

palm expansion in Sarawak (East Malaysia) and demonstrates that it is ultimately influenced by the state's use of economic, legal, political power to redistribute access to land and forest resources. Chapter 7 by Cramb and Sujang shows how smallholders in Sarawak found ways in coping and reasserting themselves relatively successfully in the oil palm landscape despite their difficulties in gaining resources. The first theme of the book largely reflects how livelihoods of smallholders can be improved in an industry which mainly favours commercial plantations.

The second theme (Chapters 8–10) touches on the various conflicts arising from the oil palm industry. Readers will find two key messages from this theme. The first message is that oil palm should not be viewed as an 'evil crop'. The second message is that the conflicts surrounding the oil palm industry are actually results of politics played out by the different actors over the three main issues of land, labour, and capital which the edited volume focuses on. The third theme sees Chapters 11 and 12 specifically focusing on labour vulnerability in rural livelihoods of the oil palm industry. The examples given in these two chapters demonstrate the largely 'invisible' labour force to the public eye and document the isolation of their work undertook to produce palm oil for local and overseas markets. The political economy of the oil palm landscape is indeed a landscape that very much remains silent on the migrant and vulnerable labour that makes and sustains it, where the end product is 'dead labour' (Mitchell, 2003). The book then quickly wraps up with a single chapter on the transnational aspect of the oil palm complex (fourth theme) by focusing on the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO), and a chapter concluding the overall key findings.

It is evident that the editors wish to highlight the land, labour, and capital conflicts that often reside in the peripheral space of oil palm production. Whilst there is richness in the various themes presented in the edited volume, it is rather perplexing that the editors have not thoroughly engaged the environmental, particularly the transnational environment aspect, of the oil palm complex. This is a missed opportunity. For instance, the editors' arguments on the smallholders could afford to be better developed by linking back to wider environmental discussion of regional issues such as the transboundary haze in Southeast Asia in relation to oil palm expansion and forest fires which are perennial problems that remain hard to resolve, thereby making their 'complex' framing of the oil palm industry more cohesive. These shortcomings aside, the volume nevertheless contributes to the literature on environmental political geography through its close interweaving of political economy issues of the oil palm industry. The volume also highlights that scholars and policy-makers need to engage deeper with smallholders' livelihood struggles and adaptations, before making theoretical insights or even meaningful policy recommendations.

River

Certainly there is a great amount of academic research that have examined the riparian politics of the Mekong River over the last two decades and it is beyond the scope of this review essay to reference such an extensive list. *The Mekong: A Socio-Legal Approach to River Basin Development* joins this crowded field in providing a dedicated socio-legal understanding to interpret and synthesise the politics of hydropower development in the Mekong River Basin. In a time where governments and private developers are racing to put up dams in the Mekong River, this book through its socio-legal and legal pluralism ('hard' and 'soft' laws) conceptual underpinnings, is a timely contribution in helping us to comprehend the complexities of law in relation to the river's transboundary water

politics.

Chapter 1 introduces the Upper and Lower Mekong mainstream dams studied in their book, such as the Xayaburi Dam in Laos and the Lower Sesan 2 Dam in Cambodia in particular focus. The introductory chapter also shows the key state and non-state, and regional institutional actors involved. Chapter 2 focuses on the theoretical aspect of the book, presenting a well-woven account by the authors' socio-legal approach and its associated ideas of legal pluralism (helped by the interdisciplinary expertise of the team). The chapter exposes readers to several views, if broad, of how law should be understood in the context of environmental decision-making in the hydropower projects. This articulation matters crucially given the multiplicity of actors and their intertwined political and legal interests which may at times, take place transnationally. Next, Chapter 3 examines the conflicting visions of donors, developers and experts of the Mekong River Basin in a largely historical context.

The second half of the book highlights the analysis of the socio-legal approach undertaken in four interrelated angles. Chapter 4 looks at technical legal governance surrounding the building of mainstream dams through the intergovernmental institution—Mekong River Commission (MRC). Chapter 5 explores on participation in environmental assessment procedures while Chapter 6 focuses on the transparency of hydropower development. An engaging Chapter 7 reflects on the legal strategies of civil society used to contest hydropower development projects.

There are two main issues, a strength and a weakness of the book. First, it is pleasing to read a book that has carefully mapped out the extensive socio-legal geographies of the Mekong River's environmental politics, contributing to the relatively thin but growing literature of legal geographies of the environment, and thereby echoing Delaney's (2017) call for more strengthening of convergence between legal geography and the bio-physical environments. *The Mekong: A Socio-Legal Approach to River Basin Development* does well to put its attention solely on assembling 'a nuanced account of how laws and legal institutions at different levels operate and shape water governance outcomes, claims and expectations in the Mekong' (2016: 35) rather than, also, offer policy insights to resolve the conflicts and tensions across the various levels of governance and national borders. In this way, the book has managed to keep its discussions of hydropower development tight and focused. Additionally, the choice of a socio-legal approach is effective for the latter sections of empirical discussion. The extent to which the authors discuss and justify their hard law and soft law engagement of transboundary water governance among the wide array of actors is convincing and further reinforces Gillespie's (2017) idea that people-place-law dynamics need to be carefully interrogated for environmental decision-making.

Second, the limited discussion on China's role in the mainstream dams of the Lower Mekong Basin (LMB) stood out for me distinctively. This decision is surprising and odd. It is abundantly clear that China holds considerable geopolitical and geoeconomic influences on the LMB countries with its extensive financial backing on those states' infrastructural projects (dam construction and beyond), and the very fact it could regulate water downstream into the LMB (a major concern for LMB states during the dry season). Therefore, the representation of the Mekong River, and of course, the LMB's geopolitics and livelihood concerns necessitate a consideration of China (Ptak, 2017; Sithirith & Gillen, 2017) among other multiple constructions of the region in which the Mekong is situated and subject to (Hirsch, 2016b). Whilst it is impressive to see the authors tease out the sentiments of

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