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Jerome Whitington’s *Anthropogenic Rivers: The Production of Uncertainty in Lao Hydropower* offers a nuanced and novel set of discussions about the hydropower enterprise in Laos and the uncertainties in expertise and knowledge that are (re)produced to maintain the sector. The book does a commendable job of exemplifying ethnographically how the Lao hydropower enterprise continues to persist amidst rising concerns regarding the value of large dam projects for social and economic development. The empirical focus of the book is placed on the Theun-Hinboun Hydro-power Project (THHP), a “state-of-the-art” project made possible by the World Bank’s efforts to illustrate the continued relevance of large dams for economic and social development across the Global South. Moving between offices, field trips, lunch breaks, and assessment documents, Whitington takes readers into a diverse network of people and spaces that constitute and shape the THHP’s management and operation. In so doing, the author traces the set of imaginaries, regulations, institutions, and experts that make the Lao hydropower enterprise “tick.”

The book has five main chapters, excluding the introduction and conclusion that lay out key contributions and arguments of the book. Interludes between chapters help the reader transition from one topic to another. Chapter 1 focuses on the imaginative dimensions of hydropower development as articulated from the perspectives of a new generation of Lao technical experts. Through these elaborations, Withington suggests an important point: due to the ways in which hydropower dams are enmeshed with national and individual aspirations of development, the political and social effects of large dams in Laos begin long before individual projects are approved and built.

Chapter 2 zooms in on the interactions and negotiations that took place through the late 1990s between the Theun-Hinboun Power Company (THPC) and the prominent transnational anti-dam advocacy group International Rivers (IRN). The chapter shows how the Lao hydropower enterprise was made vulnerable not through mass protests or legal strategies but by generating “cracks” in the existing socio-technical assemblage of the enterprise for “undermining the delicate structures of an industry” (p. 103). Building on these insights, chapter 3 discusses the kinds of capacities and the host of relations needed to manage anthropogenic rivers. The author suggests that the corporate management of hydropower projects in Laos is not limited to acts of control, destruction, or profit generation. A key feature of the enterprise is the deliberate production of uncer-
tainty that should be recognized as a “tactic, weapon in its own right” (p. 144).

Chapters 4 and 5 are best read together. They paint a vivid picture of what consulting experts, field staff, and local residents—those directly engaging with the anthropogenic river—face when trying to navigate the complex social and political context of the hydropower enterprise, on the one hand, and attempting to understand, communicate, and act in response to the very real environmental and livelihood harms created by the THHP, on the other. Taken together, the author uses the case of the THHP and the Lao hydropower enterprise more generally to further critical conversations on the role of uncertainty in the production of anthropogenic natures. The author draws upon science and technology studies research on expertise to suggest that uncertainty is a “built-in feature” of late industrial environments (p. 225). The Lao hydropower enterprise, seen in this way, is constituted by a set of practices and relations that deliberately produce uncertainty and can work with the “intractable problems, unresolved troubles, risky opportunities, and viral threats” arising from the construction and operation of dams (p. 223).

For my reading, I found the observations and analysis presented in chapter 1, the behind-the-scenes processes of transnational and domestic expertise involved in the operation of the Lao hydropower enterprise, to be the most intriguing. Through ethnographic vignettes and contextual summaries, the author illustrates vividly how hydropower development has been made into an attainable and promising enterprise in Laos. The chapter’s focus on the affective dimensions of the industry allows an animated understanding of the industry, the people, and the imaginaries that sustain it. In the author’s words: “The riverine imagination of Lao national development takes form in the work of international organisations, technical standards, foreign investment, and the multiplicity of institutional structures through which these function.… This confluence of the intimacy of expertise and the promise of achievement helps demonstrate why hydropower remains so central to an affirmation of Lao development” (p. 60).

While Whittington’s detailed discussion and description of Anglophone (mostly American) experts, managers, and advocates is much appreciated, more attention could have been paid to the role that domestic officials and technical experts have played in the evolution of the country’s hydropower enterprise (for example, in chapter 1, pp. 48-61). This line of inquiry, especially when contextualized within the longer history of regional development in the Mekong Basin, would be valuable in understanding how (late) industrial expertise does not just arrive in places where no expertise existed before (following the argument of Timothy Mitchell in Rule of Experts: Egypt, Techno-Politics, Modernity, 2002), but it is instead adopted, reinterpreted, and hybridized on the backbones of already existing socio-technological systems.

Related to the point above, Whittington’s book left me wondering whether/how anthropogenic rivers (and the forms of expertise that constitute them) may take similar forms when bilateral agreements and diplomacy agendas are enmeshed with Lao development aspirations. Such questions would especially be relevant in the case of Chinese-backed large dam projects where the promotion of dams and regulation of river basins seem to continue to reflect modernist and authoritarian modes of expertise, the kind in which reaching near-complete control of the river’s flows and assuring certainty in the knowledge produced are (still) deemed to be important prerequisites of a successful hydropower project. Building on Whittington’s rich account of the THHP and the infliction of transnational expertise in the Lao hydropower enterprise, and existing research that highlights an emergent change in the way hydropower projects in Laos are funded and managed,
new research will be well placed to consider such questions further.

Finally, it is worth noting that although the book can be theoretically heavy in some parts, its value goes beyond its theoretical contributions. Researching new places and areas as a newcomer is never an easy task—with it comes challenges of not just understanding the subject but also working out who's who in the field and what may be their biographies, networks, and political standpoints concerning the topic at hand. To this end, Whitington's book provides a valuable point of departure for researchers and practitioners interested in the behind-the-scenes of development, expertise, and advocacy in contemporary Laos, the Lower Mekong Basin, and (post)socialist contexts more broadly.

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