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TerraViva

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MEKONG MEDIA FORUM • CHIANG MAI, THAILAND • DEC. 9 - 12, 2009

Diversity, Frank Talk at MMF

By Lynette Lee Corporal

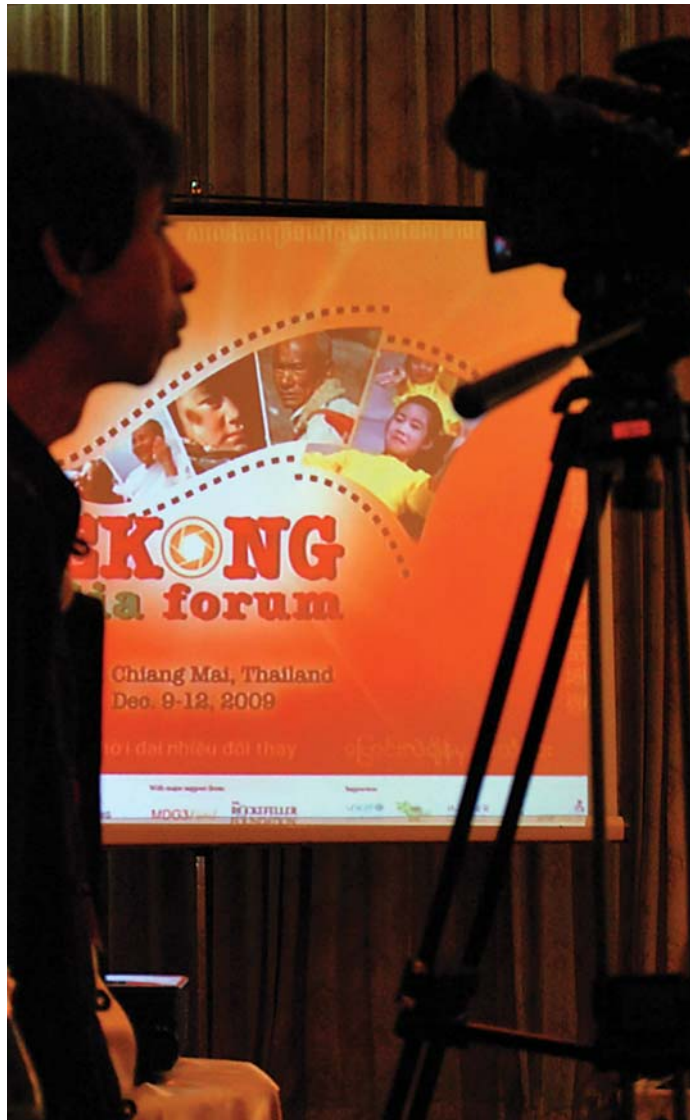
The diversity of views at the Mekong Media Forum in Chiang Mai, Thailand and the frankness which with some touchy topics were discussed, from China's behaviour in the Mekong region to the situation in Burma and how journalists make their way through sometimes tricky media terrain were among the hallmarks of the four-day forum, participants say.

More than 220 participants, nearly 100 of them journalists from the six Mekong countries, attended the Dec. 9-12 Forum.

"I really didn't expect that the Mekong dams issue would be so controversial in this conference," said Zhu Yan, senior editor at the national broadcaster China Central Television, referring to the heated discussions about water resources and dam constructions in the upper reaches of the Mekong river.

As a Beijing-based journalist, Zhu Yan said the issue of China's Mekong dams "wasn't major news" in the Beijing-based press. "I think the reporters based in the south of China, such as Guangzhou and Hong Kong, have a better understanding of these things," he added.

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Living with Limits, Creating Some Space

Coping with a wide variety of limitations has become a way of life for Mekong journalists, who have developed ways of coping with them in a host of pragmatic ways.

These limitations include challenges from governments and business institutions running media entities, and commercialisation.

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Mekong Media Should Ask Tougher Questions

By Tess Bacalla

Countries in the Mekong region have indeed seen borders open and former foes become friends, but several of them are still ruled by authoritarian governments that put limits on media and other freedoms.

Aung Zaw, exiled Burmese editor of 'The Irrawaddy' magazine, stressed this contrast during his remarks at the Dec. 9 opening of the Mekong Media Forum in this northern Thai city, where he has lived and fought for Burma's freedom since fleeing the repressive state 21 years ago as a student activist.

In this kind of environment – where openness has filtered through all the economies in the region but not necessarily into their political environments – the founder and editor of the magazine focusing on Burmese and South-east Asian issues said journalists need to raise fundamental questions to authorities lest they allow the region's repressive regimes to remain in power unchallenged.

This while scores of people continue to languish in oppressive environments – such as Burma where there are 2,000 political prisoners – and are denied fundamental freedoms as well as economic opportunities in an otherwise resource-rich region.

"The role of journalists is not about nurturing media organisations; it is about having the courage to tell the truth and being committed to the pursuit of democracy in an environment dominated by repressive regimes," said Aung Zaw.



Aung Zaw throws a challenge to journalists.

The Mekong region consists of China, Cambodia, Vietnam, Laos, Burma and Thailand through which flows the Mekong River, one of South-east Asia's most important river systems.

The Forum brought together more than 220 participants – composed of about a hundred journalists and at least a hundred

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TERRAVIVA

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ANALYSIS:

China's PR Problem



By Johanna Son

CHIANG MAI - Powerful neighbour. A rising power. Old friend. Big, secretive investor. Big boy of the region.

These were some of the terms participants at a talk-show discussion at the Mekong Media Forum used when asked to share the images of China they get from the media.

Several said they had mixed feelings about the country that is the big power in the Mekong region, among the biggest investors in their countries and has built two dams on the upper reaches of the Mekong River.

"There are two Chinas," said Cambodian journalist Nguon Serath, editor of 'Rasmei Kampuchea Daily' newspaper. One is the country that has put in the biggest investments in Cambodia and "that is a good picture", he explained. The second is the builder of dams in the Mekong river that has sowed discontent among communities in downstream countries from Lao PDR, Cambodia and Vietnam and triggered letters of protest from grassroots groups.

These comments, which came up through the four-day Forum, reflect the depth of resentment by neighbouring countries that perceive that China has run roughshod over their concerns about the impact of its dams on water levels, salination, worsening floods and their livelihoods.

Chinese diplomats and engineers, including at an October consultation held by the Mekong River Commission with in Chiang Rai, say that these problems are not due to the dams. The Lancang, as the upper reaches of the Mekong is called, contributes just 16 percent of the flow of the Mekong river, so damming cannot have such a huge impact on it, they have pointed out.

At the height of the record-high floods in Vientiane last year, the Mekong River Commission also issued a statement saying that based on a study of the volume of water involved, they could not have been caused by China's dams.

But China's views are not always read or heard much in the media of other Mekong

"There are two Chinas," said Cambodian journalist Nguon Serath of 'Rasmei Kampuchea Daily' newspaper. One is the country that has put in the biggest investments in Cambodia and "that is a good picture", he explained. The second is the builder of dams in the Mekong river that has sowed discontent among communities in downstream countries.

countries as well in China's own media. There is an information gap between upstream and downstream countries and communities, and this is perhaps part of why some Chinese journalists at the forum and audiences inside the country are surprised by the extent of the anger over its dam projects.

Over the years, it has become increasingly common for media reports in downstream countries to carry as 'fact' statements that China's dams are behind uneven water levels and other water-related problems.

Media reports in Vietnam now carry articles criticising the dams. In June, Ngo Dinh Tuan, chair of the scientific council of the South-east Asia Institute of Water Resource and Environment, told 'Tuoi Tre' newspaper: "(Chinese) dam construction now joins hands with climate change to worsen droughts, salinity intrusion, landslides and land erosion." He added: "The Vietnamese government must create a national strategy for protecting the river downstream, not only for the Mekong but the Red River (in Vietnam's north), as China has started to build dams on it as well."

The scrutiny given to China's moves is a reflection of its soft power in the region.

This has been taking root since the nineties, as a more confident China signed cooperation accords with South-east Asian countries that had previously

been impossible to discuss with Beijing (including the matter of the Spratly islands) except on a bilateral basis. Gradually, China's image changed, from one of a threat to a power that had a 'good neighbour' policy toward South-east Asia. Today, the story angle of the 'China threat' is gone.

But its behaviour in the Mekong region, especially in the years since the first Mekong mainstream dam was completed in 1993 and the second in 2003, has been judged heavily against the backdrop of these hydropower projects.

Journalists say it is far from easy to get the views of China or Chinese officials in their stories, though Chinese colleagues also explained new trends point to more accessibility these days. Language is also a challenge.

Perhaps all the attention paid to China – and the depth of uneasiness toward its Mekong moves – is the price to pay for its large political footprint. "America in Asia", in fact, was a phrase that Beijing-based journalist Lin Gu cited to refer to China's power in the region.

He said that China is learning the ropes of being a power, and is concerned about how it is viewed by the outside world. "The (Chinese) government should understand that being beaten is part of the price to pay for being strong," he said. At the same time, it still lacks confidence and can thus be "sensitive" and "overreacts" to criticism.

A barrage of questions about China's dams also arose at the MRC meeting in October, from hydrologists, engineers, water researchers, academics and campaigners. In an interview, Chinese diplomat Lu Hai Tien said "we will bring all these concerns back" to Beijing.

Lu, from the Department of International Organisations and Conferences of China's foreign ministry, conceded that there were many concerns about China, and "that's why we are here". Told that Mekong journalists had difficulty getting the Chinese government's views, he said: "Maybe there has not been a proper platform for China to express its views."

PERSPECTIVES: Who Cares for the River?

By **Nguyen Kim Ngan**

This question dawned on me when I took a boat along the Mekong River, one of the biggest rivers in Asia that is shared by six countries, namely China, Myanmar, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam. Although any point somewhere in the Golden Triangle area can be Lao, Thai or Burmese territory, it sounds strange that none of these governments have taken appropriate care of a river that has a significant role in their economies and cultures. Each country appears to treat the river as if Vietnam has Cuu Long, China its own Lancang. But the haze from Chiang Mai to Luang Prabang, dams by China and Vietnam that cause rice fields in Cambodia to get flooded, river water pollution, drug trafficking, illegally imported and exported products, HIV/AIDS, and poverty are some examples of the challenges that the six Mekong countries share.

The solution might lie not in giving more financial resources or educational improvement, but in asking the question “Who cares for the river?” Among the efforts to seek answers to this are the Imaging Our Mekong annual programme and Mekong Media Forum.

In this forum, I felt that I was in a family whose members were discussing, sharing and having arguments, but all for the benefit for their common family, the Mekong Region. I saw the way Vietnamese journalists care about the situation in Burma, Thai male reporters empathise with female colleagues for the difficulties in their work or a young Cambodian filmmaker frankly sharing his opinions about China to Chinese participants.

Among the sessions that impressed me was the one on ‘Children and Borders’, the gender sessions and ‘Burma 2010’. On children and gender, which are my interests, I heard many new viewpoints and angles. These include cooperation between Vietnamese and Lao young people voluntarily working at the Viet-Lao border or the ‘iron girls’ or glass ceiling concept in China, for instance. Journalists shared with us their problems on gender equality, although the situation is varied among nations.

In the sessions on ‘Burma 2010’ or ‘Shifts in the Media Landscapes’, my understanding has been widened through facts, figures, stories and comments from foreign colleagues. I may not know as much about the Burma situation if I did not take part in the forum. I don’t have any opportunity to meet Burmese former prisoners or exiled journalists who are not able to go back to their own country.

Thanks to the MMF, our big Mekong family can be reunited and share our love for the region. Together with IPS Asia-Pacific and Probe Media Foundation, other international organisations and ourselves, local journalists want to answer the question I started this article with. We are Mekong citizens and we care our river!

Q&A

‘Not Many People Think about Rivers’



Photo by Jude Stanislaus Chan

Stanislaus Jude Chan interviews Steve Van Beek, explorer and author of several books on Asian culture.

A stint as a volunteer in the Peace Corps brought Steve Van Beek out of the United States to Asia in 1966, where he served in a small village in southern Nepal. Then he “forgot to leave,” he says with a twinkle in his eye. The sprightly 65-year-old strides between sessions at the Mekong Media Forum with a barely noticeable limp, which one later learns is from a gash on his leg – the result of a minor accident just two weeks ago when he slipped while climbing a waterfall.

Beek is an adventurer, and it will take more than a few stitches to stop him from kayaking down the next river he sees. Since moving to Asia, he has authored 23 books and 42 documentaries on Asian culture, with particular interest in the beliefs attached to rivers.

“One of the questions we are asked at this [Mekong Media] forum is how the

Mekong region is perceived by the outside world, and the question I would ask is, I don’t think we are,” Beek, who is now based in Thailand, said during the talk show session, ‘Our Mekong: Inside and Outside’, held on Dec. 9.

A Fellow of the Explorers’ Club – a multidisciplinary, professional organisation dedicated to field exploration – Beek has paddled the length of the major rivers in Thailand and is writing a book on the upper Mekong entitled ‘The Mekong Nobody Knows’.

He speaks to TerraViva about his desire to “infect other people with my love of, and appreciation of, and realisation of the vital importance of water”.

TerraViva: How did you begin your love affair with rivers?

Steve Van Beek: I was fortunate enough to have a house on the Chao Phraya [Thailand], on stilts, opposite the Grand Palace, for 11 years. That house was then torn down later, and it became the Supatra River House restaurant. And that used to be my view every morning.

Every day, I saw something new on the river. I wondered where all the water came from. It seemed to be telling a story, telling its history, of what it had seen in the past. So I asked questions, I looked for books, and I couldn’t find any. I realised, people told me later, that nobody had ever gone down the river. In late 1997, I went to the headwaters, Dong Nam, up on the Burmese border, and I walked for three days. When the water was deep enough, I said, “Ok, I need a boat”. The only experience I had was with a rowboat, but I had the boat built, took it back up,

started paddling, and 58 days later, ended up in the ocean...

TerraViva: What is it about rivers that has kept you fascinated all these years?

Steve Van Beek: I’m still trying to answer a question: What is a river? Many cultures have ideas about water, but not many of them think about rivers, and I find that interesting because there are so many rivers.... Most people look upon the river as an obstacle. I was interested in the belief systems. In other words, do the people who live along the side of it see the river as a beneficent force, or as malevolent? And how does that affect the way that they use it, or abuse it?

TerraViva: There was heated discussion in the talk show session, ‘Our Mekong: Inside and Outside’ here over China’s dam projects on the Mekong River. What are your views on this?

Steve Van Beek: I don’t want to go into the politics of it. Zhu Yan (senior editor from China Central Television, one of the discussants) was surprised by how angry people were. I mean, you heard it, people were angry. This tells you something about the reporting about the river in China. They are not hearing – forget about listening, they are not hearing – what their neighbours are thinking about it. At the end of the discussion, I said to him: “I’m sorry you became the target here, and it’s not your fault. But there’s your story! Why are your neighbours so upset and nobody in China knows about it?”

I feel that we have to address these questions because I feel it is water, not energy, that is the issue of the 21st Century. ■

TV Drama Brings Migration Risks to Life

By **Joel Chong**

Thanks to the inclusion of young volunteers and migrants in the cast and crew, a Lao television mini-drama series about the lives and struggles of young migrants who freely cross the border turned out to be just the right vehicle for getting their attention to migration and its risks.

Dubbed ‘Keun Ni Yang Mi Saeng Deuan’ (loosely translated as ‘The Moonlight Is Never Forgotten’), the series was produced by the Lao Youth Union in Savannakhet province to raise awareness of some of the major issues confronting youth migrants, such as trafficking and HIV/AIDS.

The mini-drama series, produced in both Lao and Vietnamese languages, was targeted at Lao and Vietnamese youth who move freely along the Lao-Vietnam border.

“We use this drama to push them to talk, to talk about themselves,” said Somkiao Kingsada, producer of the series and chief of the Lao Youth Radio and TV programme under the department, who spoke to TerraViva on the sidelines of the Mekong Media Forum being held in this northern Thai city from Dec. 9-12.

Savannakhet, which borders Thailand on the west and Vietnam on the east, has seen an influx of Vietnamese migrants from the nearby Vietnamese border town of Lao Bao due to the easy movement across the border. Young people make up

a sizable number of such migrants, said Somkiao.

Vietnamese children and youth cross over to Laos to find employment. Some are brought along by their parents who migrate to Laos to work.

To produce the series, the Union department tapped volunteer cast and crew from its local chapter, the Savannakhet Youth Committee. Young migrants from Vietnam were part of the production team and cast. “They were very excited,” Somkiao said.

Probably another first for the production was the participation of HIV-positive youth in the drama series, both behind and in front of the TV camera. “They really enjoyed seeing themselves [on television],” said Somkiao.

Production began in August 2008 and the series is airing in December on Lao National Television’s Channel 9. The series was part of the efforts of the Union’s youth department to broaden its focus beyond the urban youth.

“We used to think of our [urban] members only, but what about the others... the ethnic minorities [on the] rural borders?” asked Somkiao.

The title of the series, ‘The Moonlight Is Never Forgotten’, alludes to the nostalgia gripping youth migrants in big cities away from home. “In the countryside, where they don’t have any electricity, they can see the full moon clearly, but when they go to the city they can’t,” said Somkiao.

The series is also available in DVD format to reach a wider audience. “Some parts of Laos do not have television access, so we also use DVDs at monthly (youth) meetings and analyse the characters,” said Somkiao.

In the pipeline is a similar production focusing on Lao girls who end up working as bar girls and sex workers in Thailand.

Laos is not the only country that has used the media, in particular television dramas, to raise awareness about social issues.

In 2004 a Cambodian soap opera, ‘Rous Cheat Chivit’ (‘The Taste of Life’), began airing episodes revolving around a female trafficker’s attempts to traffic in Cambodian street children for labour and sexual exploitation. These episodes were intended to raise awareness about trafficking of children using the popular TV drama series – an idea broached to its producers by the International Labour Organisation’s (ILO) regional office in Bangkok.

‘The Taste Of Life’, funded by the BBC World Service Trust, had previously tackled social issues such as HIV. The TV drama is considered the highest-rating soap opera in Cambodia.

“I don’t know whether a documentary, news, or popular dramas are the best way to get messages out, but we’re always looking for new ideas,” said Allan Dow, advocacy officer at the ILO office in Bangkok, during a session called ‘Children and Borders’ at the Mekong Media Forum. ■

A promised election in military-ruled Burma next year will be held in a vastly different media culture than the last general election in 1990, Burmese journalists and activists said at the Mekong Media Forum.

That election was won convincingly by the opposition, but the junta refused to recognise its results.

The 2010 polls in Burma will be held against the backdrop of the abundance of media outlets run by exiled Burmese journalists that have mushroomed in the last two decades, says Kyaw Zwa Moe, managing editor of 'The Irrawaddy', a popular current affairs magazine produced by Burmese journalists living in Thailand.

"In the run-up to the 1990 (election), no publications inside the country were free to cover elections, and there was no exiled Burmese media," he told participants Thursday at a regional media forum held in this northern Thai city. "The media inside still faces dangers to report independently about the elections."

Consequently, the "exiled media have an important role to play," he told more than 100 participants at a panelist session on 'Burma 2010' at the Mekong Media Forum here, which runs from Dec. 9-12. "It has grown strong in recent years."

'The Irrawaddy' has set up a special series under the theme 'Election Watch' to cover different aspects of the elections before, during and after the vote.

Burma's junta has said the nationwide vote is part of its agenda to create a "disciplined, flourishing democracy".



'We're ready,' says The Irrawaddy's Kyaw Zwa Moe.



Naw Din of 'Kachin News'.

Burma's Exiled Media Brace for 2010 Vote

By Marwaan Macan-Markar

"We need to watch every step of the elections," political activist Moe Zaw Oo, another panelist in the session, said about exploring how the media inside and outside the country will cover elections that will have not the usual ways of ensuring transparency and openness of popular votes. "It will be very tricky and complicated," given that independent media will not be inside the country to report on the vote.

Media representing Burma's ethnic minorities, such as 'Kachin News' produced by Kachin journalists exiled in Thailand, are also preparing for the vote. "A new form of

people's groups has been set up in the Kachin area," says Naw Din Lahpai, editor of the publication. "A brand new office of the (pro-junta) Kachin State Progressive Party was inaugurated on November 18th."

The junta is also trying to rope in the churches in the Kachin area in northern Burma, as majority of Kachin are Christians. "Churches have been gifted with rice, cooking oil and small cash donations," Naw Din said. "A campaign based on religious organisations has been launched."

Already, the exiled media are hammering away at the uncertain and oppressive political landscape, producing stories that ask how free and fair the South-east Asian nation's upcoming poll will be. The election is only the 15th in the country's history since it emerged from British colonial rule.

But in truth, the military leaders of Burma, officially called Myanmar, have still to formally announce two important laws that will make the poll a reality – one setting the 2010 election date and the law governing political parties that will vie for seats in the legislature.

The reasons to worry about the poll are ample. In May 2008, days after Burma's Irrawaddy Delta was flattened by the Cyclone Nargis, the junta conducted a referendum riddled with fraud. It said 90 percent of voters endorsed the new constitution in that plebiscite.

How the 1990 elections turned out – where some 15 million voters turned out – also feed media concerns. The National League for Democracy, led by Nobel Peace laureate Aung San Suu Kyi, secured over three-fourths of

the seats in the national assembly, only to be denied power by the regime.

The regime's reluctance to hand over power to a civilian authority – which Burma has not had since the 1962 military coup – is reflected in the constitution that, the regime states, is part of its seven-point roadmap towards political reform and democracy.

"The constitution is totally flawed. It favours military supremacy," said Moe Zaw Oo, who writes for the 'Irrawaddy'. "The military has the power to stage a coup at any time they want. They can do so using a state of emergency, and this act is not illegal."

The regime's attempt to retain its grip on power has also been cemented by another constitutional provision that guarantees the military a fourth of all the seats in the legislature through appointments – and not through polls.

For Burma's ethnic minorities, which account for over 40 percent of the country's 56 million people, a ruthless military campaign makes "the regime's planned elections meaningless," said Charm Tong of the Shan Women's Action Network.

"We now have 600,000 internally displaced people inside Burma," she told the forum, referring to the plight of the country's ethnic minorities. "The Shan state has over 150 battalions stationed out of Burma's 500 battalions, which is a fourth of the military strength."

Many Shan political leaders have been jailed, including some who won convincingly at the 1990 poll, added the activist from the Shan ethnic minority. Said Charm Tong: "These stories cannot be ignored ahead of the elections."

Reporting, not Promoting, Pandemics

Media coverage of pandemics across the Mekong region has been a learning curve for journalists, as they struggle to understand hitherto unknown viruses, keep their audiences abreast of the latest public health emergencies and also let them know correct and preventive information.

H1N1, the latest virus to grab global headlines, was first detected in North America in April and then spread rapidly across the globe to Asia.

In more recent times, research on how this story was reported across the Mekong region revealed a picture that was heartening to experts on public health information. "The H1N1 virus has received more coverage than other viruses," Robert Kelly, regional representative for the Academy for Educational Development, told a session on reporting of cross-border health issues at the Mekong Media Forum.

"But it is a double-edged sword," he noted. "There were good opportunities to get key health messages out. But there was an inability to control the message."

Particularly troubling was the contrast between stories and headlines in the region's newspapers. "The content was good but the headlines were sensational," he revealed.

The reportage on H1N1 and other viruses should convince journalists that health and science reporting requires caution and accuracy to avoid creating panic, Zhu Yan, senior editor of the national broadcaster China Central Television told the forum. "When it comes to scientific reporting, I ask journalists to be cautious."

"We should report the disease, not promote the disease," he said while describing errors made in the Chinese media



A man with his 'gladiator' in the age of avian flu.

during the early stages of the HIV pandemic. "We should inform the public, but not create fear."

But countries like Laos also reflect a changing trend, one that has seen governments opening up to the media on the matter of H1N1, having learnt the lessons of the previous H5N1 virus, which swept through South-east Asia since the winter of 2003.

"In the past two years the health authorities have given us more support, holding weekly meetings, to ensure better reports," said another panelist, Ounkeo Souksavanh, a radio broadcaster in the communist-ruled country. "In the past we didn't get such support, when H5N1 began."

Yet the media in the landlocked country, which has a population scattered in remote rural villages in the hilly regions, are dealing with other challenges such as having to reach out vulnerable communities that live in inaccessible areas. "It is a challenge for the media in Laos to get access to rural people to inform them about what needs to be done in response to viruses," revealed Ounkeo. "It was quite difficult to convince farmers who breed chickens to slaughter them to stop the spread of avian influenza (as H1N1 is also known)."

Avian influenza has infected 444 people and there have been 262 deaths, according to the World Health Organisation. Countries struck by this virus in the region with recorded human fatalities since late 2003 include Thailand, Vietnam, Laos, China, Cambodia and Indonesia.

Cases of H1N1, which is also called "swine flu" and spreads like a regular flu, have also been reported in China, Cambodia, Laos and Thailand. (MMMMarkar)

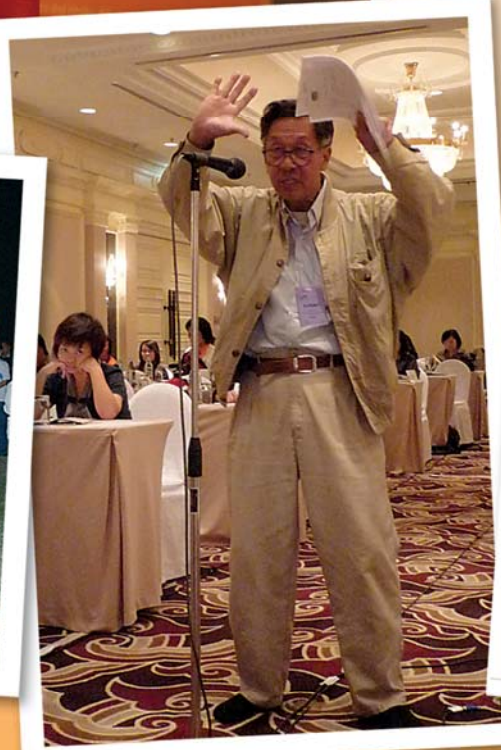
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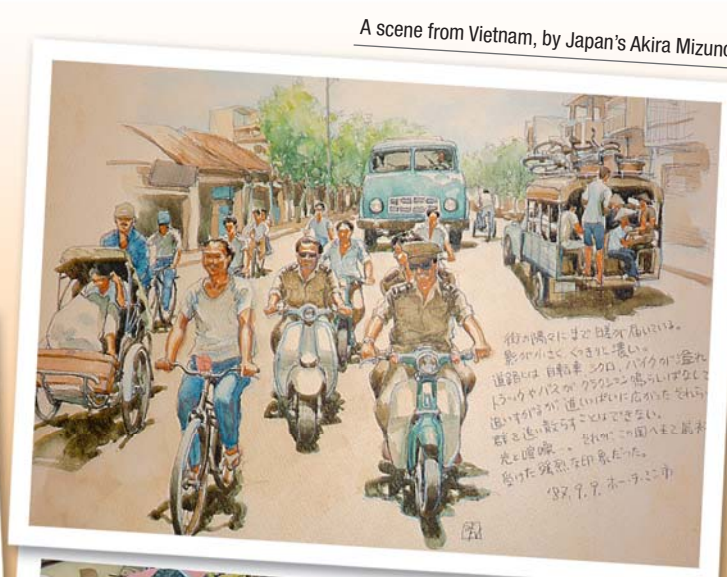
MMF banners all around.



Mekong Night on a cool Chiang Mai evening.



Discussions heated up at MMF sessions.



A scene from Vietnam, by Japan's Akira Mizuno.



ALL ITEMS FOR SALE



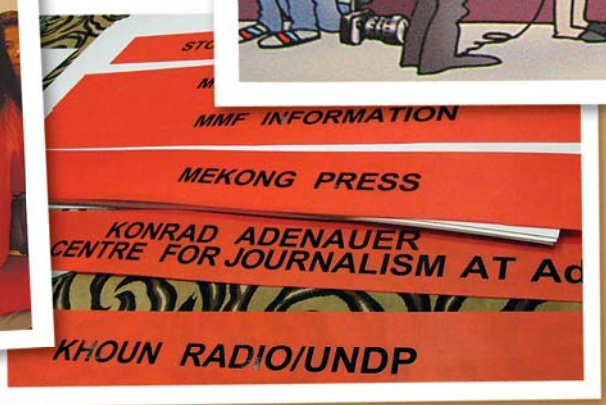
Delegates take in the Mekong photo exhibits.



The Silkworm Books' stall.



Harn Lay's cartoon says it all about the state of Burmese media.



Frenzied preparations for the exhibit area the day before MMF.

Mekong Media Forum

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How to Be Funny – and Make People Think

By Lynette Lee Corporal

Cartoonists and photojournalists usually let their work speak for them, so when they actually meet and engage with their audiences face to face, expect to see a Standing Room Only crowd.

In a session on 'The View from Cartoonists and Photojournalists' that elicited both

chuckles and pensive silence from the audience at the Mekong Media Forum, cartoonists, illustrators and photojournalists from Thailand, Burma, China and Japan talked about how they mix art with social commentary.

Drawing from their interpretations of their work – be it a series of photographs, a set of illustrations or editorial cartoons –

the speakers were quite vocal about how certain issues and experiences have shaped their perceptions about their countries.

"Doing watercolour illustrations is my way of telling people about the ways of those living along the Mekong River," said Thi-wa-wat Pattaragulwanit, editorial cartoonist for the Thai-language daily business newspaper 'Krungthep Thurakij' and the English-language daily 'Bangkok Post'.

Recalling his trips along the Mekong River some 20 years ago, the artist saw its many changes, calling some parts of the 4,880-km long river "beautiful but full of sadness" due to the development plans in the upper Mekong. He expressed concern for China's blasting of reefs and islets to make the river more navigable after the construction of dams in the upper Mekong.

"Who are the owners of the Mekong River? How can anyone justify the blasting of boulders in the river?" he asked.

Soe Win Than, a freelance photojournalist from Burma, shares Thi-wa-wat's environmental bent. His change of heart happened when he saw the extent of deforestation in his own country while on assignment.

Burmese cartoonist Harn Lay of the Chiang Mai-based 'The Irrawaddy' magazine knows how powerful images – whether cartoons or photos – can upset authorities.

He is pragmatic enough to say that cartoons "can't change politics" but that it also holds up a clear mirror image – a humorous one at that – of what's happening in a country.

"It's more difficult to make people think so we have to think hard how to be funny and give the people something to think about too," he said, drawing laughter from the crowd for the satirical images that

poked at socio-political issues related to Burma.

For photojournalist Li Lang and Japanese illustrator Akira Mizuno, the changes in their countries and regions are clearly defined in the former's railway train adventure and the latter's Vietnam travels.

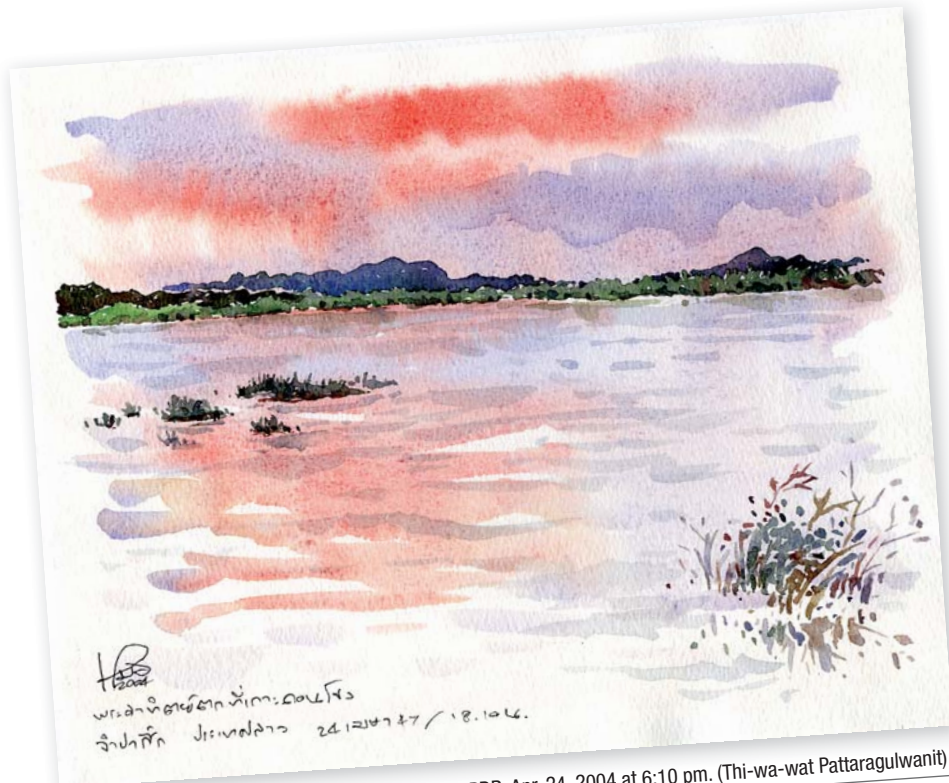
Li Lang, photography director of 'Business Travel' magazine in China, was struck by the 850-km long railway system that existed a hundred years ago and linked Kunming in China to Hai Phong in Vietnam. He documents the remnants of this railway route via photographs and noted how the old train station on the Chinese side had become home to huge and tacky advertisements and high-rise residential buildings.

"In contrast, the train station on the Vietnam side has retained its quaint look and quiet, non-commercial ways," said Li Lang.

Mizuno's sojourn in Vietnam – and later in the rest of the Mekong region – enabled him to relive the Japan that he once knew.

"My visit to Vietnam in 1987 opened my eyes to the beauty of the people and their sense of community spirit," said the Tokyo-based illustrator of over 30 years, who uses watercolour to do his illustrations after taking photographs of his subjects. "Becoming rich is good but getting to be too busy like the Japanese is not. When I do my illustrations, I always hope that I can capture the humanity of society, rather than (of) machine and materials..." he said.

"If all of us can erase the border of each country with our imaginary rubber eraser, then we can truly be united. [That way] we do not only become citizens of our [respective] countries, but citizens of the planet," said Thi-wa-wat.



The sun sets at Don Khong Island, Champasak, Lao PDR. Apr. 24, 2004 at 6:10 pm. (Thi-wa-wat Pattaragulwanit)

Riding on the (Air) Waves to Development

By Stanislaus Jude Chan

Like many of her fellow villagers, 22-year-old Khampheng Manivone first heard about community radio when letters were sent to different villages in Khoum – one of the poorest districts in Laos – asking for volunteers to be part of the Khoum Community Radio Development (KCRD) project.

Khampheng jumped at the chance to apply as one of the first few volunteers to join Khoum Radio in July 2006, more than a year before its first test broadcasts in late October 2007.

The station, which reaches out to community groups through local programming, aims to improve the people's access to information and increase residents' participation in development-related decisions, today broadcasts seven days a week, seven and a half hours a day, in three local languages – Lao Lum, Hmong and Khmu.

"Before I joined the station I was very shy, I couldn't speak in front of many people, even with people in the village. But now, I can speak in public with confidence. And when I join outreach activities organised by the station, I can speak with people and work with people and I have learnt many things," said Khampheng, a delegate at the Mekong Media Forum.

The volunteer broadcaster now also heads the Khmu programme production group at Khoum Radio, a project put up by the United Nations

Development Programme (UNDP) with the support of Laos' information and culture ministry and the Xiengkhouang Province Department of Information and Culture.

"We are a people who do not like to talk too much, because we don't want to hurt people," said Vongsone Oudomsouk, project manager of the Khoum Radio project, of the popular stereotype of the Lao people. "But 50 percent of volunteers are now made up of villagers, who act as representatives of their communities."

Production of the radio programmes are done in collaboration with the villagers, Vongsone explained, emphasising the importance of community involvement at Khoum Radio. "Villagers actually take part in decision-making processes, what to produce, when to broadcast, in how many languages, and so on."

And it is this inclusive approach, and the airing of topics relevant to the community, that has resulted in positive change for the people of Khoum district.

Speaking at a satellite session, 'Empowering Local People Through Community Radio', held on Dec. 10 at the Forum, Vongsone recounts anecdotal evidence that points to the success of Khoum Radio in assisting development in the district. For example, some doctors he spoke to had previously tried – unsuccessfully – to promote vaccination for babies, because villagers did not understand it and were not receptive to the idea. But after the airing of radio shows discussing this issue, these doctors have

reported an increase in vaccination rates.

The Khoum Radio project is part of plans by the Laos government to introduce community radios in all of the 47 poorest districts of the country by providing a platform for the community to discuss issues of local interest, including agriculture, health, and education.

On top of the improvement in information flow and increased community involvement in development issues, delegates at the session here also discussed the importance of community radio as compared to mainstream media.

Cai Yiping, executive director of women's rights group Isis International, explains that the content in community-based media is often more relevant and useful to the audience. "In community radio, because the audience is also the producer, they are the ones who know what information they need," she said.

Forum participants also turned the spotlight on another difference between the two media models: unlike mainstream media, non-commercial community radio struggles to stay financially sustainable. For example, Vongsone says, the station had previously turned away advertisers



for motorcycles and milk powder because of concerns within the communities over the socio-cultural impacts these products might bring.

To this end, Vongsone hopes for the station to be able to work out some form of "partnership strategy" with organisations that share "the same aim of getting the Khoum area out of poverty". He is also looking to set up a "volunteers' fund" to offer financial assistance to Khoum Radio volunteers, who currently receive only a small allowance for their time and services.

But for some volunteers, like Khampheng, it matters little whether she is paid. More importantly, "it's something that I like, something I'm interested in, and I want to be part of the development of my community," she said.

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Diversity, Frank Talk at MMF

China's hydropower projects along the upper stretch of the Mekong River have been blamed by downstream countries for a host of environmental impacts, ranging from unstable levels of water, floods and salinity in the Mekong Delta. China however has said that the two dams it has now would help ensure water supply to these countries during the dry season.

While the debate about the topic will continue, Moeun Nhean, publisher of 'The Cambodian Scene' magazine, says the point is that journalists and other participants were able to discuss openly their questions about China's role in the region and how media reports on the matter.

He is happy about the presence and active participation of Chinese journalists in the Forum. "Before, Chinese journalists come in and just listen and keep quiet. It used to be when they wouldn't even react and answer questions about China's policies about dams," he said.

Zhu Yan agrees that the Forum brings journalists together so certain issues could be discussed in an open manner. "I think we should expand our knowledge some more about this controversial issue," he added.

The discussion also opened the eyes of Vietnamese journalist Nguyen Kim Ngan about China and the controversies attached to its policies. "Before coming here, I was very angry with China in general because of the water resources issue, for instance, but I wasn't sure where or what brought on that anger. Now, after listening to the views of our Chinese counterparts here, I realised that it's not fair to generalise and blame the whole country," said Kim Ngan.

A few participants from non-Mekong countries expressed surprise at the passionate debates about China's growing influence in the Mekong region.

"I found it very interesting to have quite a lot of people from China here and the sometimes tense situation in the course of the discussions between the people from China and the rest of the Mekong," said Lars Krause from Germany.

Susanne Ornager, UNESCO adviser for Communication and Information in Asia, agrees but points out that "there are other things and issues to discuss apart from the dams". She added, "Of course, we're here to talk about the Mekong region, but China broadened the subject, I think, in the way they said that there are other things, other issues about China."

Tan Keng Sooi, a journalist who works with the Lao news agency KPL, was pleased that water governance issues were discussed, saying that the Forum "sounded the warning bells of the future" of the

Mekong. "The Forum is on the right track by having the water theme here," he said.

Forum participants also found discussions about Burma quite interesting.

Ornager said they were "very good" because she said it gave her a more complete picture of what's going on in the country. "Until now, at least on my side, Burma has been one country but what I learned here is that consists of many different tribes," she said.

Two Burmese participants said that the Forum was a great opportunity for them to meet their counterparts in the region and learn from each other. "This is a good way to further deeper relations among the participants and know more about our colleagues and their countries," said one of them who had flown in from Rangoon, asking that she not be identified by name. "It's very 'free' here to discuss things, even controversial issues," she said.

Freelance Burmese journalist Soe Win Than found the interaction among the participants from the six Mekong countries useful for his work. "I didn't use to be interested in the gender issue but after listening to the lively exchange here among gender experts, I now find it more interesting," he said, referring to the Dec. 11 sessions on media and gender. He also liked the discussion on children and borders.

Still, some expressed some disappointment that several topics they expected to be covered were missing.

Moeun Nhean said that because Chinese journalists do not represent the government and are not expected to speak for them,

he would like to see more 'voices' from Chinese government representatives to answer questions about the Mekong dams.

"Although it's great to know from the Chinese journalists' side who are able to tell us what their government is doing about these issues, I also wanted to hear more about how the government is going to take the responsibility for the environmental effects of the dams," he said.

Vongsone Oudomsouk, project manager of the United Nations Development Programme's Khoum Radio Support Project, wanted to hear more about solutions to the problem of the Mekong dam projects. "I think there wasn't enough discussion about how we can all work together — practical steps — to resolve the problem," he said.

Suthida Malikaew, freelance writer and consultant on HIV/AIDS and trafficking issues in Thailand, thought the Forum could have featured more sessions on people and culture in the Mekong. "The relationships among the countries in the region, their similarities, can promote better understanding among participants. We should look at the Mekong not as a river but a region as a whole," said Suthida.

U.S. journalist Patrick Kelly wanted to see more discussion about the inner workings of the media in the Mekong in relation to the issues. "I found that many of the panel discussions here were focused on the issues themselves rather than the work of the media and collaborative efforts," he said.

But 'China Daily' senior journalist Mu Qian thought that many of the topics featured in the Forum were quite new, especially since "in China, we don't talk about many of the topics discussed here".

Although he thought the sessions were a good "brainstorming experience", he said that the topics could be "a little bit too much from western angles", specifically on the gender and health issues. He said that, at least from a Chinese perspective, he would consider the gaps between those belonging to different socio-economic levels in China to be more of an issue. "Equality between men and women in China is much better than those, say, between farmers and urban residents, or those belong to different socio-economic groups," he said. "I think it's very difficult to talk about the gender issue as a whole because different countries have different experiences about this."

Also, Mu Qian proposed that future conferences discuss the cultural linkages among the Mekong countries and how these linkages could be used to unite the region.

Japanese illustrator Akira Mizuno, whose illustrations about Vietnam were exhibited at the Forum, said: "It's a bit sad that Japan is not represented here because they also need very much to be involved in this kind of conversation. Being a big donor in infrastructure projects, the Japanese government doesn't realise the deeper nuances of what's going on in the Mekong," said Mizuno, who took note of how sensitive the Mekong countries are to China's growing power. ■

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Living with Limits, Creating Some Space

For La Chan Tha, chief of Bayon Radio and Television in Cambodia and a documentary filmmaker, communication challenges are common in his country. The main challenge lies in getting sources to interview, especially when these are government officials, he told a session on 'Mekong Media: Spaces, Challenges and Opportunities'.

Unlike journalists in other countries who can just pick up the phone and get the desired source on the other line for impromptu interviews, journalists as well as documentary filmmakers in Cambodia have to go through some protocol before they are granted an appointment.

"First we need to get official permits in order to get the cooperation of local authorities," said La Chan Tha.

For their part, Thai media are driven by a variety of factors, including people,

budget and government, according to media researcher Prof Rachanee Vongsumitr. "People are the main market for media products. Media owners say that they are only trying to demand, say, more soap operas on television," she said.

China's case is different. Its so-called "external media," consisting of mainly English-language media, are made available to international audiences as part of the government's efforts to reach out to the rest of the world. "External media carry China's message to the world via a number of media institutions," said 'China Daily' senior journalist Mu Qian.

Apart from 'China Daily', other media publications and networks considered part of external media are CCTV9, 'Global Times', 'News China', 'Beijing Review', CITV, and china.org.cn, to name a few.

"While it is true that 'China Daily' contains information from the government and that all media in China are controlled by the government, not everyone in the paper identifies with this 'mouthpiece' role," said Mu Qian.

He added that many of those living outside China do not understand that the relationship between the government and the Chinese media is "not so direct" and is "subtle and complicated".

But yes, he continued, they do report about some sensitive issues, too. As examples, he cited coverage of the trial for subversion of writer Tan Zuoren, who had been exposing corruption in low-cost schoolbuildings that collapsed during the Sichuan earthquake of 2008, reportage on the Internet software aimed at pornographic sites (later rescinded), and a story by 'China Daily' on prayers in Urumqi soon after the July 2009 riots there. (LLCorporal) ■

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Mekong Media Should Ask Tougher Questions

other media professionals and analysts, development experts and civil society members — for four days of discussion around critical issues confronting the media within the region.

"If you look at the Mekong countries, these used to be hostile to each other, but borders have opened up and people travel a lot" while trade has been increasing, he said, highlighting some of the major changes that have swept across the region through the years. Yet, many countries are still ruled by authoritarian states, he explained.

Although the Mekong region today has some of East Asia's healthiest growth rates, it faces a host of complex issues, including cross-border disputes and migration,

poverty, environmental degradation, human trafficking and HIV/AIDS.

Aung Zaw said journalists have a "watchdog" and not a "lapdog" role to perform. "We should be raising questions to our authorities" to make them "accountable and transparent".

He challenged the Mekong journalists at the Forum to collectively rally around the cause of press freedom and democracy, citing the issues that bind them together — issues bordering on repression, specifically of the press — and notwithstanding the diversity within Mekong societies.

"Are we united enough to defend ourselves? Are we united enough to defend our brother and sister journalists who are locked in prison (notably those in Burma), to protect our press freedom?" These, too, are the very important questions to ask in this forum, Aung Zaw added.

"When we talk about Mekong region, there's a link (among the countries)," he said. Burma, for example, continues to be in power because governments such as Cambodia, Laos, China, Vietnam and Thailand "continue to support this pariah regime. They are very good at defending each other's interests."

Because the military junta continues to hold sway in Burma, at least 2 million Burmese have fled to neighbouring Thailand to work as migrant workers, many of whom labour under deplorable working conditions and extremely low wages. Among the biggest casualties of the repression in Burma are journalists. "You can see how the Burmese government continues to crack down on journalists," he said.

Aung Zaw said that the media, for instance, should be looking into why some international donors to Mekong countries

appear to be much more keen on providing support for big infrastructure projects in the region, instead of initiatives that push democratic space.

For instance, journalists can dig deeper into Japan's recent pledge of 5.5 billion U.S. dollars in aid to the Mekong countries, he suggested. "What is behind it? What is (its underlying) agenda?" asked the Burmese journalist, who launched the 'Irrawaddy' magazine in Thailand in 1993.

He said that often, proponents of development projects "don't talk about building a democracy, press freedom, and how to develop seasoned journalists". Yet the development process relies very much on how media follow, report and monitor the most important issues for the countries they report on. "Our participation (as journalists) is very vital in the face of such development projects," Aung Zaw added. ■



Lu Pin, executive director of Media Monitor for Women Network in China, who also writes a newspaper column, says certain topics that used to be taboo are now finding print—and even making

By Joel Chong

Martin, another Mandarin translator, works in Bangkok at Double A (the ubiquitous blue/turquoise packaged copier paper) as a marketing/IT executive while Tou, our Lao translator, designed the MMF logo.

As important as women's issues are, Tan stresses that gender issues necessarily

On the contrary, the media are able to help society address pressing gender-related issues. After all, says Cai, all gender issues are interrelated; you solve one gender problem, such as discrimination against women, and you contribute to solving others. ■

Translation helps participants cross borders.

"If we have a very soundproof booth, it would not be difficult," mused Mike, our Vietnamese translator. "But it's quite challenging when we work in the room without the booths (such as in the Lanna

The other translators in the group are Mon, a former Imaging Our Mekong fellow, and Ronald, who translates into Burmese, Pui who does Lao translation and Yin Soeum from Cambodia.