

# MEKONG DIARIES

## Part Three, Golden Triangle



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## Day 27 – Leaving China

Carrying all of our footage, we leave Jinghong and head towards our first attempted Chinese border crossing.

The bus trip is a typically dyslexic affair, beginning with a short jaunt about 30 km out of town where the bus driver abruptly directs us to all disembark, followed by a two-hour wait during which we wonder if we will ever see our luggage again, brief happiness when the bus returns, and then a drive of a few hours to a very shiny and new Chinese border post.

The customs team arrives, and two officers enter the bus and begin opening people's bags at random while another pair decides to check one of our bags. Luckily, they don't think anything of our bright orange hard drives, and we are allowed to board the bus and leave.



*The Thai customs office in Chiang Khong on the banks of the Mekong River.*

A short way down the road, we stop for the Laos customs check, this time conducted at a small cluster of prefabricated buildings dumped in a muddy car park. We already know that we intend to travel through Laos, our only way of getting to our desired destination in northern Thailand. This one day's travel will require getting a visa, an annoying expense seeing as we won't be using it except to watch Laos pass by through a bus window.

Then, at the visa window, we learn that the cost of the visa—normally about U.S. \$30—increases to about U.S. \$45 if paid for in Chinese currency. This irritation informs us that we have left a functioning China and entered the institutionalized corruption of Southeast Asia.

After a few hours of travel, and a lack of anything but biscuits to eat, we arrive at the border town of Huayxai, on the banks of the Mekong River. We pay for the privilege of passing through the town at

the border point beside the river where ferries transfer people back and forth.

After a short ride on a longtail boat, we arrive safely in Thailand where we hire a flat-bed taxi to Mae Sai and book rooms in the Top North Hotel.

We feel much joy at leaving the deceit, anxiety, and difficulty of China behind, and look forward to beginning a new leg of the trip here and over the border in Burma.

## **Day 28 – First night in Thailand**

We are staying in an old-world hotel, the Top North, which displays old black-and-white photographs of the Mae Sai river crossing into Burma. In the photos there are maybe two or three buildings on the sloping banks of the small river.

But Mae Sai has changed. Now it has a long main street of many-storied buildings leading to the border checkpoint. This is the northernmost city in Thailand and connects trade with the Shan State in Burma.

We visit a local church, as many of the contacts we will meet tomorrow are Lahu Christians. Already we begin to be aware that our work here will be sensitive, as it will involve many people who are risking everything to talk to us.

We spend the day reviewing our schedule and trying to find anything worth eating. Strangely for a city that is commonly used by tourists, we can find nothing but street noodles and tiny, tasteless burgers.

All day long, traffic passes in both directions through the border checkpoint. In the evening, a food-and-knickknack market takes over the street. We go to sleep early, glad of the chance to get some rest for tomorrow.

## **Day 29 – ‘No power to resist’**

Today we meet a father and his daughter, Lahu minority villagers who cross the border from Burma to tell us about life under Burma’s military rulers, the SPDC. We arrange to meet at 8:00 a.m., but it is 9:00 or 10:00 by the time we are all together. We take them to a café near the customs house, where the coffee is really good.

There, as tourists come and go browsing through the infinite riffs on the theme of mass-produced holiday trinkets, we make our introductions.

The daughter speaks excellent English, and as a member of a family of devout Christians—many Lahu have been Christians for over a hundred years—is confident and takes the lead in our discussions. She and her father explain the significance of the Christian community among the Lahu, but point out that most Lahu are still Buddhist animists.

Our first questions about traveling inside the Shan State prompt warnings about a newly heightened state of instability because of recent fighting between the Burmese army and various “ceasefire” armies. They tell us that a year ago a Korean tour group visiting a village was seized by a Burmese military unit and badly beaten.

They also report an upsurge of armed violence between the Burmese army and the United Wa State Army over drugs and guns. They tell us that it has become increasingly difficult to travel on the river, and that the Wa army will shoot at any foreigners they see. Our failure to find a berth on a boat down the river could be due to this increased conflict.



**There are always drugs available, 24 hours a day.**

They confirm that the Lahu are also involved in the drug trade and are growing poppies. But they add that “the Lahu just do what the Wa and the Chinese say. If they don’t do it, they will have no money.” They say that all villages grow poppies, with usage levels as high as 50 percent. They add that in all cases, the government controls opium cultivation. “If you want to do business in drugs, just pay the government. It is easy to do.”

Apart from their traditional wooden houses, the traditions of the Lahu are almost all gone. Mostly, they say, the villagers don’t get rich from growing opium. It is the businessmen running the trade who are making the money. Even the rich Lahu businessmen who are making money in drugs, mostly in Mae Sot and Mi Shat, are controlled by the Burmese government. Normally the split is 80/20 for businessmen and villagers in a drug-growing arrangement.

A lot of the fighting between the Lahu, the Shan, and the Wa is over the drug business. And this is serious fighting, with lots of guns and armaments including land mines. The underlying power in the drug trade and in the region comes from China. The Lahu father and daughter tell us that many Chinese businessmen evade national controls by purchasing a Burmese passport for around 30,000 baht, after which they are free to do whatever they want inside Burma.

Drugs that have been seized by the army or police are simply re-sold after a period of a year or so.

They break down the profit-sharing arrangement commonly seen in the synthetic narcotics industry. For one tablet, a trafficker will earn about one baht. The wholesaler will earn 35 baht, the Mekong trader will earn 50 baht, and the government will take one baht in “tax.”

At this point, our Lahu contacts grow nervous about continuing to speak in a public place about such illicit things. Suddenly, the women operating the espresso machines and opening the milk fridges become objects of suspicion—their glances and loitering at the bar clear signs of a covert intention to gather information. We relocate to a larger hotel where the dining room is spacious and empty.

The father tells us that the Lahu are forced into armed service by the Burmese as a disposable force to confront the Wa. In his own village, he says, some 500 men have already been forcibly conscripted into a militia. The strongest army according to their own observations is the Shan, as it does



the most business. Normally, the Lahu, Wa, and local Burmese armies have no money from any source except for what they can steal from the villagers.

The Burmese army is the worst, he says. If a unit comes into a Lahu village, they will steal everything. Other crimes such as rape and murder are common, and if someone tries to stand up to the soldiers they will be killed out of hand. “They don’t use the law,” he says. “They only use the money.”

And it is the same with the police. A criminal facing execution can pay to be released, and another dead body will take his or her place.

In all of these things the Lahu have no power to resist, the father says. “If they say, ‘Be in the army,’ we must do it. If they want to fight the Shan and the Wa, they will send the Lahu to die for them.” Twenty men from one village had been taken away for training just the week before, he says. On their return, men like these carry the protection of the army and so become virtual agents for the government and its business allies in issues related to trafficking drugs and women and other crimes.

The government in Burma is nothing more than a loose collection of individual businessmen. Forced labor and smuggling by the army constantly feed the army’s conflicts.

After hours spent talking, we thank the man and his daughter and wave farewell as they cross back into Burma. With a new appreciation for our security, we spend the rest of the day filming the border crossing and prepare for our first interview with a Shan man scheduled for the next day.

### **Day 30 – First steps in Burma**



*Border towns are always places of trade, and in Burma this includes the less attractive trades, such as drugs and human trafficking. This man is one of many vendors selling prescription drugs, including Viagra, on the black market.*

We meet with a man from the northern Shan State and, after a brief search for a better location,

interview him in silhouette in one of our hotel rooms. He is a slight man with a gentle way of talking, and it is hard to imagine that he is risking his life to speak with us. We are crammed into a tiny hotel room, with our source providing his own translation, recording his voice of isolation and victimization.

After the interview, our source takes us across the border, and we take our first steps in Burma. We try the local food at an alfresco diner and discover that fried rice tastes the same everywhere! Then, hiring a couple of tiny-seated tuk tuks, we strain their mouse-like engines in order to get to a pagoda at the top of a hill. After spending a little time taking all the photos we can, we bid farewell to our source.

We move next to the customs house and enter a small market where trays of pharmaceuticals and lifetime supplies of Viagra are shoved before us. Strolling around the market, we search for signs of the trade in wildlife that we know operates here, and after we find a first glass display case we seem to see wild animal skins and bones everywhere.

These come mostly from deer, monkeys, and smaller wild cats, though we do also find the skin of a tiger. There are also organs and teeth from thousands of rare and exotic animals put in bags and on trays to support the medicinal traditions and superstitions of the passing trade. We stop at a strangely Westernized café for ice cream sundaes and then cross back into Thailand, feeling that we have uncovered little of the truth of life inside Burma.

## **Day 32 - The team splits up**

Today, half of us will head south to Chiang Saen, Golden Triangle, and Chiang Mai, and then on to Bangkok where we will speak with experts on issues related to the Mekong.

The other half of our team will travel farther into Burma, to the Shan State.

The first team left last night, catching a local bus down to Golden Triangle, a small town growing on the site of this infamous juncture. An unending convoy of brightly decorated tourist buses drops off holidaymakers, mostly Thai, beside a huge, brand-new Golden Buddha.

From here, our team takes a tourist boat upriver and, along the Burmese side, past the large Paradise Resort. This icon of underground economies is situated at the edge of the river and on the flat edge of a plain. Regular ferries carry Chinese and Thai tourists across the mouth of the Sai River as it enters the Mekong and over to a waiting golf-cart bus service.

All day long, these white shuttles carry gamblers to a casino optimistically—or cynically—called Win Win Win.

Our team's boat bounces past Paradise and carves a large arc to the East, where the river's water laps at Laos. Here, rising above the trees, the golden domes of a new casino development are being finished. This is the first stage of a joint free trade zone being developed by Chinese businessmen and the Lao government.

In an area with ancient artifacts and people who can trace their life in the region back a thousand years, the future looks like a lawless Las Vegas.

On the banks of the river, our team passes a group of local women dipping their large bamboo-framed fishing nets into the water. These are the people who are not being consulted by the drug lords and politicians who will be made rich by the changes we are seeing here. These are the people who will lose everything.

Climbing the hill past a crumbling statue of the Buddha many hundreds of years old, our team takes in a view of the Mekong River as it splits its attentions between the three nations of Burma,

Thailand, and Laos. Unfortunately, the growing instability of the border between Laos and Burma—where drugs, wild animals, and people are carried across the river—means that our team can't go any farther upstream.

Our second team stays the night in Mae Sai, and in the morning crosses into Tachilek, Burma, at the first chance. The Lahu father and daughter, and the daughter's husband, meet us this time. Presenting ourselves as visiting missionaries, we get a day pass and hire a taxi, a pickup truck. Driving out of town, we encounter an army checkpoint. There is a lot of smiling and joking with the officer in charge.



*Tourists wait to cross the border to Tachilek, while monks cross behind. Mae Sai's most constant Western visitors come here to renew their visas, crossing over into Tachilek for a few moments.*

Continuing down the road, we are struck by the orderliness of the roads and homes. Not having known what to expect, we are surprised to find a country of house-proud villages and well-sealed roads. We drive for a while and stop at the home of our new Burmese friends. There, we meet a few more family members, all very excited that we will be able to tell their stories to the world.

We pick up a few more people to come for the ride and soon pass grass-roofed villages on a road running through low and mountainous farmland. The old man we had interviewed the other day in Mae Sai explains that much of the land through which we are passing was being turned over to rubber plantations.

We stop to photograph some very young plantations, and the old man points out a large sign that gives the name of the business that has taken this land from the villagers. Continuing on, we pass a small military base at the edge of the plantation, and the old man explains that the army took this land from the villagers and sold it to the company.



We pull off the main road into the father's and daughter's village. It seems a happy and well-ordered place with no signs of despair. The children are all in school, and many homes are large and clean. Staying just long enough to walk through, we return to the truck and drive to a large pagoda standing on a hillside overlooking the Mekong valley.

For our guides, who are Christians, the wealth and extravagance of the pagoda is clearly not something to celebrate. Rather, it seems that the Lahu people feel imposed upon by the Burmese Buddhist monuments that overlook their more humble Christian villages.

We drive to a final village where we take a walk into the fields. It is harvest time, and the people's hand-tended paddies have begun to fill with stacked bales of rice. Stopping to say hello to a family gathering their harvest, we sit for a while in their hut. They prepare a lunch consisting of a single pomello for four people.

Beneath this village's quiet and clean surface, it appears that these people are very close to the hunger line that is common to so many village communities in this region. One bad season is all it would take for many of these farmers to face dire want and need.

Walking back to the village, we are invited to meet a 120-year-old man. In the corner of a dark little bamboo-floored hut, a tiny man with milky eyes and a shock of white hair shuffles out of a blanket to greet us. His legs are frozen by age, their joints swollen and muscles emaciated and still, but his eyes flash and smile as we ask him questions about his world.

He tells us he remembers that people lived very well in the old days. Disease and drugs were a small part of life, and the forests and rivers were abundant. Tigers, bears, elephants, and other rare creatures filled his memories of those long-ago times.

It is impossible to confirm his age, as he follows a village calendar that measures days by the waxing and waning of the seasons. But he does introduce us to a young woman with a baby who he tells us is his great-granddaughter and great-great-grandson. In the old days, he says, people were healthier or else died quickly. In his own case, he had never wanted to touch the opium that grew widely in the area, even in his young days. His account confirms the long-time presence of opium in these farms.

The trip is over, and after driving back through a couple of checkpoints, saying farewell to our guides, and crossing back into Thailand, we feel relief and a strong desire to return again someday.

## **Day 33 – Golden Triangle**

The two halves of our little traveling production team have joined up again at a hotel in the Golden Triangle, a small tourist town that takes its name from its infamous location. We wake this morning feeling the effects of a month of constant moving and working. Meeting us early is Ae, a Thai woman who is studying the impact of Chinese investments in the area. She is starting research on the casino with a gold dome that we can see on the opposite shore in Laos.

The Chinese have a lot of money to invest, and the governments of Laos and Burma have few resources to defend against China's expansion into the region. This particular example is a 20 square km industrial estate and free trade zone with a couple of tourist casinos at its center—the consequences for a local village being displacement and the loss of traditional farming and fishing lands.

Our plan is that Ae will introduce us to the villagers and perhaps help us get some footage of the casino development.

After breakfast we visit the immigration office on the banks of the river, but the staff are suspicious

of us. With all our camera bags, I suppose we sometimes don't look that much like tourists. Unable to get a day visa to Laos, we decide to go the next day from Chiang Khong, where there is a border crossing with ferries carrying a steady flow of people in both directions.



*Chiang Saen is a port full of Chinese freighters, large boats that have necessitated the blasting of river rapids from Yunnan to the Golden Triangle. In turn this has degraded fish catches and water quality and has changed the river's hydrology according to local people we met.*

As Plan B for today, we visit a schoolteacher in Chiang Saen, a man called Miti who is also a leader of a local campaign that threw the casino development out of Thailand. When he heard about the plans to develop a casino with Chinese money in the town, Miti organized a successful protest movement.

Miti explains that the people of Chiang Saen knew that the casino would have been a locus for Chinese imports and illicit economies. On these grounds, the casino was blocked inside Thailand, and instead moved across the river.

Miti sheds light on how the casino is used as a conduit for Chinese money interests and how it affects local Thais even from across the Mekong. It works in concert with the Chinese-backed canalization of the Mekong from southern Yunnan province that is blasting rapids down past Burma and Laos to the Golden Triangle. The effects on local fisheries are considerable, as these rapids form natural obstacles and barriers that are key to the life cycles of many Mekong fish.

Chinese freight boats use these new navigation channels, off-loading their goods in Chiang Saen and undercutting local goods. The locals are losing their fishing and income from farming. Miti is reluctant to tell us everything he knows, because the Thais involved in this project are very powerful. His campaign has already driven them to Laos, and he feels unsafe reviving an old fight.



We drive back to the Golden Triangle to try to send Ae over to the Laotian side, where she will prepare the village chief for our visit tomorrow. But first, we again climb the lookout mountain to get some shots of the river as it passes between the three countries. Noting the constant flow of ferries taking people over to the Paradise, we climb back down and watch as people board the boats with Win Win written on their bows and roofs.

Our initial astonishment at the thought that 10,000 tourists a day are planned to visit the new casino weakens as we watch this daylong traffic of gamblers move across the mouth of the Sai River and up the Mekong to where the peaks of the Paradise complex mark the riverbank.

Talking later with a local man with ties across the river, we learn that Thai and Burmese politicians use the casino as a convenient way to launder money and keep their accounts clean. Our source explains that the Paradise casino inside Burma plays this role already.

With the sun softening in the western sky, we drive south again—this time to Chiang Khong to prepare for a trip into Laos in the morning. As we pass Chiang Saen, the river returns to its natural course, broken by silt islands and rapids. In Chiang Khong we stop at a riverside guesthouse that looks over at the Laotian town of Huayxai.

The guesthouse turns out to be a hub for civil society activists and workers. We speak to some of them about the history of civil society in Thailand, starting with its beginnings in the communist student-led forces that fought for reform in the 1970s. Surely, some of the effectiveness of civil society in Thailand today is due to the lessons that were learned in those dangerous early days.

After dinner, strange lights rise into the sky across the border—candles in paper balloons that are being released as prayers that float higher and higher over the river until they disappear into the dark clouds.

## **Day 34 – Day trip to Laos**

Over breakfast at the Tamila Guesthouse in Chiang Khong, we make plans with Ae for a day trip into Laos. She also answers our questions about why Thai civil society is more locally driven and, perhaps, more effective than civil society has been in other countries.

She explains that the origins of the civil society movement can be found in what she describes as the communist resistance fight of the 1970s. At a time when the region was in flames with wars in Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos, Thailand also was experiencing ideological struggles.

Many of the groups now fighting for land rights and the environment are staffed by activists who began as communist guerrilla fighters during this period. During this same period, the U.S. government built roads and dams in the north of Thailand, and especially on the Lao border, in order to preserve an anti-communist foothold in the country.

We slept very well last night. Chiang Khong is a truly peaceful and reserved little town. Judging from the sounds of revelry and drunkenness coming across the river from Laos, however, its twin sister Huayxai is not as dignified. This town is a product of the U.S. policy of funding a foothold here, and so bears the imprint of Western influence—lots of brothels and Christmas lights.

After breakfast, we cross just in time to meet a wave of tourists on the Laotian side of the river who are waiting at the customs office to cross into Thailand. The crowd includes a large number of young Chinese. Ae explains that they are probably students headed for Bangkok, where the cost of study is low.



*A panoramic view of the Mekong on the way to Chiang Khong from the Golden Triangle. On the right bank is Laos; on the left, Thailand.*

With our visa in hand, Ae organizes our transport. We are somewhat surprised when this turns out to be a large luxury minivan. We drive toward the village community that was displaced by the casino development. On the way, we pass large cash crops of tobacco and rice. Ae explains that Chinese businessmen often cross the border into Laos to rent land for farming, as there is little arable land left in China.

These arrangements between private Chinese interests and the Lao government create economic free trade zones that are basically colonies where national and international laws and financial restrictions can be ignored. And these zones make use of a ready supply of Burmese people—illegal immigrants and refugees—who work without protection or recourse to legal rights. Legal authority itself is uncertain in these zones, Ae says.

The road is terrible, and has been made worse by the fact that it was surfaced with loose river rocks. Eventually, we arrive on the land of the Chinese free trade zone on the Laotian banks of the Mekong. The first things we notice are extravagant street lights, not yet working, that line the still-un-surfaced road. In the distance, quarries are busy in the small hills on the edges of the Mekong's valley.

We pass a large fenced enclosure surrounding row upon row of dormitories. Then we drive up to one of the two unfinished casinos, each with its own huge golden dome.

Leaving our cameras in the car, we walk up a short red carpet, past some limousines, and into the casino. Inside, the central circular gaming room is already full, with people in casual clothes busy at many tables.



The decorations are predictably kitschy, though their themes are slightly surprising. There are paintings of cupids and of Victorian-era battles between the British and other European powers, along with courtly scenes of wigged suitors and powdered ladies-in-waiting—all peeking from the walls and ceilings as tattooed men in tank tops stub out cheap cigarettes next to piles of chips on green felt.

Leaving the casino, we stop briefly at an open-air market next door. Here, Chinese vendors are already set up to sell everything from imported vegetables to spices and preserved foods, jade carvings, and watches. The unfinished entertainment complex includes restaurants and massage parlors, but their main clients while we are there appear to be the Chinese and local laborers who are working on the project.

Ae points out to us the stark differences in local accommodations. Rough handmade huts can be seen in the distance, while the Chinese workers have rooms in a large, bright blue building. According to many of the people we speak to during our visit, these Chinese markets will help to flood the area with cheap Chinese goods. However, the project's 20-square-km land lease also provides for an industrial estate and agricultural development, which forecast an increased Chinese presence in the local economy for years to come.

We drive on a few minutes more to the village, where the headman meets us at his home. After just a few minutes of trying to arrange a plan, Ae suggests that we take our driver and get some lunch while she works out the details with the chief. We return some time later to find that a few more village men are sitting with Ae and the village chief. Then the bus driver joins us. He loudly begins to suggest that the villagers not talk to us or allow themselves to be interviewed.

This troublesome advice frightens the villagers, and we soon find ourselves back in the van and leaving without getting a single word on tape. Our trip back to the river crossing at Huayxai is frustrating, and we realize that Laos is indeed a closed country.

## **Day 35 – ‘The river is not a border’**

Our stay at the Tamila Guesthouse has proved to be a way into the world of the civil-society workers who operate in and around Chiang Saen. Looking out over the river and Huayxai on the Laotian side, we have breakfast at the guesthouse with people from Living Rivers Siam, an organization fighting for the social and economic value of the river.

Through our translator, we learn that there have already been lots of conflicts over the casinos in Laos. In one case, Chinese workers killed a farmer who was trying to get to his fields. Connections across the river are key to the work of Living Rivers, and they claim to have family-like relations with people inside Laos who are unable to speak freely about their situation. As Gong puts it, for local people “the river is not a border.”

After breakfast, we go upstream to visit fishing people on the Thai riverbank in Chiang Saen. All the way there, we can easily see where farmland is being lost to erosion. After a couple of hours, we stop to talk to locals at the site of a new port that is being constructed for Chinese freighters. We then continue on to the point where the casino is being built on the Laotian side. There, in a small village of grass huts on the banks of the river, fishermen are cleaning and folding their nets as the sun begins to set.

We interview two men who are relaxing next to their floating home as they slowly get inebriated on rice wine. Each member of our crew is offered some of this, though not all partake. It is a quick and cheap way to forget one's inhibitions, and after the interview they take us on board the floating platform where they live and show us a large carp weighing probably five or more kilos.

We catch a van into Chiang Saen proper and quickly meet up again with Miti. After photographing the unloading of boxes at the port, we drive back to Chiang Khong. Over dinner, Gong gives us a powerful catch phrase relevant to the development on the Mekong—“democracy you can eat.”

### **Day 36 – Problems on the river**

In the early morning we walk through Chiang Khong’s quiet streets to the offices of Living Rivers Siam to meet with a leading river activist named Kul. Sitting in the shady garden outside his office, he outlines the issues facing river communities, in order of significance. These are China’s dams, rapid blasting, freight boats, chemical fertilizers in the river, unsustainable fishing practices, and the destruction of riverside wetlands.



*China’s policy of damming its rivers is a sensitive state issue, making it challenging to photograph structures like the Manwan Dam.*

He also discusses the impact of free-market economies and state-to-state trade on local people and local trade. As things now stand, local people must pay tax while Chinese do not need to.

Kul reports that in 1996, while the Manwan Dam was being built, the water in the river dropped so dramatically that the riverbed in Chiang Khong was almost dry. A rock called the Elephant Rock was revealed for the first time in living memory. Seventy and 80-year-old people ran down to the river to see this amazing change in the flow of water.

Seven years later, a second dam was built in China, and according to Kul the water flows and levels changed even more dramatically. It was possible, he claims, to see the water levels rise and fall in response to the daily release of water from the dams as they generated electricity to meet surging demands.



Water is also released from the dams to allow the flow of freight from ports near Jinghong and elsewhere in southern Yunnan, with water levels artificially raised to allow large boats to pass. Kul explains that this is devastating both to stocks of fish and to the ability of local people to catch them.

The fishing “wisdom” of local people is based on the natural cycles of high and low water that have occurred season after season for thousands of years. If these cycles are disrupted, the techniques on which fishermen depend are rendered useless. Kul says that if a fisherman leaves a bamboo rod out overnight, and the river rises, the tackle will be washed away. And if the water drops, the only thing you can catch is a bird.

These impacts are also mirrored for the fish in the river. Each species has a different trigger for spawning and migration. For some fish, the water levels rising with the rain may be a trigger to lay eggs. For others, warm currents may be the signal to spawn. The dramatic changes to the hydrology of the river are therefore causing some fish to appear in places where they have never been seen before, and are causing others to disappear. Fifty percent of the fish in the river migrate, and any dams placed across the river will block their life cycles.

The plans to blast rapids and allow the river to be used as a navigation channel for freighters are not new, Kul explains. In fact, ever since the 18th and 19th centuries when French explorers first traveled up the Mekong to Yunnan, efforts have been under way to use the river as a route to China. Kul says that this makes the Asia Development Bank and the Mekong River Commission a continuation of the colonizing process.

For China, the river is an important potential route to market, and the rocks are just an obstacle. But for locals, and for those who live on and love the river, the rocks are not a problem. Villagers understand that the rapids are an important home and nursery for fish and also an impediment to the river’s powerful currents, thus preventing wholesale erosion. Kul says that beginning all the way back in the Himalayas, these rocks control water flows and create deep pools where fish can survive even in the most extreme dry season.

After a long interview, Kul invites us to review his group’s footage of the giant catfish that are caught in Chiang Khong every year. We then walk together to the river, where a group of local men are eating lunch and drinking rice wine in a small grass hut. These men of all ages have fished in this stretch of the river for generations. They enthusiastically agree to be interviewed and continue to eat and drink while we speak with them.

Meanwhile, some of us get a lift on a fishing boat to a thin sandbar island in the middle of the river. Here, Lao and Thai fishermen work side by side. Indeed, the fishermen we speak to even have family on both sides of the river. We drift downstream in a tiny boat in the late but very hot sunlight while a fisherman uses his fingers and toes to feed a nylon net into the water.

As the sun sets, we make plans with the fishermen, who call themselves the Mekong Lovers, to return here tomorrow at dawn to film more of their fishing.

## **Day 37 – Up at dawn**

Today, we get up at dawn. Whose idea was this? Down at the river, the fishing is already in full swing well before sunrise. When the sun does rise, the river turns gold and the mists peel away from the valleys and hillsides. Then it is time for our team to split up again, with half of us going to Phnom Penh in Cambodia in time for the Water Festival and boat races, and the rest of us off to Ubon Ratchathani in Thailand to keep following the river.

Living Rivers Siam takes Team A to a community meeting on the Ni River. Villagers have gathered

there to discuss issues facing the agricultural people. A local government representative is there as well, and the teams takes the opportunity to interview him along with the head of the community forestry office.



*A fisherman on the Mekong River at Chiang Khong checks his catch, a giant Siamese carp, which is tied to a bamboo pole and kept in the river to stay alive and fresh.*

Afterward, the team returns to Chiang Khong to get some shots of the border crossing. Then it is onto a dodgy bus to Chiang Rai, where they spend the night before catching a plane down to Phnom Penh for the Water Festival.

Meanwhile, Team B catches a plane to Bangkok and takes advantage of the opportunity to visit a shopping mall and snack out in some really good food courts. However, a marathon search for cheap miniDV tapes comes up blank. Thailand has completely lost any right to claim it is a place for bargain shopping.

Then it is downtown to the central train station and onto a “first class train.” This must be a new budget kind of first class. After a sleepless night face-to-face with an air hose direct from the Arctic, Team A arrives—cold, sick, and coughing—in Ubon.

## **Day 38 – River life**

Team B is in transit on a plane and freaks out when the pilot performs some anti-gravity maneuvers when the tiny aircraft gets caught in bad weather.

After breakfast, Team B hires a car and drives for an hour out to the Sai Moon district to a village research center for the Pak Mun Dam campaign. There, a woman by the name of Bun Mi and a man called Pun meet us and to plan our trip to the dam and surrounding communities.



The center itself is quite impressive and includes a museum of life along the Mun River before the Thai government built the much-troubled Pak Mun Dam in the 1990s. A long line of shelves are stacked with formaldehyde-filled jars preserving the fish species that have disappeared from the river since the dam blocked migration and breeding routes. All around are the many different nets, traps, and hooks used by fishermen, as well as a tableau showing a family gathering food in shallow rapids.

Pun tells us that the river's name, Mun, means "inheritance" in the local Isan language. Together, we climb into the flat bed of our hired pickup truck and drive on to pick up another woman, Som Pong. We then head toward the dam itself and conduct our first interview with Bun Mi, whose knowledge and ability to talk through the issues really impresses us.

After we film the dam, and especially the failed fish ladder, the villagers take us to the site of an old village just next to the dam's outlets. This was called the Lovers' Village because of the good fish that used to be caught in the rapids, now destroyed by the dam. Many people came here, and many romances blossomed in the idyllic beauty of the shady trees and clean-running waters. Over time, people stayed and made a village, now long abandoned.

Next, we drive to a small village on the banks of the Mekong for lunch. On the menu of a little open-air eatery we discover a dish that claims to be Giant Mekong Catfish. It tastes like a big river fish, but the belief that eating such a fish will cause one to live forever will have to wait the test of time. We strike up a conversation with people at another table, who tell us that reports of another project, the Dan Kum Dam, to be built nearby are mistaken.

However, judging from what we can learn from our research and from conversations with government and civil society figures, steps are being taken that could well lead to the dam being built.

With our Giant Catfish digested, we head back to the dam where the third villager, Som Pong, takes us in a boat onto the Pak Mun reservoir. As the sun sets, she tells us about what lies beneath the water, about the homes and farms that were lost.

## **Day 39 – Grandma Hai**

Team A prepares for the Water Festival in Phnom Penh.

Meanwhile, Team B meets Tu, a graduate of the Mekong School in Chiang Mai, and Panna, a worker with the Thai civil society organization Assembly of the Poor. Panna tells us that for 15 years he has been a part of the Pak Mun campaign fighting to have the dam decommissioned. Today, however, we will meet an equally famous figure from Ubon Ratchathani—Grandma Hai.

Now an 80-year-old rice farmer, Grandma Hai fought for more than 30 years to reclaim her flooded farm from a small dam. Finally, just a few months ago, Thailand's new prime minister, Abhisit, visited the region to present Grandma Hai with a compensation check. More importantly, she now has her land back, and the dam has been decommissioned.

We drive several hours to a small farmhouse in the middle of endless rice paddies. This is the home of Grandma Hai's youngest daughter. Grandma Hai has 10 children and 30 grandchildren, most of whom are activists, having taken up their matriach's work. Grandma Hai has indeed bred an impressive social movement.

At first sight, Grandma Hai doesn't look like a revolutionary. Rather, she is quiet and ancient, with milky eyes, and is most interested in chewing a kind of local chewing tobacco made from a leaf called Maak Plou, limes, shell calcium, and the bark of a koun tree. These are all mixed together and chewed, with the red-stained saliva then spat out to stain the ground.



*Grandma Hai is an 80-year-old Thai rice farmer in Ubon Ratchathani whose 30- year struggle for her land, which was flooded by a dam, offers hope for the many rural people negatively affected by care-less development projects.*

We wait in the shady space beneath the house for some time until lunch is delivered. In the meantime, Grandma Hai shows us some photos of the prime minister's visit given to her by the Bangkok Post. Gradually warming to our visit, Grandma Hai confides that if it was up to her she would be working in her fields, but that her daughters won't let her work anymore. Then she tells our fortunes, a skill she developed after her farm was flooded and she had no way to earn money.

After lunch, we drive for a few minutes to her old village, Non Tan, meaning Palm Nut Village. Our first stop is at her grandson's house. He has recently fallen from the second floor and hurt his leg. Grandma Hai's other skill is as a local spirit healer, and she tends to her grandson's swollen leg with prayers to the spirits, or angels. She also smears his leg with herbal medicine made from oil from the horns of a small goat, called Liang Pha. Apparently, this animal is able to cure its own broken bones with its saliva.

At lunch, Grandma Hai gives us a strong bitter drink made from herbs and bark traded across the Mekong in Laos for our budding colds. She explains that few people can become healers. Only those who don't drink and who are morally upright, ethical, and honest can be taught by the village's spiritual leader, the Maw Pau.

Walking past her grandson's house, she points to some rice paddies and vegetable gardens. This is her farm, the best land next to the little stream that was flooded by the dam. And just a few meters farther on we come to the weir that Grandma Hai fought against for so long. In 2004, after 30 years of frustration, she camped here and then, with her family, took a sledgehammer and smashed a hole in the wall.



Most of the villagers didn't support her, and the police were called. But Grandma Hai has paid taxes every year for her flooded land and had the papers to prove her unbroken title. Within a few months, the dam was gone and her farm had been drained. After decades of campaigning followed by success, Grandma Hai has set a dramatic and far-reaching precedent for rural people throughout Thailand.

Standing over the broken dam and holding on to a small tree for support, Grandma Hai wears a smile that seems both happy and fierce.

## **Day 40 – Lunch at a Wat**

Team A is in the midst of the Water Festival in Phnom Penh. They are within a stone's throw of the King as he launches the race. Millions come from all over the country for these races and crowd the banks of the river. We meet a team from Kampong Cham who like their chances of taking line honors. Time will tell. There will be two more days of races after this.



*A villager looks out across the 300-meter-wide Pak Mun Dam. Their fight to have the dam's gates permanently opened is one of Thailand's longest running and most successful civil campaigns.*

Team B meets up again with Panna and Tu, this time joined by two of their friends. We all drive to the Mekong River to visit a few villages that will be directly affected if the proposed Ban Kum Dam goes ahead.

We begin at the first village by visiting the Wat, where lots of people are working together to prepare food for an annual festival, the Fire Boat Festival, on the river. The monks offer us lunch, and we spend some time talking to villagers as they cook rice and make sweets.

Walking down to the river, we meet a man who farms on the seasonally revealed riverbanks. He



tells us what the impact will be like for people like him if the dam floods the area. Then we interview the monk who invited us to lunch. He tells us that according to local teachings, the Buddha once passed through this territory and that his footprints can be seen in the riverbed during the dry season.

Saying good-bye, we drive downstream to a village where the main fishing grounds are also the site for the proposed dam. We meet a fisherman who tells us what this will mean for him. He then takes us in his boat to the rapids where the dam will be built. Many people from both the Thai and Laotian sides of the river are out in their boats. Stopping near the fishing grounds, the fisherman shows us a survey marker. We suggest that we should move it to Bangkok.

We end the day at an open-air dining court where a constant supply of meat and seafood is grilled over a coal fire set in the middle of the table.

## **Day 41 – On to Phnom Penh**

It is now time for Team B to fly to Phnom Penh for the last day of the Water Festival. After a sleepless night, we wake up suffering an internal revolt that is clearly due to last night's barbecue.

## **Day 42 – The Water Festival**

It is hot and humid, and the crowds have thinned. This could be because of an economic crisis that has hit local people really hard as rice and gasoline prices have spiraled upward. We spend the morning based near the palace and filming the crowds eagerly watching the races from the riverbank. The races are scheduled without a break. Two boats at a time race downstream toward the palace, where the King's box and the finish line wait.

We conduct some interviews, and a clear picture of the festival's importance emerges. People with few resources still make this journey from the provinces every year to witness the event, which is central to Cambodia's national identity.

Waiting near the palace gate for the King to come out in his black Mercedes, we and the crowd play chicken with the dark, gathering clouds. Lines of shiny soldiers and policemen hold back crowds of onlookers, but the atmosphere is relaxed. Then, a unit of men in black suits and a squad of motorcycle police take up positions. As the wind whips up the pigeons roosting on the palace walls, the King's cavalcade emerges from the palace enclosure—just in time, too, as the heat is replaced by a downpour.

With the festival's last day coming to an end, we prepare ourselves for our own departure tomorrow back upstream to continue our journey in Laos./.