

Luang in Mekong River: The Change of Socio-Economic Space of Communities in Thai-Laos Boundary

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Abstract: This study presents the study on the ethnography of the communities at Thai-Laos boundary. Its aim is to examine the socio-economic change of the communities located along the Mekong river, the border between Thailand and Lao PDR. The concept of space and boundary is employed as the key method to conduct this study. This research desires to indicate that the Luang space in the Thai-Laos boundary is not only a physical space where people can do fishing but as the status of the socio-economic space. It is a flexible area in Thai-Lao bordering area as well as a contested space caused by governmental power, upholders and local communities; this disputed borderline was originated from the state of being a modern nation state during the French colonization of Laos. Yet the people living on both sides of the river do not surrender to government power. Conversely, they have undergone an operation to reinforce their community power to overlap the political power.

Key words: Luang, Mekong river, change, socio-economic space, Thai-Laos boundary, communities

INTRODUCTION

The researcher was 1st interested in the communities at Thai-Laos boundary when Thailand was formulating a policy (St. John, 1998) to change the battlefield in Indochina into the trade field in 1988. The Thai-Laos relationship, Mukdaharn and Sawanakhet allowed the researcher to 1st visit Lao PDR. To the researcher, then the perception of the imagined boundary meant the area both separating and blocking people from different systems of society from the others. The researcher however was very surprised to see the ships of Thai and Laos people sailing to practice Laimong (Laimong refers to fish catching activity in the Mekong river, usually by using a net which is locally called Mong) while the locals at the communities under the study call Luang. This phenomenon made the researcher feel doubtful about the meaning of the term boundary.

Why has Mekong river, despite the boundary line separating the two peoples from each other become a social space where the Thais and Laos can manage to use for their mutual benefits? After that trip, the researcher has gone to Lao for several times thus having opportunities to talk and share ideas with some fishermen in the Luang area.

Consequently, the researcher desires to study the socio-economic change of the communities at Thai-Laos located in Luang in Mekong river in the context of a modern nation state.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The data were collected through qualitative research methods (Fischer, 2005), especially through direct observation on the ethnography of the purposively selected area, Nam Lao village (pseudonym), Maung Chaibuli, Sawanakhet, Lao PDR. It is located South of the Sae Bung Fai canal that flows into the left side of the Mekong river. The village has been closely connected with the Thai communities through the socio-economic pattern. This study also covered Nam Thai village (pseudonym) located on the opposite side of the Mekong river. Population and sampling consist of the people at both villages who do fishing; those are the key informants. Additionally, document research study was performed to for a better understanding about the history of the boundary.

For over a year, the researcher had stayed and participated in the activities of the two villages under the study to gather the information. The results of the study were presented in the descriptive analysis.

The conception of space and that of boundary were used as the key themes for this study. According to The Production of Space by Lefebvre (1991), space refers to the area where things are combined together. Space can be divided into three types; social, physical and mental (Lefebvre, 1991). Lefebvre believes that to understand the social life of human, it is necessary to reconsider about something called space so as to step over the concept of

the separating areas. He perceives a space as social construct or place making that is contained with a coded space and connected with the everyday life.

In general, boundary means the line that marks a national border. Thongchai Winichakul (1998), the researcher of Saim mapped: A history of Geo-body of a nation interestingly proposed an idea that Geo-body involved the operation of mapping technologies leading to the formulation of a nation state as well as social institutions, the operation supported by the knowledge of space or geographical management. The Geo-body thus becomes sort of powerful technology formulating a nation state, especially most powerful in creating nationalism and this can lead to an ideology of Thainess, We-self or Otherness (Winichakul, 1998).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Mekong river has become an important social and economic space where the people of the two countries earn their living, particularly in the middle of the part of the river, it is the large source of fish which feeds an amount of people. This fishing area is known among the locals as Luang. The word Luang locally means the area where fish live and for sure where the villagers can get fish. The villagers have given a description of physical space of Luang; it is 1-2 km long while its width varies depending on season and it may be 500-600 m deep in the rainy season or merely 200-300 m in the dry season. The good characteristics of Luang include the bed of the river is flat with no or little range of reefs. The bottom of the good Luang should have sand or gravel. The fact is that reefs or rocks at the bottom of the water will result in unevenness of the water flow.

Moreover, they can damage fishing equipment like a net or Muang. Luang in the Mekong river is a common property. Considered as the members of the same community, the villagers at the two sides of the river have their right to catch fish in Luang. This has traditionally been practiced since the past time. Everyone are supposed to be queueing up to do Liamong and the members altogether have to help in Soaluang activity to remove branches and other stuffs to clean their fishing area. They also take part in an annual ritual held to worship the Holy Ghost known as Phi Luang. Each season, the ecosystem of the Mekong river causes the physical change of the Luang area, i.e., the sediment buildup transforming to an island or don. For instance, besides used as a fishing area, Hadhea which is originated from sedimentation in Luang has been used for orchard and farming too. Such adjustment was done due to geographical changes in the Luang area.

Luang in Mekong river is the center of commercial transportation and the emergence of community setting in the South of the river traced back to the Srikotarabue kingdom. One myth named Urungkhatat revealed the emergence of religious places (i.e., Thatpanom Buddha's relics) and presented the location of ancient cities (such as Muang Srikotarabue, Muang Nong han, Muang Luang, Muang Nong harn noi, Muang Inthaputtanakorn, Muang Saket or Roi-et pratu, Muang Kuruntanakorn or Ayothaya and Muang Chulani). The origin of several important rivers built up by Naga are also mentioned in this myth such as Ueu, Ping, Nguem, Mulnatee and Cheewainatee river as well as Mekong river. Moreover, the myth shows the connection between multi-ethnic groups and religious beliefs that are relatively connected with traditional beliefs.

The radical change dramatically affected the management of the Southern part of Mekong river occurred in the period of the Western colonization about the 24 Buddha era. The arrival of France in the left side of Mekong river led to serious conflicts with Siam. Under the pressure from France, Siam government finally, yet reluctantly agree to sign a treaty on October 3, 1883. From then, Mekong river has been the borderline, resulting in the emergence of Laos territory on the French colonial map. According to the treaty, Siam kingdom had to give some areas on the left side of the river as well as a group of islets to France. Siam was forced to set up a demilitarized and tax-free zone 25 km down the right side of Mekong river. The event had a profound impact on the communities at Thai-Laos boundary, especially the politics and governance of the modern state made the borderline being passed the Luang area in Mekong river. This situation separated the members of the communities at Mekong river from one another, resulting in their feeling of otherness and we-self.

The cutting up of the relationship between the two nations indicated that it was a political power, instead of a community power that was used in the management of the areas on Mekong river. In 1884, Laos became completely free from France, so there was less pressure in the socio-economic space in Mekong river. However, the internal affair of Laos was increasingly problematic; the communist movement was against Lao government for having supported America (Evans, 2006). This really led to the alteration of administration to communism in 1975. The informants stated that the administration change had a substantial effect on the communities at Thai-Laos boundary. The liberation of the country caused a countless number of the Laos to seek refuge in their relatives' houses at Namthai village and other villages nearby. Government powers were intensively exercised

across the borderline with the support from the laws and rules set up, all were claimed to help maintain the nation security and stability and solutions to problems existing throughout the boundary line. The government was also attempting to take advantage from the area that was used by the two nation states like taxation and admission charge. This indicated that it was rather the government management with the aim to extend its power to take control of the areas on the boundary line and their residents.

Besides, policy changes based on political (governmental) system differing from one nation state to another created serious disputes between the two villages. Some villagers who were formerly placed in the social network began to have a feeling of otherness and we-self. Moreover, there was news about a demand on merging the two sides of Mekong river into one. The two nations were both trying to engage in managing the natural resources in Luang and serious argument was as a result. The Hadhae case was the most disputed area in Luang. It is where the Luang area is located and it is regarded as an important area for both fishery and farming in Mekong river. Hadhae was originated from the accumulation of sand and gravel (also called in Laos language Hinhae) which later became an islet or don. The ambiguity in the proprietary right to own Hadhae caused the two nation states to find some way to allot the area as well as the natural resources. Hadhae, therefore became a contested space wanted by the government, capitalists and local communities. There were various reasons for the government to get involved in managing the area. For instance, they sold sand gravel concession to the capitalists. As a result, the residents at the Luang area who used to earn their living from fishing, changed to work for those capitalists. The concession really affected the ecosystem of Luang and furthermore, it turned so problematic with fishing activity that the local fishermen requested the government to put an end to this activity. In June 1977, the dispute about the ownership of Hadhae between the Namtai village and Laos reoccurred. The Laos officers took about 300 armed villagers to go by boat to seize Hadhae as their own. They however were disallowed to approach Hadhae by >200 Namtai villagers who came up with swords and weapons. The informants added it was a blood war between the communities at the borderline. That is they were related as families and relatives by the social structure from the past time. Finally, they could an agreement and the dispute ceased. Recently, most of Namtai residents are still commuting to work at Hadhae. The residents of the two villages will still continue to participate in the Laimong (fish catching) activity. Crossing the border between the members of the communities in both sides of Mekong river has still been

practice in accordance to the basic social construction, tradition and culture. In the present time, the overlap of the government power on Thai-Laos boundary continues to exist but it does not mean that all of the villagers surrender to government power. Many have created their own strategies to claim that they have the right to manage the area too. There is a statement, Mekong river is not belongs to the two nations. So, the residents of Namtai villagers can cross the river to catch fish in the opposite side of the riverbank while the people at Namlao village often illegally come to the Thai border paying little or perhaps no attention to government power.

Very often the villagers take advantage from the borderline because of the gap between the power of Thai and Laos government by setting up a space for their own benefits, i.e., catching fish in the Luang area, searching for plants and animals in the forest. Some villagers claim that that space is the common property so they have the right to take advantage of it. While many say that Luang in Mekong river is a no man land. With no regard to the civil rights of neither Thai nor Lao nation states, the locals at the riverbanks together use the natural sources in the Luang area. They have mutual consciousness and understanding how far their socio-economic space can extend. It is also found that the train of capitalism in Thailand has pierced into the borderline; this caused a wider range of the use of the Luang area for several purposes such as fish catching as trading; the locals tried to think of fishing techniques and making up effective fishing equipment. As a result, there is a rise in the number of fishermen while the number of fish gradually decreased. With the decrease of fish, Luang thus has become an increasingly contested area.

That Mekong river was set up as the borderline appearing on the map created a sense of otherness and we-self among the two people. This is consistent with Winichakul (1998)'s concept of the Geo-body. The knowledge on space (geographical) management and social institution construction resulted in governmental power overlapping community power on the Luang areas including Namtai village and Namlao village. However, the community operation was constantly performed in several ways to stand against this so as to maintain their cultural transborder as well as to create their own socioeconomic space overlying government power in the same time.

According to Lefebvre (1991) and Winichakul (1998)'s concept of space and boundary, it showed that physical space, mental space and social space are closely connected with one another, yet it cannot exactly tell the how far their extent is. Yet the extent of those spaces depends upon the operation and the condition imposed by the communities who are trying to get rid of government power. In that way, it could be said that they

are attempting to create their own socio-economic space in the context of a modern nation state. Moreover, the cultural transborder over Thai-Laos boundary and the modification for an existence of a socio-economic space prevent the government from separating the communities along the river banks. That is because the locals stand up for their Geo-body position on the map made up from government power. However, government power cannot tear apart the communities on both sides of the river. The two peoples still associate with each other and share their culture across the boundary line. Luang, therefore will remain the socio-economic space in the communities at Mekong river.

CONCLUSION

This study suggested that the key to good relationship between Thailand and Laos as well as the key to eliminating the conflict between them is relationship mechanism at the community level, not at the national level; the social network at the community level was rooted from the family-relative system. This system is considered as a cultural chain linking the local people at Mekong river, despite boundary separating the two nations from each other.

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