

The Mekong

This monograph is focused on one of the great rivers of Asia, indeed the world. The Mekong river wanders over a distance of 4,800 kilometers from its origin in the vast mountain plateau in Qinghai Province of central China to the delta in Viet Nam adjoining the South China Sea. It is formed by the convergence of a number of small streams 5,000 meters above sea level, to become known for a short distance as Dza Chou or Water of Stone. It then becomes the Lanchang River for the rest of its passage through China, in which country it spends almost half of its life journey in Yunnan Province, before emerging to form the natural boundary between China/Yunnan and Myanmar and thereafter between China and the Lao People's Democratic Republic. The Mekong river then follows a southwesterly direction between Lao PDR and Myanmar. In the region known colloquially as the Golden Triangle the Lao, Myanmar and Thai borders meet at the confluence point of the Ruak and Mekong rivers. Then, swinging southeastwards, the Mekong goes on to form the border between Lao PDR and Thailand where it is known in both countries as Mae Nam Kong. The Mekong then leaves Thailand behind, going east through Lao PDR, rounding Luang Pabang, then turning south to the Thai border again. In Cambodia the Mekong is joined by the Tonle Sap River, whence, in Monsoon season, the excess water from the Mekong empties into the Tonle Sap Great Lake by reversing the direction of flow. At Phnom Penh the Mekong divides in two for its final passage into Viet Nam, where it is known as the Cuu Long or Nine Dragons, describing the multi-stream geographic pattern of the delta as it empties into the South China Sea. Thus is the winding course of the great Asian river that has impacted on the history of this vast geographical area and on the lives of the diverse populations of people who inhabit the Mekong region from the great mountain plateau to the sea. In the lands along the river's course live nearly 250 million people who in turn form part of the wider grouping of Southeast Asia with a population approaching half a billion. The diversity of the people of the Mekong region reflects the ethnic patterns of human history. Thus, for example, those who inhabit Yunnan Province of China include a substantial portion of all the ethnic groups of China. The 5 million population of Lao PDR includes 47 main ethnic groups and many subgroups. Indeed across the 6 Mekong countries flow a wide range of peoples, contributing to the cultural richness, the similarities and the differences of life patterns, to both economic stresses and opportunities. The borders between the nations are hives of economic activity and bear the portents of continuing change. Inevitably these borders bear the hallmarks of communicable diseases that move with the people, both are integral to history.