



The River's Tale

A Year on the Mekong

BY EDWARD A. GARGAN
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The great rivers of the world seem to have a magical appeal to writers. Fulfilling a long-held dream, Edward A. Gargan embarked in 1998 upon a roughly 3,000 mile journey down the Mekong River from near its source (at an altitude of 16,441 feet) in Tibet down to the Mekong Delta where it flows into the South China Sea. Early on we learn that the Mekong is called the Dzachu in Tibet and the Lanang Jiang in China.

This journey took Gargan to Tibet and Yunnan in China, Laos, Thailand, Cambodia, and finally Vietnam, all of which are described in this remarkable story of cultural and geographic adventure. The complex logistics of actually accomplishing this challenging feat makes this read almost like a novel as the reader develops intense curiosity about what will happen next as our brave traveler tries to negotiate the Mekong.

Prior to embarking on this journey, Gargan had complex and enduring relations with Asia, primarily as a student of Chinese medieval history, opposition to the war in Vietnam resulting in two years of federal prison, and a distinguished career as a journalist covering Asia primarily for the *New York Times*.

Having known Asia as both an academic scholar and as a journalist, Gargan wanted to encounter Asia in a more direct and intimate way. In his own words, he states that he wanted “to understand Asia in a way I never had before” (p. 7) and to undertake a “voyage through the heart of Asia’s complexity, amid a blizzard of languages” (p. 8).

Thus, basically this work is a travelogue with rich descriptions and imagery of the diverse areas visited. The book takes us to a myriad of fascinating places such as Dechen, the northern-most Tibetan town in Yunnan; Luang Prabang, the former royal capital of Laos and perhaps the best preserved traditional Southeast Asia city today; Vientiane, Laos; Phnom Penh, Cambodia; the great Tonle Sap lake in Cambodia; Angkor Wat; Ho Chi Minh City; and the Mekong Delta.

Gargan is a wonderful storyteller, and his accounts of encounters with individuals he met is one of the book’s most memorable features. Among such individuals are Phon Dza, a 68-year-old nomadic Tibetan herder; Dakpa Kelden, a former Tibetan Buddhist monk; the

Lao journalist, Mixay; the dedicated Sister Ath in Cambodia, and his boatman Phuong in the Mekong Delta.

Gargan’s masterfully written text is enriched by black and white maps and photographs. Gargan’s narrative also includes local poetry, hymns, and epics, to give the reader a feel for the richness of the diverse cultures of the Mekong region.

Gargan’s description of the countries and cultures along the Mekong touch on many currently complex global issues. He delights in the marvelous cultural diversity of the Mekong region, but worries about the fragility of these cultures (p. 114) and their resiliency in the face of the powerful forces of globalization.

Another valuable contribution of the book is Gargan’s discovering important facts about the region’s recent history, which are not often well known. For example, he points out that Laos was one of the most bombed countries ever during the U.S. war in Vietnam and that pilots on their return to air bases in Thailand from their missions over Vietnam would dump unused bombs mindlessly on Laos. As a result, to this day Laos suffers from a serious problem of extensive unexploded ordnance in its eastern and northeastern rural areas. Gargan also notes that over three million Vietnamese died during the war, and that there are over 300,000 Vietnamese MIAs. While in Cambodia, Gargan discovers that Kaing Guek Iev (also known as Duch or Deuch), who ran the infamous Khmer Rouge Tuol Sleng torture center in Phnom Penh, had earlier been trained under a USAID program and had been a student of Michael Vickery, a well-known Cambodian scholar.

Given Gargan’s fluency in Chinese, the sections in the book dealing with the Chinese areas of the Mekong are certainly the most informed. Unlike China, Gargan’s encounters with Laos, Thailand, and Cambodia occurred with no prior linguistic capability. Thus, there are a number of flaws in the coverage of Laos, for example.

Gargan describes, for example, Lao monks and their “begging” bowls. Actually, the monks do not beg, but Lao people offer the monks food as a way to show kindness and earn merit. He mentions that the highland Lao are known as *Lao Theung*. Actually they are

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known as *Lao Sung* (*Sung* meaning tall or high) and *Lao Theung* refers to the Lao living on the slopes of mountains. It is stated that all banks are run by the government (p. 197), which is patently false. There are, for example, many Thai banks in Laos.

The most unfortunate part of the book is Gargan's uncritical reporting of the views of an overseas Lao visiting the country who claims that "nobody here has ever read a book. . . . No one ever talks about their country. . . . It seems that everyone is walking around with a bag on their head" (p. 184). Later he cites a single university student who falsely claims that the library has no books (p. 182). Such remarks represent a gross distortion of contemporary Lao realities and are an insult to Lao scholars who write books and students and others who read them.

Others have also taken an active interest in the Mekong. Several years ago, with the support of the Asia Society, Jefferson Middle School in Eugene, Oregon did a whole year unit focusing on the Mekong. The project also emphasized the development of information technology skills in doing research on the Mekong. One of the most valuable aspects of studying the Mekong is the opportunity to see many complex international interdependencies. For example, the dam development of the Mekong in China described by Gargan (pp. 95–7) potentially can have dramatic effects on the ecology of down-river areas such as the Tonle Sap, a great fishing lake in Cambodia, and the Mekong Delta, a major rice growing area in Vietnam.

With the rapidly growing number of students of Southeast Asian heritage in U.S. schools and many students' ignorance about Southeast Asia, Gargan's volume could provide the opportunity for students to study the region in a fun and stimulating way. The careful study of the book could enhance geographic literacy as well as comparative, critical, and interdisciplinary thinking. The book should be critically assessed and complemented by the use of a scholarly volume such as that of Milton Osborne's *The Mekong: Turbulent Past, Uncertain Future*; *The Atlas of Languages: The Origin and Development of Languages Throughout the World* edited by Bernard Comrie, Stephen Mathews, and Maria Polinsky; *The State of China Atlas* by Robert Benewick and Stephanie Donald; *Atlas of Laos: The Spatial Structures of Economic and Social Development of the Lao People's Democratic Republic* by Bounthavy Sisouphanthong and Christian Taillard; and various Internet resources such as the Digital Asia Library. The material on Tibet could be valuably studied in conjunction with the fascinating autobiography of the Tibetan scholar Tashi Tsering, 1999, to provide a contrasting indigenous Tibetan perspective. The book also raises the important issue of whether cultures are

"clay or iron pots" (Ron Crocombe), and provides rich data to inform the debate about the *Lexus and the Olive Tree* (Thomas Friedman). Discussion of these complex and controversial issues raised by Gargan's book could stimulate divergent and constructivist thinking among students.

The River's Tale provides us with a highly readable account of the complex and diverse countries and cultures of the Mekong region. A critical reading of the work can enhance our understanding of an important area of the world that too often has been ignored or forgotten. ■

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