the ground.<sup>4</sup>

The BRI has been conceptualised by some as a relational and contested process that entails political ambiguity and messy outcomes that contrast with the monolithic narrative of Chinese elites.<sup>5</sup> Scholars are increasingly considering the environmental consequences of these large-scale infrastructure projects at different BRI sites around the world. For instance, a case study of Sri Lanka has demonstrated how the BRI may bring about political rupture and moments of chaos together with environmental degradation in a politically unstable state.<sup>6</sup> Such grounded views have contributed to complicating studies on the BRI by including the varied responses of local actors to China's projects.

Many nuanced accounts exist of ongoing BRI projects in countries of the global South. Most of these infrastructure projects have been criticised for posing significant threats to the ecosystems of host countries. In response to such criticisms, China has pledged to make the BRI projects more sustainable and eco-friendly. As a result, the Chinese 'green development' discourse has become more pronounced in recent years, portraying the re-labelled 'Green Belt and Road Initiative (Green BRI)' as an alternative way to grow through developing infrastructure in a clean way.<sup>7</sup>

This article serves to add to this scholarship as a fine-grained case study of Southeast Asia, focusing on the controversial issue of the mighty Mekong River, one of Asia's most essential rivers for over 60 million people in China, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand, Vietnam and Cambodia. For decades, it has been the site of

1 Julie Michelle Klinger and Joshua S.S. Muldavin, 'New geographies of development: Grounding China's global integration', *Territory, Politics, Governance* 7, 1 (2019): 1–21; Gustavo de L.T. Oliveira, Galen Murton, Alessandro Ripa, Tyler Harlan and Yang Yang, 'China's Belt and Road Initiative: Views from the ground', *Political Geography* 82 (2020): 1–4.

2 Hong Liu and Guan Lim, 'The political economy of a rising China in Southeast Asia: Malaysia's response to the Belt and Road Initiative', *Journal of Contemporary China* 28, 116 (2019): 216–31.

3 Jonas Lindberg and Robin Biddulph, 'China's Belt and Road Initiative: The need for livelihood-inclusive stories', *Geoforum* 121 (2021): 139.

4 *Ibid.*; James D. Sidaway, Simon C. Rowedder, Chih Yuan Woon, Weiqiang Lin and Vatthana Pholsena, 'Introduction: Research agendas raised by the Belt and Road Initiative', *Environment and Planning C: Politics and Space* 38, 5 (2020): 795–802.

5 Oliveira et al., 'China's BRI', p. 1.

6 Kanchana N. Ruwanpura, Peter Rowe and Loritta Chan, 'Of bombs and belts: Exploring potential ruptures within China's Belt and Road Initiative in Sri Lanka', *Geographical Journal* 186, 3 (2020): 339–45.

7 Sanja Bogojević and Mimi Zou, 'Making infrastructure "visible" in environmental law: The Belt and Road Initiative and climate change friction', *Transnational Environmental Law* 10, 1 (2021): 44.

ongoing tensions between China and neighbouring countries due to the construction of a cascade of upstream hydropower dams in Yunnan. It is worth noting that Thailand's northern and northeastern border areas were already facing tremendous infrastructural changes as a result of various transnational projects with the Yunnan provincial government even before the launch of the BRI. For instance, cross-border bridges and highways were built in the Mekong region with the promise of prosperity and better regional connectivity. While China has played a role, institutions such as the Asian Development Bank (ADB) have also made significant contributions, as seen with the East-West Corridor and the North-South Economic Corridor projects. The central government of Thailand has generally welcomed these infrastructure investments. However, dissatisfaction, resistance and protests by local communities and NGOs, including an environmental group in a northern Thai border town on the Mekong, Chiang Khong, reveal a variety of responses to China's transborder infrastructure projects.

This article examines China's grand ideas of the BRI and transnational infrastructure put into practice. My fieldwork was conducted from October 2019 to August 2020 in Chiang Khong, a district in Chiang Rai province, northern Thailand. Chiang Khong is located at the border between Thailand and Laos. The district comprises seven subdistricts, which are subdivided into 102 villages. In 2018, there were 64,201 citizens, with approximately 13,511 people living downtown.<sup>8</sup> The town is across the Mekong from Huay Xai, the provincial capital of Bokeo province in Laos, approximately 250 km from Mohan, a significant town bordering China, facilitating cross-border trade between Laos and China. The primary data were collected through observation, participation in the NGOs' activities and interviewing the NGOs' staff and town residents. Secondary data were gathered from local news, a conference handbook and relevant official reports.

In particular, I explore the work of the Rak Chiang Khong Conservation Group (hereafter Rak Chiang Khong), a key actor that has run several campaigns against China-backed infrastructure projects. Rak Chiang Khong has, for instance, protested against hydropower dams along the Mekong and specifically, the project to dynamite rapids and shallows in the middle Mekong to create year-round river navigation for Chinese cargo boats, which NGOs renamed the 'Blasting Mekong Project'. In the more recent 'Green' BRI phase, the group has also interacted with Chinese NGOs and academics, actively reaching out to them to discuss the harmful impacts of current and planned projects. The tensions between Chinese agencies and companies involved and local NGOs focus on the fear of natural resource grabbing, transnational enclosure, adverse impacts on local livelihoods, and serious long-term environmental threats to the Mekong River Basin.<sup>9</sup>

I adopt the notion of a moral ecology of infrastructure, developed by the anthropologist Caterina Scaramelli, to analyse the just relationships between humans,

8 Chiang Rai Provincial Public Health Office, 'Number of registered population Chiang Khong district, Chiang Rai province as of 1 Jan. 2018', *Health Data Centre (HDC)*, <https://datacro.moph.go.th/hdc> (in Thai).

9 Yos Santasombat, *The river of life: Changing ecosystems of the Mekong Region* (Chiang Mai: Mekong Press, 2011), pp. 25–47.

nonhumans, water, and infrastructure in this case study.<sup>10</sup> In Scaramelli's view, the concept of a moral ecology contributes to understanding the motivation for the actions of people who confront and respond to environmental transformations.<sup>11</sup> Thus, this article will employ this concept to explore how the various actors involved compete for their vision of the Mekong ecology and take actions to transform its riparian infrastructure. I also examine the recent policy adjustment, as represented by the 'Green BRI', in Chiang Khong town by focusing on community engagement between Thai NGOs, Chinese NGOs, a Chinese academic institution, and Chinese state-owned enterprises regarding Mekong environmental issues.

I demonstrate that, although China has portrayed the BRI as the path to a shared future prosperity for all countries in the Mekong region, the transborder infrastructure projects have generated local insecurity, uncertainty, and political ambiguity. I will discuss how local NGOs, residents, dam builders, Chinese NGOs, and Chinese agencies have all pursued their own interests in engaging with the Mekong River. Through the analysis of three cases of interaction between Rak Chiang Khong and various Chinese actors, I argue that China's ambitious transnational infrastructure programme takes on new meanings when exposed to social, political, and environmental conditions in different parts of the world such as the Mekong region, where in practice it is being reshaped by a variety of non-state and state actors trying to align it with local needs or adjust it to their advantage.

### **Moral ecology of retrofitting the Mekong**

The concept of a moral ecology of infrastructure is built on the notions of moral economy and moral ecology. Scaramelli suggests expanding the concept of moral ecology beyond its previous meaning as resistance to capitalist processes and applying it to a broad context, not limited to peasant or indigenous society.<sup>12</sup> The concept was drawn from ethnographic research on local daily experiences and conflicts among fishers, scientists, NGOs, and middle-class and working-class residents in transforming the Gediz Delta in western Türkiye to serve multiple purposes, ranging from a wetland to a real estate development site. These actors have taken measures to change the delta's landscapes and livelihoods according to their moral evaluations of specific deltaic configurations. In Scaramelli's view, the relationships between ecology and infrastructure are interwoven within capitalism, land expropriation histories, and class hierarchy in Turkish society. In short, in the Gediz Delta, ecology and human infrastructure were seen as complementary, not antagonistic.

In addition, some scholars have suggested a broader understanding of the term infrastructure itself, one that refers instead to a set of organisational techniques modifying the environment globally, blurring the boundaries between nature and technology.<sup>13</sup>

10 Caterina Scaramelli, 'The Delta is dead: Moral ecologies of infrastructure in Turkey', *Cultural Anthropology* 34, 3 (2019): 388–91.

11 Ibid.

12 Ibid.

13 William Balée, 'The research program of historical ecology', *Annual Review of Anthropology* 35, 1 (2006): 75–98; Geoffrey C. Bowker, *Science on the run: Information management and industrial geophysics at Schlumberger, 1920–1940* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1994), p. 191; William Cronon, 'The trouble with wilderness: Or, getting back to the wrong nature', *Environmental History* 1, 1 (1996): 7–28; Martin

Anthropological works in particular highlight that nature *becomes* infrastructure through human practices involving techno-politics and environmental politics, suggesting that infrastructure and the environment are intertwined and inseparable. Ashley Carse, for example, has proposed a ‘nature as infrastructure’ conceptual framework to examine the sociopolitical work of water provision and the relationship of people involved in the Panama Canal watershed management.<sup>14</sup> Another example is the research on the construction of the Chao Phraya Dam, funded by the World Bank in 1950s Thailand. Jakkrit Sangkhamanee adopts Andrew Pickering’s ‘dance of agency’ concept to explore the interactions among agencies in complex dam construction networks, highlighting the unintended consequences that arise from such intricate assemblages.<sup>15</sup>

Drawing on these anthropological infrastructure concepts, in this study, I will treat the Mekong River as infrastructure. I will analyse the practices, politics, and multiscale relationships involved in contemporary Mekong River development projects. The roles of multiple actors and their relationships with the Mekong will be examined, particularly their visions of the Mekong and the actual implementation of infrastructure projects. The following cases demonstrate how the Mekong is physically integral to local and regional political processes, and how the meaning of the river emerges from these relationships at different scales.<sup>16</sup>

Furthermore, recent studies have described infrastructure as an open-ended process of maintenance, decay, and retrofitting.<sup>17</sup> In order to anticipate future projects, it is necessary to evaluate whether past projects were successful or unsuccessful; retrofitting then demonstrates how infrastructure anticipates future needs and tackles crises that emerge from existing projects.<sup>18</sup> In short, retrofitting follows a futurological approach, which involves thinking into the future by intertwining it with the present.

Viewing infrastructure as a process, I examine Rak Chiang Khong’s role in responding to China’s transnational infrastructure through different projects. Finally, I illustrate how these projects, such as the Blasting Mekong Project and hydro-power dam construction, have enmeshed several actors at various levels, representing the different interests in the river. The Mekong has thus become a site where multiple national and local governments, officials, Chinese state-owned enterprises, academics, and NGOs are co-constructing and retrofitting China’s transnational infrastructure projects.

Reuss and Stephen H. Cutcliffe, eds, *The illusory boundary: Environment and technology in history* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2010).

14 Ashley Carse, ‘Nature as infrastructure: Making and managing the Panama Canal Watershed’, *Social Studies of Science* 42, 4 (2012): 539–63.

15 Jakkrit Sangkhamanee, ‘Infrastructure in the making: The Chao Phraya Dam and the dance of agency’, *TRaNS: Trans-Regional and -National Studies of Southeast Asia* 6, 1 (2018): 47–71.

16 See Franz Krause and Veronica Strang, ‘Thinking relationships through water’, *Society & Natural Resources* 29, 6 (2016): 633–8.

17 Howe et al., ‘Paradoxical infrastructures: Ruins, retrofit, and risk’, *Science, Technology, & Human Values* 41, 3 (2016): 547–65; Akhil Gupta, ‘The future in ruins: Thoughts on the temporality of infrastructure’, in *The promise of infrastructure*, ed. Nikhil Anand, Akhil Gupta and Hannah Appel (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018), pp. 62–79; Joshua J. Cousins, ‘Malleable infrastructures: Crisis and the engineering of political ecologies in southern California’, *Environment and Planning E: Nature and Space* 3, 3 (2020): 927–49.

18 Howe et al., ‘Paradoxical infrastructure’, p. 555.

Additionally, in the past two decades, state, state-owned and commercial hydro-power investors have primarily perceived the Mekong River as a resource for connectivity, mobility, and energy for economic growth. However, in response to evolving environmental concerns, the Pak Beng hydropower project located on the Mekong in northern Lao PDR is one example of initiatives to negotiate and find common ground among various stakeholders. Its recent adjustment is framed by investors as an effort to enable clean energy production, potentially reducing CO<sub>2</sub> emissions and serving as an alternative energy source that does not rely as much on fossil fuels.<sup>19</sup>

Using the Mekong region as a starting point, I examine socioeconomic imageries and politics that have shaped its infrastructure and social life from 1990 to the present. I will demonstrate how the functions of infrastructure have been repurposed to address various environmental concerns. This has resulted in multiple forms of moral practices, for instance, in contestation, negotiation, cooperation, and projections of the future of the Mekong.

### Land and water connections with China

How did the Mekong River become an infrastructure serving regional economic growth? The Mekong region has been a target of neoliberal 'development' policies since the late nineteenth to early twentieth century. In the colonial period, the British and French were highly interested in building a railway and creating a riparian shipping route for commercial trade with southern China.<sup>20</sup> In the 1990s, the ADB launched an economic cooperation programme for Mainland Southeast Asia, called the Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS), comprising Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam, Thailand, Myanmar, which included the two southwestern Chinese provinces of Yunnan and Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region.<sup>21</sup>

The GMS adopted the 'economic quadrangle' concept, which the Chiang Rai Chamber of Commerce first conceptualised in the 1980s to promote regional economic integration. The economic quadrangle refers to the upstream areas of the Mekong River, comprising Yunnan, Laos, Myanmar, and Thailand. Apparently, the Quadrangle Economic Zone was introduced with the promise of thriving transborder zones that would bring mutual economic growth and prosperity to these countries.<sup>22</sup>

Infrastructural development became the highest priority of the ambitious GMS plan known as the North-South Economic Corridor.<sup>23</sup> Many cross-border transportation projects were developed, for example, highway links between China and

19 Nathaniel Matthews and Stew Motta, 'China's influence on hydropower development in the Lancang River and Lower Mekong River Basin', in *State of Knowledge Series 4*, Challenge Program on Water and Food (Vientiane: CGIAR, 2013), p. 1.

20 P.K. Menon, 'The Mekong River and international development of natural resources', *The International Lawyer* 5, 1 (1971): 53–8.

21 Ming Li Yong, 'Reclaiming community spaces in the Mekong River transboundary commons: Shifting territorialities in Chiang Khong, Thailand', *Asia Pacific Viewpoint* 61, 2 (2020): 205–6.

22 Masami Ishida, 'Development of five triangle areas in the Greater Mekong Subregion', in *Five triangle areas in the Greater Mekong Subregion*, ed. Masami Ishida (Bangkok: Bangkok Research Center, IDE-JETRO, 2012), pp. 14–15.

23 E.C. Chapman and Peter Hinton, 'The emerging Mekong Corridor: A note on recent development (to May 1993)', *Thai-Yunnan Project Newsletter* 21 (1993): 12–16.



Thailand via Laos and Burma (R3A and R3B), a rail link between Thailand and Yunnan, regional airports and the expansion of air transport and a project to improve navigation through the Upper Mekong.<sup>24</sup> In the late 1980s Thai prime minister Chatichai Choonhavan announced a policy to turn the former Indochina from ‘a battlefield into a marketplace’.<sup>25</sup> As a result, Thai–Laos border crossings between Chiang Khong and Huay Xai as well as Chiang Saen and Tonpheung were officially launched in 1989;<sup>26</sup> formal border trade was re-established a few years later.

An inland waterway that connects the ports of Simao in Yunnan and Chiang Saen in northern Thailand was also discussed among the Mekong countries. As a result, a commercial navigation agreement was signed in April 2000, allowing the blasting of submerged rocks and rapids in the Mekong River between Simao to Luang Prabang (Laos).<sup>27</sup> The Navigation Channel Improvement project led by China aimed at widening and deepening the Mekong River to enable 500-ton cargo vessels to safely navigate down from Yunnan province towards Laos and Thailand.<sup>28</sup>

Already in place was a major programme to control, manage, capture, and manipulate the Mekong through hydropower dam development in western China since the 1990s; 11 hydropower dams have been built on the Lancang-Mekong River in Yunnan province.<sup>29</sup> The Lancang cascades have been constructed to regulate the flow of the *entire* river to generate electricity, enhance irrigation, capture water supply, and control water levels for navigation.<sup>30</sup> Although the Chinese government has portrayed the Lancang dams as a successful hydropower development model, the environmental impact of impounding water has severely disrupted the critical fisheries and riparian ecology of the Mekong in the downstream countries of Laos, Cambodia, Thailand and Vietnam.

The Mekong River is an illuminating site to explore how nature has been modified through hydrological engineering and politics. Geoffrey Bowker defines infra-structural work as a collection of organisational techniques, comprising administrative and technical support, that facilitate a higher-order objective.<sup>31</sup> For example, the operation of the Lancang-Mekong hydropower dams involved complex technical and political work to regulate water levels serving multiple purposes; altered navigational conditions are a part of those objectives. Thus, the blasting Mekong project performed on the already modified river created more tensions between China and communities in downstream countries.

24 Andrew Walker, *The legend of the golden boat: Regulation, trade and traders in the borderlands of Laos, Thailand, China and Burma* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1999), p. 65.

25 David Murray, ‘“From battlefield to market place”: Regional economic co-operation in the Mekong zone’, *Geography* 79, 4 (1994): 350–53.

26 Ibid.

27 Naho Mirumachi and Mikiyasu Nakayama, ‘Improving methodologies for transboundary impact assessment in transboundary watercourses: Navigation channel improvement project of the Lancang-Mekong River from China-Myanmar Boundary Marker 243 to Ban Houei Sai of Laos’, *International Journal of Water Resources Development* 23, 3 (2007): 411–25.

28 Ming Li Yong, ‘Reclaiming community spaces’, p. 210.

29 The Mekong is called the Lancang Jiang in China.

30 Pu Wang, Shikui Dong and James Lassoie, *The large dam dilemma: An exploration of the impacts of hydro projects on people and the environment in China* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2014), pp. 35–6.

31 Bowker, *Science on the run*, p. 10.

In addition to waterway connectivity, international land routes connecting Yunnan province with the border of Laos and Myanmar were also constructed in the 2000s. For example, the ADB, China, and Thailand provided a loan to the Lao government to build the Lao route connecting Huay Xai, Chiang Khong and Boten to Mohan, on the border of China. In addition, China initiated funding half of the construction costs of the fourth Thai-Lao Friendship Bridge, of which the Thai government funded the other half; the agreement was made at the 14th GMS Ministerial Meeting in 2007.<sup>32</sup>

In December 2013, just a few months after the proclamation of the BRI by Chinese President Xi Jinping, the fourth Thai-Lao Friendship Bridge between Chiang Khong and Huay Xai was officially opened. It has become a crucial route to Asian Highway 3 (R3A), connecting Bangkok to Kunming in Yunnan. In addition, the Thai government has marketed Chiang Khong town as the 'Gateway to Indochina', instigating the ambition to become one of the fastest-growing border cities in the GMS.

Another attempt to reimagine the borderlands continued a few years later; the Thai government designated Chiang Khong as part of a special economic zone (SEZ), claiming the border town would be an ideal location to be a 'logistics hub', operating cargo transportation via highway, river, and railway. In July 2018, the Thai cabinet approved funding for constructing a double-track line linking Chiang Khong and Bangkok. According to the Thai Ministry of Transportation, this northern rail project will be a part of Thailand's mega plan to boost the local economy and serve as a new link to Laos. The route's unofficial name is Den Chai-Chiang Khong, and it will run from Bangkok northwards through the provinces of Phrae, Lampang, and Phayao, then entering Chiang Rai and finally ending in Chiang Khong district, near the Thai-Lao Friendship Bridge. Amid the intense promotion of the Sino-Thai high-speed railway cooperation, the Thai Minister of Transport promoted the Den Chai-Chiang Khong double-track line as an ambitious plan to join the BRI.<sup>33</sup> In his remarks at the inauguration ceremony, he claimed that Chiang Khong would become an important gateway for the North-South Economic Corridor.<sup>34</sup>

China's economic engagements in the Mekong region as a whole exceed the scope of the BRI by far, extending to extensive cross-border ventures such as rubber plantations, mining, and other commercial projects. It is impossible to discuss these without referring to the GMS programme. The role of the Mekong countries in recasting the vision started by China is particularly crucial. The list of infrastructure projects above demonstrates that Thailand has firmly worked on aligning itself with global neoliberal capitalism even before the recent BRI. The plan to build the Den Chai to Chiang Khong railway had been discussed in Thai domestic transportation plans for decades. Moreover, the Thai government has used the BRI and Chinese

32 Ishida, 'Development of five triangle areas', p. 15.

33 Prachachat, 'เวนคืน 2.5 พันไร่ผุดศูนย์โลจิสติกส์ชายแดน-หัวเมืองหลัก' [Expropriation of 2,000 rai (989 acres) to build a logistics centre near the border and in the cities], *Prachachat.net*, 30 Jan. 2018.

34 Bangkokbiznews, 'รวม.คมนาคม' ลงเสาเอกศูนย์ขนส่งสินค้าเชียงของ' [The transport minister participates in the pillar erection ceremony at the Chiang Khong cargo centre], *Bangkokbiznews.com*, 18 Jan. 2018.



economic expansion to envision itself as the central hub for regional logistics developments.

In order to understand what these transnational infrastructures mean to communities, I will focus on visualising the interplay between local people and the modified environment along the Mekong River in the following sections. Finally, I will give an account of my experience of how Chiang Khong residents are struggling and dealing with the livelihood changes resulting from erratic fluctuations of the Mekong's water levels, including their views on the Chinese dams upstream.

### **The disappearance of *kai*, a freshwater weed**

It was 7 a.m. when I arrived at Baan Had Krai pebble beach. I stood on the riverbank, looking at the stunningly peaceful view of the Mekong River. The sky above was covered with soft white mist mixed with the golden light of the sun and clouds. This morning, we were the first group of five women carrying wooden bamboo baskets, mobile phones, and cameras, wading into the shallows of the Mekong River to search for *kai pen*, a freshwater alga also known as *kai* or *klainam* by local people. Malee, a Rak Chiang Khong staff member, invited me to join her for the *kai* collection, which takes place only in the dry season from January to March.

I was struggling to balance on the slippery pebbles and avoid stepping on *kai* swaying slowly beneath the surface of the water when another group of four women appeared. They walked quickly towards a waist-deep spot and started pulling out *kai* from under the rocks. Each wore a long-sleeved T-shirt and pants, a hat and long waterproof boots. The group was fully equipped with big wooden baskets, rice sacks, small fishing nets, and a portable radio placed on the riverbank. A woman told us that they were from a nearby village. In her opinion, *kai* did not grow here last year because 'China held back much water upstream'.<sup>35</sup> Although they fortunately found *kai* again this year, I heard many women complaining that it was dirty because of unstable water levels. It took a longer time to wash out the excess sand and mud. They piled the *kai* into small fishing nets and hit it with a wooden stick to wash and drain it.

The freshwater weed is mainly found on pebbles in shallow water. In Chiang Khong, it is mainly women who harvest *kai* at specific locations along the Mekong during the dry season.<sup>36</sup> After harvesting the river weed, they dry it into sheets, after which it can be deep-fried or seasoned with spices. They can also earn money by selling fresh *kai*. However, due to the uncommon fluctuations of the river levels *kai* is no longer abundant. I was told that they had earned more money from selling fresh *kai* before 'China's dams' were in operation. I noticed that the dams were mentioned critically when they talked about the unseasonal fluctuating water levels of the Mekong. It was not only local environmental activists but many ordinary people who often brought up 'China's dams' in general conversations about the river. Throughout my stay in the town, there were a lot of complaints about a severe drought, insufficient water for rice farming, decreasing fish variety and quantity, flooding of riverbank farms, and delays in commercial shipping upstream because of low water levels.

35 Fieldnotes, 2 Feb. 2020.

36 Ming Li Yong, 'Reclaiming community spaces', pp. 210–12.

Much has been written about the concerns regarding the environmental degradation and social impact caused by Mekong dams which have been built across the countries of the Lower Mekong River Basin. The disappearance of kai is part of the criticism of how the hydropower dams have threatened the food security of Mekong Region communities. In addition, scholars and NGOs often highlight the effect that these dams have on humans and nonhumans, as they bring about changes in the life cycles of migratory fish and birds due to the disruptions of a fragile ecosystem.<sup>37</sup> One of the earliest responses to this was the establishment of the Mekong River Commission (MRC) in 1995; an intergovernmental organisation set up by Cambodia, Lao PDR, Thailand, and Vietnam to jointly share water resource planning and coordinate sustainable development policies across the Lower Mekong Basin.

However, many studies have shown that the MRC has failed to tackle the Mekong's problems. The primary reason is that the upstream section of the river is in China, which is not a member of the MRC. In addition, the diversity of water interests among the six riparian countries results in the complexity of expectations and undermines the legal basis for restitution.<sup>38</sup> The MRC's ineffectiveness has weakened the political power of the Lower Mekong countries in their negotiations with China over its upstream control of the flow and water volume of the Mekong.<sup>39</sup> In the meantime, a small community-based environmental movement has long been searching for alternative support to receive greater attention for damage caused by current and future Mekong projects through the media; thus, they have sought to connect with other environmental NGOs and international river protection networks.<sup>40</sup>

### Activists in Chiang Khong

Rak Chiang Khong can be translated as 'Preserve Chiang Khong' or 'Love Chiang Khong',<sup>41</sup> and it is led by the charismatic Niwat Roykeaw. His fellow activists address him as Kru Tee, 'Teacher Tee'. In Chiang Rai, he is a well-known environmental activist who has been working on Mekong River issues for over 20 years. A former teacher at a public school, he resigned in 1995 to work as a full-time environmental activist in his hometown. In 2004, he established the group, inviting several residents from all walks of life to gather under the Rak Chiang Khong.

In the early stage, the group operated loosely. Most of its activities focused on creating mutual understanding between the hill tribes and lowland residents. However, a critical period for the organisation to appear as local environmental activists who strongly opposed the China-led projects began around the year 2000 when

37 Philip Hirsch, 'China and the cascading geopolitics of Lower Mekong Dams', *Asia-Pacific Journal* 9, 20 (2011): 1; Ian Baird, 'The Don Sahong Dam: Potential impacts on regional fish migrations, livelihoods and human health', *Critical Asian Studies* 43, 2 (2011): 211–35.

38 Ellen Bruzelius Backer, 'The Mekong River Commission: Does it work, and how does the Mekong Basin's geography influence its effectiveness?', *Südostasien Aktuell: Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs* 26, 4 (2007): 31–5; Yi Fu, 'The analysis of the international legal water regime of the Mekong River Basin' (PhD diss., University of Göttingen, 2017), pp. 16–17.

39 Ibid.

40 Ming Li Yong, 'Reclaiming community spaces', p. 206; Sokphea Young and Sophal Ear, 'Transnational political economic structures: Explaining transnational environmental movements against dams in the lower Mekong region', *Third World Quarterly* 42, 12 (2021): 2999.

41 The word **รักษ์** (rak) and **รัก** (rak) are homonymous in Thai.

they launched a campaign against the Lancang-Mekong navigation project and disseminated information about the dams being built along the river.

In 2015, Kru Tee, the leader and founder, collaborated with the Mekong-Lanna Natural Resources and Cultural Conservation Network to establish the Mekong School: Institute of Local Knowledge.<sup>42</sup> Situated on the Mekong riverbank, the building is a two-storey wooden-framed structure, topped by teak-leaf roof. This open-air space serves as a multifunctional classroom, office, living area, and dining room. Through outdoor learning and participatory action research, the Mekong School aims to promote local culture and social justice issues associated with the Mekong River. However, as the school was surrounded by greenery without a fence, tourists often mistook it for a restaurant or resort. Instead of giving long explanations, the staff sometimes simply and gently showed them out, saying 'Sorry, today our restaurant is closed!'

According to Kru Tee, Rak Chiang Khong divides its tasks into four categories: strategy and policy-making, NGO network cooperation, fieldwork research and local engagement, and media and public relations. At present, Rak Chiang Khong has a broad network of members from various sectors, such as the media, local NGOs, international non-profit organisations, universities, and cultural organisations. They include independent researchers, village chiefs, activist monks, fishers, boat operators, and members of provincial chambers of commerce.<sup>43</sup>

Since its founding, Rak Chiang Khong has played a prominent role in opposing China's navigation project and dam construction along the Mekong River. The image of local activists striving to protect their hometowns has become a vital characteristic that appears in local, national, and international media. The emergence of Rak Chiang Khong serves as an example of a local response to China's transnational infrastructure project. China-backed infrastructure penetrated the borderland community more than two decades before the inception of the BRI. In the following section, I will further illustrate the group's relentless campaign against the China-led navigation project, which both governments have recently discontinued.

### **Stop blasting the Mekong rapids!**

China's plan to enable navigation for large cargo vessels in the Mekong, drafted in September 2001, involved the dynamiting of rapids around Chiang Khong. In response, Rak Chiang Khong argued that the blasting and dredging scheme would destroy the local ecosystem, including fish and other aquatic species. The same year, the group played a vital role in fighting against the project. Once the Chinese survey vessel appeared near the Kaeng Kai rapids in Chiang Khong, Kru Tee led Rak Chiang Khong staff and a group of residents to occupy exposed rocks in the middle of the Mekong River and brandished placards. Then, in May 2002, Rak Chiang Khong approached the Thai Senate Committee on the Environment, requesting that the project be halted due to the risk to border demarcation and adverse ecological effects. As a result, the project was temporarily suspended, because the Thai

42 The Mekong School emphasises on-site experiential learning and has introduced an online platform for wider engagement. See their official website: [www.mekongschool.org](http://www.mekongschool.org).

43 Kru Tee, interview, 19 Oct. 2019.

government worried about the territory's sensitivity and insufficient Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) data on the project.<sup>44</sup>

The navigation project was postponed for several years. However, in light of China's growing influence in the region and the intense promotion of the BRI, in 2015, the Lancang-Mekong Cooperation Mechanism authorised the navigation channel improvement project again by claiming that it would enhance logistics capacity on the Mekong. In the following year, in December 2016, General Prayuth Chan-o-cha's military government revived the rapids blasting project by approving a development plan for international navigation on the Lancang-Mekong River from 2015 to 2025. The Thai Ministry of Transportation proposed the plan, allowing China's state-owned CCCC 2nd Harbour Consultant Co., Ltd to carry out a feasibility survey along the Mekong River.

In response, Rak Chiang Khong made several headlines again in 2017. Two long-tail boats with handwritten Chinese, English, and Thai banners saying 'Stop Rapids Blasting' approached a Chinese engineering company's vessel on a 'survey and design' task. On the Khon Phi Long islet in the middle of the Mekong, members of the group pulled out handwritten banners stating 'The Mekong River is Not for Sale'. This was followed by a larger event called 'The Peaceful Chiang Khong 93', where environmental activists gathered at the Pha Phra viewpoint opposite the site labelled 'Rapid no. 93' in the blasting plan. They pulled out written banners saying 'Lancang-Mekong is the Same River'; several multicoloured umbrellas served as a background, implying the diversity of the people of the Mekong.<sup>45</sup>

Their efforts to stop the navigation project were not without its risks. After seizing power in 2014, Thailand's military authorities limited civil society movements throughout the country. Nevertheless, the Rak Chiang Khong activists kept running campaigns against the rapids blasting project throughout 2017, while the Chinese survey vessel was working in the area. Because of the protests, the provincial military commander once invited Kru Tee to 'talk' about the influential movement.<sup>46</sup> On the same day, Prime Minister Prayuth was quoted as saying that he was concerned about the protests against the Chinese-led project. Thai officials attempted to convince the public that it was only a feasibility study phase, and no decision had been made yet.<sup>47</sup>

China's state-owned CCCC 2nd Harbour was the enterprise that directly confronted NGOs while surveying the site and conducting project feasibility studies. In November 2018, Rak Chiang Khong expressed its vehement opposition to the blasting project in a public hearing on the project. The group emphasised that they disagreed

44 Ming Li Yong, 'Reclaiming community spaces', p. 208.

45 Thecitizen, 'คนริมโขงแสดงจุดยืน "ค้านระเบิดแก่งน้ำโขง" ในปฏิบัติการ "เชียงของ โขงร่มเย็น 93"' [At the event known as Chiang Khong Rom Yen 93, Mekong residents voiced their opposition to the Mekong Blasting Project], *Thecitizen.plus*, 15 May 2017.

46 Prachatai, 'ทหารนัด ปช.รักษเชียงของ ถกหน่วยความมั่นคง-กรมเจ้าท่า เหตุด้านจีนสำรวจแก่งน้ำโขง' [The chief of the Rak Chiang Khong Conservation Group was invited to talk to provincial officers, the military, marine department, and security agency about their movement against the Chinese-led navigation project], *Prachathai.com*, 26 Apr. 2017.

47 Siamrath, 'สิ่งแจงปมค้านพัฒนาเดินเรือลุ่มน้ำล้านช้าง-โขงหวันระเบิดแก่ง' [Explanation from Thai government agency on the controversial Lancang-Mekong blasting issues], *Siamrath.co.th*, 25 Apr. 2017.

on the proposed clearing of the Khon Pi Long rapids, insisting that removing the islets and rapids would dramatically affect the ecosystem.

In Chiang Khong, the last public meeting was held in January 2019, arranged by consultants to CCCC 2nd Harbour, which brought a representative of the company and a Thai team to answer relevant questions raised by participants. CCCC 2nd Harbour's representative clarified that they would submit their pre-project study results to the governments of the four countries involved (China, Thailand, Laos, and Myanmar) to decide whether they wanted to continue the project individually. He explained that the company was not a representative of the Chinese government; the company only carried out 'survey and design' tasks, which were mutually agreed upon by the four countries.

Before the public hearing, Rak Chiang Khong worked actively to disseminate information about the potential impact of the project on the Mekong River. During the presentation, attendees addressed several issues, such as insufficient ecosystem impact details, the risk of the Thai–Laos boundary changing, and the unequal sharing of benefits with China. Rak Chiang Khong representatives appeared at each session of the hearing to confirm that they would not tolerate any activity beneficial to the project.

### **The victory of relentless resistance**

On 4 February 2020, in the late afternoon, I was chatting with Rak Chiang Khong members at the Mekong School when Kru Tee broke the news to us that the Thai government had formally withdrawn from the blasting Mekong project. From the group's perspective, it was their first accomplishment and the first official response from China. Kru Tee told me that he felt delighted about this victory, as they had been fighting for issues concerning the Mekong River for over twenty years. However, this turn of events was not as surprising as one might think, as it could be observed over the past few years that China had changed its approach in communicating with local communities, as Kru Tee had noticed. For him, this victory was the dawn of hope regarding negotiations to stop further dam projects along the Mekong.

Notably, the Mekong navigation project has encountered local resistance since the early 2000s. As mentioned, it was put on hold for several years due to the disputes over environmental problems and sensitive territorial issues. The decision to revive it could be understood through BRI's recent influence in the region.<sup>48</sup> The blasting project was not originally part of the BRI. Nevertheless, the reappearance of the strategy to strengthen regional riparian logistics aligned well with other land-based connectivity projects, such as a Sino-Thai high-speed railway and the Eastern Economic Corridor investment zones.

Since the 2014 coup in Thailand, its military ties with China have become stronger; the junta government has actively approached China for military cooperation, since the United States and other Western countries responded negatively to the coup. The Thai military government was also eager to facilitate Chinese investment

48 Shaun Lin and Carl Grundy-Warr, 'Navigating Sino-Thai "rocky" bilateral ties: The geopolitics of riverine trade in the Greater Mekong Subregion', *Environment and Planning C: Politics and Space* 38, 5 (2020): 831.

in Thailand by simply waiving or approving relevant laws and regulations. Consequently, China is now Thailand's largest trade partner and the second largest source of foreign direct investment.<sup>49</sup>

Over the past two decades, Rak Chiang Khong has employed a range of tactics, including protesting and shaming, running campaigns, forming networks, disseminating information, lodging a complaint with the Supreme Administrative Court against Thai authorities, and promoting Mekong issues through international environmental organisations. Clearly, they know how to place the Mekong issue within a global framework that induced the Chinese government to reconsider the blasting project. As a result, the small community-based movement, which was able to evoke international pressure, has contributed to reshaping China's approach to this transnational infrastructure project.<sup>50</sup>

Rak Chiang Khong's members successfully present themselves as local activists who fight against China's transnational infrastructure projects, where these do not serve the best interests of local populations, local cultures and ecosystems. The constructed local identity and relentless efforts to preserve the Mekong River have contributed to their accountability and have prompted broader international support. In addition, steady support from the local, national, and international media on various platforms substantially amplifies these local activists' influence on the public. As a result, numerous articles, photos, video clips, documentaries, leaflets, stickers, interviews, et cetera, have been produced in Thai and English by the group and others interested in its work. To name a few, prominent among these are the BBC's feature titled *Explore the Pulse of the Mekong River*,<sup>51</sup> the collaborative report 'The Changing Mekong River' produced by Rak Chiang Khong and other local entities,<sup>52</sup> and an article on the International Rivers website about the termination of the rapids blasting project.<sup>53</sup>

Another reason for China's turnaround is that there are now better ways of overland shipment connecting China with the Mekong countries. Thus, dropping the controversial navigation project would reduce tensions between China and the Mekong communities and strengthen China's reputation as a responsible neighbour, without affecting regional logistics. Further, due to China's recent stated commitment to environmental responsibility in BRI projects, it might be that its leaders have become

49 Ian Storey, 'Thailand's military relations with China: Moving from strength to strength', *ISEAS Perspective* 2019/43 (Singapore: ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, 2019), p. 11.

50 Pichamon Yeophantong, 'China's Lancang dam cascade and transnational activism in the Mekong Region', *Asian Survey* 54, 4 (2014): 700–724.

51 Tanyaporn Buathong, 'สำรวจชีพจรแม่น้ำโขง ย้อนรอยโครงการระเบิดเกาะแก่งแม่น้ำโขง กั้บการใช้อำนาจ อัน ทรงพลัง ของ จีน เพื่อ เปลี่ยนแปลง ธรรมชาติ' [Explore the pulse of the Mekong River: Retracing the project to blow up rapids in the Mekong river by China], *BBC*, 15 June 2020. Pictures and video by Jiraporn Kuhagarn, planning editor, Isariya Prythongyam, [https://www.bbc.com/thai/resources/idt-sh/mekong\\_blast\\_thai](https://www.bbc.com/thai/resources/idt-sh/mekong_blast_thai).

52 Rak Chiang Khong Group, Living River Association, Mekong Community Institute, and Local Villager Researchers Mekong River Chiang Rai Group, 'แม่น้ำโขง สายน้ำที่เปลี่ยนแปลง : งานวิจัยของชาวบ้านริมโขงจังหวัดเชียงราย' [The changing Mekong River: Research by Mekong villagers in Chiang Rai province] (Chiang Mai: Wanida, Mar. 2023).

53 Pai Deetes, 'Victory on the Upper Mekong: Thai Cabinet terminates rapids blasting project', *International Rivers*, 6 Feb. 2020, <https://www.internationalrivers.org/news/blog-victory-on-the-upper-mekong-thai-cabinet-terminates-rapids-blasting-project/>.



more sensitive to friction outside the country. To further illustrate how Chinese companies adhere to social and environmental standards at the international level, another case of interaction between Chinese companies and Rak Chiang Khong is provided in the following section.

### **Dialogue between dam builders and dam opposers**

The community-based movement has not been able to prevent the much more lucrative projects of ongoing dam construction, however. Nevertheless, Rak Chiang Khong has helped to make some contentious transborder hydropower projects more transparent for the public, and increased pressure on China to show responsibility for its infrastructure projects in neighbouring countries and to pay more attention to communities living along the Mekong River. The Green BRI can be seen as a response to such pressures, with new efforts at community engagement, such as the dialogue between leading Chinese dam-building companies and Rak Chiang Khong. These actions aimed to reduce tensions and improve the image of China's transnational infrastructure in the GMS.

One of these dams is the Pak Beng dam, downstream from Chiang Khong, near Luang Prabang in Lao PDR. The Chinese-backed Pak Beng dam is only approximately 90 km from the Thai border and has been actively opposed by environmental groups since its inception. The Lao government signed a memorandum of understanding with China Datang Overseas Investment in 2007; however, Rak Chiang Khong's campaign against the dam construction contributed to a delay.

China Datang Corporation is one of five state-owned large-scale power generation enterprises in China. Several subsidiary hydropower companies are building dams along the Mekong River in Lao PDR. In January 2018, the first direct conversation between China Datang Overseas Investment Co., Ltd, Chinese Datang Hydropower (Lao) Pak Beng Hydropower Co., Ltd and Thai anti-dam opponents took place in the simple setting of Rak Chiang Khong's Mekong School.<sup>54</sup> One side of a long wooden conference table was filled with the deputy director general of the Energy Policy Office of the Lao PDR Ministry of Energy and Mines as well as with the Datang delegation. On the other side, the Thai civil society representatives sat with professors and a representative of the Thai Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment. Officials from the Thailand National Mekong Committee Secretariat (TNMCS) and the Lao National Mekong Committee Secretariat (LNMCS) also took part in the meeting. NGO staff and several national and local media representatives also attended as observers.

The meeting was the first peaceful encounter that allowed both sides to exchange concerns regarding the Pak Beng dam project in Laos. Kru Tee told me that he agreed to enter into a dialogue with Datang, although his attendance could have been perceived as an activity to complete the consultation process of the Pak Beng dam project.<sup>55</sup> Considering that the company might use the meeting to improve its image with regard

54 Thairath, 'บ.ต้าถึง ควงอธิบดีพลังงานลาว ถกผลกระทบข้ามพรมแดน สร้างเขื่อนปากแบง' [Director of the Lao Energy Department and Datang Co. participate in the discussion of potential cross-border impacts of the Pakbeng Dam construction], *Thairath.co.th*, 15 Jan. 2018.

55 The MRC has developed five sets of procedural rules on water quality, data sharing, water use monitoring, water flow maintenance, and water use cooperation to support the implementation of the 1995

to community engagement, Kru Tee insisted that the meeting must be held at the Mekong School as a site of Thai civil society. In doing so, he believed that a certain balance between the negotiating parties could be established and that both sides perceived the meeting as a fair and equal conversation based on mutual respect.<sup>56</sup>

Following a second meeting in November 2018 at Chiang Mai University, the Thai Mekong People's Network and the Datang representatives held a technical consultation meeting to further exchange data regarding the potential effects of the Pak Beng dam.<sup>57</sup> The Thai delegation raised concerns, for instance, about sedimentation affecting downstream areas, inadequate information about the dam's structure, a decline of fish species due to disrupted ecosystems, and insufficient compensation offered for potentially affected habitats. In response to these questions, Datang's representative affirmed that the company attempted to cooperate with people in the Mekong region. Furthermore, as developers, they were aware of the MRC's regulations and were willing to comply with international standards.<sup>58</sup> A Datang representative said:

By participating in all the arranged activities, we have sincerely shown our intention to solve the problems and respond to demands. We have proposed a specific plan to cope with the raised problems and worries. For example, we provided a security plan for safe navigation. We have set up a new team and redesigned the fish passageways. We have also launched a study on the fish migration programme for further practice. Besides, [given] the earlier worry that the dam's design might cause flooding on the Thai side, we have reduced its size and height to prevent any [adverse] effects that might happen to the Thai riverbank.<sup>59</sup>

However, the Thai delegation felt that the Datang and Lao delegations were rather reluctant to consider a new environmental impact assessment study; the Lao delegation insisted that the EIA had been completed and that they expected an approval from Thailand soon.<sup>60</sup>

The China-backed hydropower dam has brought several groups to discuss their positions, including engineers, administrators, academics, environmental activists, and the media. The dialogue between them is representative of the politics of environmental knowledge; on the side of the dam builder, it implies a firm stance on employing modern technology to mitigate the effects of the dam construction on the residents, the animal world, and vegetation. This suggests that a new moral ecology would be created through the process of re-engineering and re-designing.

Mekong Agreement. One of them is the Procedures for Notification, Prior Consultation and Agreement (PNPCA), which was adopted in November 2003.

56 Kru Tee, interview, 19 Oct. 2019.

57 *transbordernews*, 'บริษัทยักษ์จีน "ต้าถ้ง" ถกภาคประชาชนเตรียมเดินหน้าสร้างเขื่อนปากแฉกแก่งกันแม่น้ำโขงเฉียดแดนไทย นักวิชาการชี้ข้อมูลไม่ชัดในหลายประเด็น-หวั่นปลาบึกสูญพันธุ์ อธิบดีลาวปฏิเสธทำวิจัยเพิ่ม ھرันล่าช้า', สำนักข่าวชายขอบ [Datang, a big Chinese company discussed the construction of Pak Beng Dam, close to Thailand's border, with citizens. Scholars have expressed concerns regarding its environmental impact, hoping that Laos conducts further research. But Lao officials worry about construction delays], *transbordernews.in.th*, 14 Nov. 2018,

58 *Ibid.*

59 *Ibid.*

60 *Ibid.*

Through the lens of a moral ecology of infrastructure, this process may be seen as influenced by humans and nonhumans; fish, birds, anglers, residents, engineers, officials, and activists could all take part in shaping the material future of the Mekong River. The interests of the dam builders, investors and energy purchasers competes with that of its opponents (including local and neighbouring Mekong region residents, environmental NGOs, world heritage proponents, experts) regarding the new inhabitable ecologies that might result from infrastructure transformations.

In addition to their dialogues with Pak Beng dam's builders and proponents, Rak Chiang Khong has also recently welcomed several Chinese agencies that reached out to them for potential cooperation. In the next section, I provide another case of interaction between the Rak Chiang Khong and Chinese actors. In doing so, I intend to demonstrate how the Chinese actors are recasting the BRI as a 'green' programme and the Thai NGOs' responses.

### **ASEAN–China NGO dialogue: Are we sharing the same pain?**

China's attempts to create a better image of the BRI in the Mekong region have resulted in a range of official proclamations, academic research, policies, financial guidelines, and official international forums. For instance, the 'Guidance on Promoting Green Belt and Road' as well as a 'Plan for Cooperation in Ecological and Environmental Protection for the Belt and Road Initiative', jointly issued by the Ministry of Environmental Protection (MEP), Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC), and Ministry of Commerce (MOFCOM), were circulated among relevant government departments in 2017.<sup>61</sup>

In the same year, the Chinese government had announced its support for NGOs as part of the BRI action plan, which emphasises the 'people-to-people' bond.<sup>62</sup> Official statements since then have implied the encouragement of Chinese NGOs to engage in people-to-people activities and international NGO network building across the BRI countries.<sup>63</sup> Furthermore, in April 2019 Xi Jinping's keynote speech at the opening ceremony of the 2nd Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation promised to pursue an 'open, green, and clean' cooperation with international partners.<sup>64</sup> This was followed by several further guidelines and documents providing details on environmental protection and biodiversity conservation for Chinese enterprises to enhance their collaboration with international and state agencies and environmental NGOs.<sup>65</sup>

61 Hoong Chen Teo et al., 'Environmental impacts of infrastructure development under the Belt and Road Initiative', *Environments* 6, 6, 72 (2019): 2.

62 Anja Ketels, 'Chinese NGOs in the Belt and Road Initiative: Building people to people bonds for better governance', in *China's New Silk Road dreams*, ed. Nele Noesselt, Berliner China-Hefte, *Chinese History and Society* 52 (Wien: LIT, 2020), p. 86.

63 CSEBA, 'CSEBA becomes a full-fledged member of SIRONET', *CSEBA*, 24 Nov. 2017.

64 Jinping Xi, 'Working together to deliver a brighter future for Belt and Road Cooperation', Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 26 Apr. 2019.

65 Christoph Nedopil, Dimitri De Boer, Fan Danting and Yingzhi Tang, 'What China's new guidelines on "green development" mean for the Belt and Road', *China Dialogue*, 18 Aug. 2021, <https://chinadialogue.net/en/business/what-chinas-new-guidelines-on-green-development-mean-for-the-belt-and-road/>.

The new policy is exemplified in the inclusion of Chinese NGOs in the ASEAN-China NGO dialogues that began in November 2017. The first ASEAN-China NGO dialogue, arranged by the Shaoyang Environmental Protection Agency and Fen Fang Culture Institute, was held in Shaoyang city, Hunan province. Representatives from Southeast Asian NGOs were invited to discuss Chinese investment and its social and environmental impact in the region. In June 2018 members of the NGOs, the Research Centre of Hunan University, and Chinese NGOs arranged a five-day trip to Chiang Rai. They visited the Mekong School in Chiang Khong and attended an academic conference at Mae Fah Luang University in Chiang Rai.<sup>66</sup>

The 2nd ASEAN-China NGO and scholar dialogue was held in Changsha, Hunan province, in October 2018.<sup>67</sup> The meeting was sponsored by the Shaoyang Environmental Protection Association and Fen Fang Culture Institute. The Research Centre for NGOs at Hunan University hosted the conference on cultural exchange, environment, and sustainable development. The conference aimed at promoting exchange between civil organisations, academics, and NGOs in China and ASEAN.<sup>68</sup> Notably, an excursion to the Changsha high-tech zone was arranged to visit several enterprises involved in green technology development.

The 3rd dialogue again took place in Changsha, Hunan, in November 2019. The session was sponsored by the Non-profit Organisation Research Centre of Hunan University and hosted by the Shaoyang Environmental Protection Association and Chengdu Urban River Association (CURA). The participants included representatives of NGOs and non-profit organisations as well as academics from the United States, Japan, Thailand, Malaysia, Vietnam, Cambodia, Myanmar, and Laos. The conference focused on foreign investment, green development, and cooperation between Chinese and Southeast Asian NGOs. Interestingly, the guiding theme of the meeting was 'Green and Symbiotic Development'; a set of keywords pertaining to the Green BRI were among the topics up for discussion, for example, 'BRI and Community Residents' Sense of Fulfilment', 'BRI and Regional Social and Economic Sustainable Development', 'Research on Social Responsibility of Overseas Investment Enterprises', and 'Community Reconstruction and Cultural Inheritance and Protection'.<sup>69</sup> Additionally, an excursion to visit several advanced technology enterprises was again arranged.

Nopparat, a staff member of Rak Chiang Khong, told me that he had met with the Shaoyang NGOs at the 2nd ASEAN-China NGO meeting. They agreed to arrange an educational exchange programme for junior leaders from China and ASEAN countries. In Chiang Khong town, an educational exchange activity between the Shaoyang NGOs and the Chiang Khong conservation group took place in July 2019. Nopparat explained that the event was held at the Mekong School; speakers from both sides shared their experiences of environmental degradation, particularly

66 Nopparat, interview, 19 Oct. 2019.

67 Sina, '第二届中国与东南亚 NGO 及学者对话会举行' [The second dialogue between Chinese and Southeast Asian NGO], *Sina News*, 23 Nov. 2018.

68 Ibid.

69 'Conference Handbook: Green and Symbiotic Development Dialogue Conference 2019', The Third Dialogue between Chinese and Southeast Asian NGOs & Enterprises & Scholars, Changsha, 12–15 Nov. 2019, unpublished.

regarding river issues in their hometowns. The Chinese volunteers from the Shaoyang organisation also travelled to a small village in Chiang Khong and accompanied local fishers who had to look for other livelihood sources due to the disappearance or depletion of many fish species following China's development of the cascade of hydropower dams upstream.

According to the report shared by the Rak Chiang Khong staff, Shaoyang NGOs and the Research Centre for NGOs at Hunan University aimed to learn more about the Chiang Khong NGOs' work and create a mutual understanding of China's infrastructure development projects in Southeast Asia. They expected another educational exchange programme with a team from Hunan University in June 2020. Unfortunately, the conference and exchange programme was postponed because of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Even though the language barrier was a huge obstacle, the members of Rak Chiang Khong were impressed by the stories told by volunteers from Shaoyang. They presented local history and shared their experiences regarding environmental problems in their hometowns in Hunan. Although it was just a small measure, which lasted only for a limited time, Kru Tee and other staff members expressed their hope that the exchange programme would contribute to better mutual understanding. In addition, they told me that they occasionally arranged online meetings with the Chinese academic organisations. Some staff members still had questions about the concrete outcomes of the China-ASEAN NGOs dialogues and remain sceptical about China's implementation of environmentally responsible measures. However, they remain optimistic that they will continue their exchange programmes and cooperate in the future as well.

As mentioned above, Chinese NGOs have recently been encouraged to get involved in the Green BRI. Indeed, NGOs have expanded their roles in the PRC since the 1980s. In the beginning, most Chinese foundations were sponsored by the Chinese government and received donations abroad; then, in the 1990s, the NGOs gradually started fundraising in their own country.<sup>70</sup> In 2004, the official regulations for fundraising activities were implemented in China. The second stage of NGO development began around 2004–05, which mainly involved fundraising for disaster relief projects, with the Chinese government centrally coordinated donations.<sup>71</sup> Finally, the third stage began in 2012; Chinese NGOs increased their role in China's foreign policy and globalisation strategy, now officially involving the NGOs in the talk of 'going global' and the BRI.<sup>72</sup>

These NGOs have several working models, generally regulated under an authoritarian environment.<sup>73</sup> Anja Ketels argues that the recent development of NGOs in China has three characteristics: the channelling of private wealth for public welfare, the integration of NGOs into social governance, and the engagement of NGOs in China's international diplomacy, which is becoming a significant tendency in the

70 Ketels, 'Chinese NGOs', pp. 92–5.

71 Ibid.

72 Ibid.; Xiaoyun Li and Qiang Dong, 'Chinese NGOs are "going out": History, scale, characteristics, outcomes, and barriers', *Nonprofit Policy Forum* 9, 1 (2018): 2–3.

73 Timothy Hildebrandt, *Social organizations and the authoritarian state in China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

context of the BRI. In addition, Chinese NGOs have been encouraged to engage with private companies, social actors, and other NGOs beyond their country.<sup>74</sup>

The interactions between Rak Chiang Khong and Chinese NGOs in the China-ASEAN dialogues demonstrate the actual practices of the Green BRI. My conversations with Rak Chiang Khong members exemplified that these Chinese agencies, NGOs, and academics are demonstrating their willingness to learn and build mutual understanding of environmental issues resulting from China's Lancang-Mekong infrastructure projects. The involvement of many enterprises from Hunan province has conveyed the impression that Chinese transnational enterprises are trying to meet their local environmental and cultural responsibilities. Furthermore, their engagement with local NGOs in Thailand is intended to exhibit their active cooperation with the new Chinese guidelines on BRI projects.<sup>75</sup>

Thus, the BRI can be seen as an ongoing process involving multiple actors engaging with 'ecological infrastructure'. In practice, the Green BRI encourages project adjustments by multiple Chinese actors according to local responses and conditions. As a result, the Mekong River has become a site of power struggles, where different actors reveal their visions of how to utilise the Mekong according to their own purposes. The actions ranged from state policy implementation to local activist protests. It represents a complicated picture of multiple actors performing on infrastructure, giving meaning to the Mekong River issues through their interaction. Viewed through the case of the town of Chiang Khong, it appears that the BRI is not a rigid master plan containing fixed and predetermined land and river to sea route projects. Instead, actual projects are being gradually adjusted by provincial governments in China, Chinese transnational enterprises, and Chinese agencies.<sup>76</sup>

## Conclusion

In the twenty-first century, China's influence in Southeast Asian countries has expanded greatly through hard and soft infrastructure projects, and in particular the global Belt and Road Initiative. This article starts with the economic and geopolitical background of Chiang Rai province, which is influenced by its proximity to China, during a transitional period of regional economic cooperation, with ambitious visions of modernisation, and the liberalisation of the cross-border economy which has emerged since the 1990s.

This study then takes a closer look at Rak Chiang Khong, a community-based environmental movement in a riverside town, which emerged in response to issues arising from Chinese infrastructure development along the Mekong River. The group's actions highlight the limits of global China outside its own state territory. Moreover, the confrontations and negotiations have revealed the entangled relationships among the actors involved. Disputes over transnational infrastructure have constantly reconfigured the power relationships among associated actors, ranging from intergovernmental mechanisms, powerful states, weaker states, international

74 Ketels, 'Chinese NGOs', pp. 98–9.

75 Heng Jiang, *An evolving framework for outward investment: A Chinese approach to conflict sensitive business* (Beijing: American Friends Service Community, 2015), pp. 48–52.

76 James D. Sidaway and Chih Yuan Woon, 'Chinese narratives on "One Belt, One Road" (一带一路) in geopolitical and imperial contexts', *Professional Geographer* 69, 4 (2017): 591–603.



environmental organisations, local NGOs, Chinese state-owned enterprises, and local communities.

Notably, some infrastructure projects in Thailand are also promoted and implemented under the influence of the BRI, even though they were not part of the original master plan. Thus, the BRI is not only China's unique vision to connect it to the world; instead, it is open for exchanges with the governments of countries that are to be connected with China. It can be argued that the borderlands, including towns such as Chiang Khong, serve as sites where infrastructure projects materialise aspirations of modernisation and strengthen regional connectivity. In response to China's infrastructure development, Thailand, a smaller state, has invested in international highways, cross-border bridges, and river ports. Additionally, the government has waived some regulations, launched SEZ plans and even expanded railway construction to attract foreign investors.

However, some transborder infrastructure projects, such as the blasting of the Mekong rapids, have been perceived as irresponsible with regard to long-term ecological sustainability and the livelihoods of local communities, which has resulted in extensive and long-lasting resistance. Even though the blasting was primarily designed to enhance Chinese commercial navigation, it also introduced new environmental threats. The controversies around the use of the Mekong River reflects the dynamic and unstable consequences of the blasting of the rapids and building of dams that stand in contrast to a coherent geopolitical strategy designed by the state.<sup>77</sup>

In addition, this article has shown that hydropower dams are an example of infrastructure that create but also destroy. In recent decades, an overly human-centred approach to infrastructure has led to the degradation of the river's ecology. The disappearance of food sources such as river weed, the depletion of fisheries and the adverse ecological effects of the Lancang-Mekong cascade of dams have generated tensions between Chinese developers, local NGOs, and millions of people who live in the Mekong River Basin. For Chinese enterprises, these conflicts are a threat to their investments and delay other dam projects.

In light of local opposition and global ecological awareness, the Chinese government has recently started to encourage Chinese developers overseas to be more sensitive to local issues and aim for more ecologically-friendly technologies. On the ground, BRI projects are adjusted and implemented by multiple Chinese actors who face civil society opposition, and local actors also attempt to adjust, or even cancel some elements of BRI projects, working at different scales.

However, while individuals, institutions, and civil society groups try to mediate, translate, and reshape China's transnational projects to align with their interests, their influence might be limited when it comes to halting the most destructive and sizeable projects, especially when individual GMS governments are in favour of the project, as in the case of the Pak Beng dam in Laos. Here, the notion of a moral ecology of infrastructure contributes to transcending infrastructure and environment, enabling us to understand human and nonhuman relations in retrofitting dams and waterway projects. Through a lens that moves beyond an anthropocentric perspective, we are able to engage with a world comprising a multitude of actors, shedding light on the

77 Oliveira et al., 'China's BRI', p. 2.

distribution and contestation of agency and power among these diverse entities.<sup>78</sup> Based on my observations at one site of struggle, I conclude that the BRI is a contingent process involved in reimagining a viable future for the Mekong's ecological infrastructure.

78 Marisol de la Cadena and Mario Blaser, 'Introduction. Pluriverse: Proposals for a world of many worlds', in *A world of many worlds*, ed. Marisol de la Cadena and Mario Blaser (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), pp. 4–6.