

China's Water Governmentality and the Shaping of Hydrosocial Territories in the Lancang-Mekong Region

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Abstract

This paper examines China's water governmentality in advancing the Lancang-Mekong Cooperation (LMC). It attends to how discourses, used as a political instrument, are framed, justified and contested in the reshaping of international hydrosocial territories. China's official and popular discourses present the LMC as promoting multilateral politics, economic benefits and social integration, while they obscure polarizing politics, external interventions and regional conflicts. Using strategies of positive publicity first, top-down communication and mutual empathy creation, these discourses aim to deflect attention away from controversies and geopolitics in the region to construct governable hydrosocial territories. However, in a transnational context where the Chinese state cannot unilaterally control geographical imaginaries, alternative discourses depict China as a "hydro-hegemon" that poses threats to downstream countries. The discursive dichotomy reflects multiple ontologies of water and power struggles in international river governance, bringing regional stability and sustainable development into question.

Keywords: governmentality; hydrosocial territories; discourse; imaginary; Lancang-Mekong Cooperation; international rivers

The relationship between water and power is an important social-natural process through which Chinese politics can be examined.¹ Since Karl Wittfogel's notion of a hydraulic society was first aired,² scholars have explored mechanisms, practices and technologies of power within China's small-scale irrigation

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1 Liu, Zhang and Wang 2022.

2 Wittfogel 1957.



management;³ basin-wide regional water conflicts and coordination;⁴ large-scale hydraulic infrastructure, notably dams and water diversion projects;⁵ and civic engagement and environmental activism.⁶ Studies have documented several overlapping and complementary dimensions of governmentality which direct the conduct of water through the exercise of power in diverse modes. For instance, one study examines how the “tournament system” for local cadre assessment and promotion internalizes incentives for water pollution control.⁷ Promotion of the Chinese ethic of “eating bitterness” (*chi ku* 吃苦) as a social norm during the construction of the South-to-North Water Diversion Project serves to manufacture public acceptance of the project’s socioeconomic and ecological impacts.⁸ The mainstreaming of the economic value of water in public discourses is used to justify neoliberal water sector reforms such as ecological compensation schemes and water markets.⁹

Although Chinese domestic water politics have received some scholarly attention, studies on the dispersed governing practices of Chinese actors relating to international rivers are few.¹⁰ The transition of scale, from national to international, inevitably creates an alternative space with new power dynamics. First, the actors involved in international river governance are more diverse in their preferences and the interests they pursue. Second, the coercive mechanisms of China’s domestic hierarchical system are often inapplicable in an international arena where sovereign countries, international organizations and oversea communities are not subject to Chinese jurisdiction. Third, values, culture, established authorities and locally accepted knowledge vary widely across countries and regions, thus forming inconsistent foundations for the legitimacy of decision making and institutions in a transboundary river basin.

This paper applies Michel Foucault’s notion of governmentality to illuminate China’s “conduct of water conduct” in international river governance.¹¹ In particular, we focus on the spatial dimension of governmentality by examining how discourse, as a key technique of governmentality, is framed and contested in the shaping of hydrosocial territories. Foucault pointed out that governments and their subjects are diverse, complex and even contradictory.¹² The effects of government programmes should not be judged simply in terms of their successes or failures; instead, they can be identified within different practices (for example, resistance, acceptance and abandonment) that subjectify human beings in

3 Wang, Raymond Yu, Chen and Wang 2021; Wang, Raymond Yu, Liu and Dang 2018; Wang, Yahua, and Wu 2018; Yu et al. 2016.

4 Moore 2014a; Wang, Raymond Yu, et al. 2017; Wang, Raymond Yu, Ng and Qi 2020.

5 Crow-Miller and Webber 2017; Moore 2014b; Rogers et al. 2016; Sheng and Webber 2019; Sheng, Webber and Han 2018; Webber, Crow-Miller and Rogers 2017.

6 Mertha 2008; Tilt 2014.

7 Sheng, Webber and Han 2018.

8 Crow-Miller and Webber 2017.

9 Jiang et al. 2019; Wang, Raymond Yu, Ng and Qi 2020.

10 Moore 2018.

11 Foucault 1991.

12 Foucault 2002a.

different ways.¹³ This perspective foregrounds the significance of the “postulates of thought” of government and political rationalities that serve to justify the aims of a government and provide reasons and principles guiding its and others’ conduct.¹⁴ Moreover, governmentality is inextricably spatial, as governmental power and projects are exercised in, through and over spaces and sites.¹⁵ Therefore, spatial sensitivities have considerable potential to advance the notion of governmentality, because the space of a territory encompasses more than physical land; it is an “owned, distributed, mapped, calculated, bordered, and controlled” political category that influences the rationalities and configurations of government.¹⁶ Accordingly, spaces and territories can be conceptualized as both objects and purposes of government.¹⁷ Territories are not only spaces of enclosure where the population, the economy and their relations are imagined and fabricated within specific forms of governmental thought; they are also governable spaces that emerge as analytics of government, necessitating the territorialization of government and presenting “modalities in which a real and material governable world is composed, terraformed, and populated.”¹⁸

Following the Foucauldian articulation of spatial governmentality that aspires to shape and guide the actions of subjects towards particular ends, this paper moves beyond the materiality of hydrological cycles, institutions and infrastructure, and considers water and power from a relational and dialectical perspective. On the one hand, we conceptualize water and watersheds as hydrosocial territories, that is, “spatial configurations of people, institutions, water flows, hydraulic technology and the biophysical environment that revolve around the control of water.”¹⁹ This hydrosocial conceptualization of water rejects the simplistic picture of water as merely H₂O, which can be managed through “scientific knowledge” and “best practices.” Rather, it emphasizes the interconnections and interdependence between water and society in the process of water distribution, utilization and transformation,²⁰ as well as their socioeconomic consequences, through the processes of accumulation and dispossession, empowerment and disempowerment, and mainstreaming and marginalization.²¹ In this sense, international river governance is understood through a set of hydrosocial relations, which coexist across physical, institutional and representational dimensions of space that embody the exercise of power and enable material changes. On the other hand, we examine the deployment of power through discourse that problematizes challenges and justifies purposes, logics and forms of governance.²²

13 Foucault 2002b.

14 Dean 2010; Foucault 1991.

15 Ferguson and Gupta 2002; Huxley 2008; Rutherford 2007.

16 Elden 2007, 578.

17 Swyngedouw and Boelens 2018.

18 Rose 1999, 32.

19 Boelens et al. 2016, 1.

20 Linton and Budds 2014.

21 Swyngedouw 2004; Wesselink, Kooy and Warner 2017.

22 Dean 2010.

Discourse refers to capabilities or sociocultural resources deployed in the construction of meaning about the world or particular events.²³ Spatially, it relates to the power entailed in the production of geographical imaginaries that signify how the fragmented knowledge produced by diverse actors contributes to making a place meaningful.²⁴ On a local scale, a geographical imaginary is a representation of spatial consciousness, which enables individuals to understand the relations between themselves and their neighbourhoods and territories or to judge whether the activities happening in particular places concern them.²⁵ Therefore, geographical imaginaries and their production are central to the shaping of hydrosocial territories.²⁶

Bringing together the scholarship on governmentality and hydrosocial territories, our analysis examines the statecraft China deploys in shaping geographical imaginaries within transboundary river basins. This “conduct of water conduct” demonstrates hitherto underexamined features of Chinese hydropolitics in international spaces, which concern nuanced power exercises for the construction, legitimization and contestation of transboundary water governance. Through a case study of the China-initiated Lancang-Mekong Cooperation (*Lan-Mei hezuo* 澜湄合作, LMC hereafter), we examine the discursive inclusions and exclusions that have shaped fluid hydrosocial territories, outline the hydrosocial strategies used for the Chinese production of geographical imaginaries, and illustrate how Chinese discursive framings are contested by competing rationalities and problematization of international river governance. The analysis is based on a composite of political, social and cultural statements, in both Chinese and English, from different state and non-state actors on various platforms, including government documents and reports, newspapers, television and social media. Notably, internet-based media provide a major source of data for examining geopolitical discourses associated with the LMC.

In the following section, we present a review of the recent literature on Chinese hydropolitics and hydrosocial territories. Next, we describe the background and the methodology applied in the study. The analysis of China’s water governmentality in the Lancang-Mekong is then unpacked from three aspects: a characterization of Chinese framings of the LMC, a summary of China’s strategies for the production of geographical imaginaries, and an illustration of competing discourses that contest China’s shaping of hydrosocial territories in the Lancang-Mekong region. Although the Chinese discourses are mostly dominated by the state, we also carefully examine the commonalities and differences between official and popular discourses, highlighting the implications of domestic state–society relations in international river governance. Finally, we offer conclusions, suggesting that a nuanced understanding of Chinese water governmentality may

23 O’tuathail and Agnew 1992.

24 Agnew 2003.

25 Harvey 2005.

26 Hommes and Boelens 2017.

elucidate the dynamics of international hydropolitics and the implementation of the LMC in a complex geopolitical context.

Chinese Hydropolitics and the Hydrosocial Approach

Although water governance studies across the world have paid particular attention to relationships among power, technology and society, the vast majority of those in the Chinese context shy away from an in-depth consideration of politics and instead mainly focus on technicalities of scientific, engineering, economic and security risk concerns.²⁷ Of the few studies that do examine Chinese hydropolitics, some emphasize the Chinese state's role, considering the central institutional structure and central–local interactions at different scales, exploring issues of state legitimacy and authoritarian fragmentation.²⁸ Others focus more on local and non-state actors who have managed to insert their concerns into social and political negotiations that influence water use.²⁹ In these studies, water is conceived as a context or subject of governance rather than an integral aspect of political power. The lack of relational and dialectical analysis of water may limit our understanding of dispersed water governing practices involving multiple discourses, techniques, practices and actors.

The hydrosocial conceptualization of the relationships between water, power and society provides an analytical lens for uncovering the nuanced power dynamics encapsulated in dispersed water governing practices. The concept of a hydrosocial territory builds on hydrosocial dialectics, which were first elaborated in Wittfogel's analysis of large-scale irrigation systems and centralized states in which transformations of the hydraulic environment prompted societal changes that, in turn, brought about further changes in that natural environment.³⁰ This perpetual “challenge-response-challenge” process reveals that “neither nature nor humanity ever achieves absolute sovereign authority, but both continue to make and remake each other.”³¹ Erik Swyngedouw advanced hydrosocial dialectics by emphasizing the integral relations between water and social power, arguing for a conceptualization of hybrids constituted by both nature and humans rather than being pre-formed entities that fall within either domain.³² Accordingly, hydrosocial hybridity redefines the ontologies of water by highlighting the integral association and inseparability of water and society.³³ Consistent with Donna Haraway's “cyborgs” and Bruno Latour's “quasi-objects,”³⁴ Swyngedouw's conceptualization of hydrosocial hybrids posits a dialectic relationship between water and society as both products and agents of

27 Rogers and Crow-Miller 2017.

28 Magee and McDonald 2006; Moore 2014a; 2014b; 2019; Nickum 2010; Pohlner 2016.

29 Mertha 2008; Tilt 2014.

30 Wittfogel 1957.

31 Worster 1985, 22.

32 Swyngedouw 1996; 1997; 1999; 2004.

33 Götz and Middleton 2020.

34 Haraway 1991; Latour 1993.

hydrosocial change, rendering nature as an undivided component of the process of socio-natural production.

Hydrosocial hybridity enables an in-depth exploration of the production and reproduction of an assemblage of hydrosocial networks shaped around water and its use. Embracing the mutual constitution of, and interdependence between, nature and society, many scholars critique the “modern” dualistic ontology that separates water from society and thus reveal injustices associated with the commodification of water³⁵ as well as the fallacy of simple integrative policy models such as integrated water resource management (IWRM) and the water–energy nexus.³⁶ The concept of territory has also evolved from traditional physical and legal containers towards dialectical and symbolic interpretations,³⁷ whereby territories are subject to constant reproduction and contestation.³⁸ Thus, hydrosocial territories are not only aligned with a relational and dialectic approach but also illuminate the diversity, malleability and durability of nested actors, meanings and imaginaries within continuous struggles over and reconfigurations of hydrosocial relations.

Although a substantial body of research has used the hydrosocial framework to understand the politics of water, its applications in China have been very limited. Only a few studies explicitly apply a hydrosocial framework to replace the biophysical flow of water with internally inseparable hydrosocial relations. The South-to-North Water Diversion Project (SNWDP) is one case that has been examined through a hydrosocial lens. Michael Webber et al. argue that although the project is engineering-heavy, it is a hybrid of technology and politics that both represents existing socio-environmental relations and enables changes in those relations.³⁹ By bringing in the notion of governmentality, scholars have also focused on dispersed practices of governing that aim to legitimize the SNWDP. Those dispersed “arts of government” can be identified in the construction of discourses that naturalize water scarcity and underline economic benefits, masking human-exacerbated water stress and the social-ecological impacts of the SNWDP.⁴⁰ Discourses can also rescale the SNWDP – both up to the central government and down to a fragmented, geographically disembodied, subnational scale. These discourses serve to selectively include and exclude certain regions and groups of people to justify the uneven distribution of the costs and benefits associated with the project.⁴¹

In addition to large hydraulic infrastructure projects such as the SNWDP, the hydrosocial approach has also been applied to rural water governance in north-west China. It is shown that technology and policy shifts (for example, the

35 Bakker 2005; 2012; Loftus 2009.

36 Molle 2008; Williams, Bouzarovski and Swyngedouw 2019.

37 Usher 2019.

38 Hommes and Boelens 2017; Mills-Novoa et al. 2020.

39 Webber, Crow-Miller and Rogers 2017.

40 Crow-Miller 2015.

41 Rogers et al. 2016.

introduction of plastic mulches and crop selection), which do not fall within the traditional scope of water governance, have rescaled hydrosocial relations that comprise broad and contingent processes of agricultural water use.⁴² These rescaled hydrosocial relations thus bring many new actors, such as poverty alleviation authorities, into the analysis of agricultural water governance. Water supply networks are another case examined under hydrosocial frameworks. It is demonstrated that the risk of and responsibility for water shortages can be reconfigured by a state-backed, centralized piped water system that aimed to replace rainwater harvesting in semi-arid northwest China. The piped water system centralized state power and the risk of water shortages, and simultaneously forged new links between rural households and rural water markets that diffused power away from the state.⁴³ This ambivalence of power in water supply networks was also observed in urban areas. The ideological tensions in China's transitional period enabled the uneven distribution of premium water systems and universal municipal tap water supply systems, which reveal complex and unexpected ways that ideologies influence "new infrastructural spaces and processes of splintering urbanism."⁴⁴

In spite of the limited appearance of hydrosocial approaches, governmentality and technopolitics in the literature, they have not been applied to analyse China's hydropolitics in an international context. Most studies of China's transboundary hydropolitics fall within the disciplinary boundary of international relations and use a state-centric and realist approach to illustrate the hegemonic, cooperative and benefit-sharing strategies of the Chinese nation-state,⁴⁵ while overlooking nuances relating to the complex networks of political, social, cultural, economic and ecological relations that manifest not only in material hydrological infrastructure and water utilization but also in everyday life, imaginaries and subjectivities. In this sense, many of the complexities and particularities of Chinese hydropolitics in an international and/or transboundary context remain to be explored.

Case and Methods

We merged the frameworks of governmentality and hydrosocial territories within a case study of the Lancang-Mekong, one of the longest international rivers in Asia crossing China, Myanmar, Laos, Thailand, Cambodia and Vietnam. Our aim is to uncover Chinese techniques of water governance nested within discursive framings of international rivers and to explore the complex construction of a hydrosocial territorial imaginary and its contestation within changing international hydropolitics.

42 Clarke-Sather 2012.

43 Clarke-Sather 2017.

44 Boland 2007, 21.

45 Biba 2014; 2018; Ho 2014; Zhang and Li 2020.

In November 2014, at the 17th ASEAN–China leaders’ meeting, Chinese premier Li Keqiang 李克强 proposed establishing a dialogue and mechanism for cooperation relating to the Lancang-Mekong River. Since then, state leaders, foreign affairs ministers and senior officials from all of the riparian countries have regularly held meetings and hosted events to discuss the planning and promotion of the LMC (Table 1). The Sanya Declaration of March 2016 signified the official launch of the LMC.⁴⁶

We conducted a discursive analysis of the LMC based on texts and videos collected from three major sources. First, we gathered 12 official documents, including remarks, declarations, joint press briefs and working plans related to the LMC, from the websites of Chinese agencies (for example, the State Council, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the Lancang-Mekong Environmental Cooperation Centre) and agencies of other riparian countries (for example, the Mekong River Commission and Cambodian Office of the Council of Ministers). Second, we collated 311 Chinese and 436 English articles from mainstream official media of China (for example, *China Daily*, *Xinhua News* and *People’s Daily*).⁴⁷ Third, we compiled a social media database. We searched for posts, articles and videos relating to the LMC on Weibo, a major Chinese social media platform, and other relevant websites between 1 March 2016 and 1 October 2019, using search terms including English phrases such as “Lancang-Mekong Cooperation” and “Lancang-Mekong Cooperation meeting” and Chinese phrases such as *lanmei hezuo* 澜湄合作, *lanmei hezuo huiyi* 澜湄合作会议 and *lancangjiang-meigonghe hezuo* 澜沧江-湄公河合作. The raw data from social media comprised 9,486 Chinese posts and 2,880 Chinese comments extracted from Weibo, and 225 articles (81 in Chinese and 144 in English). After using Web Scraper and Python to clean the data and remove irrelevant content, we compiled a database of 6,256 Chinese posts and 221 articles (81 in Chinese and 140 in English), which were published by both the individual accounts and official accounts of mass media and professional journalists or writers.

We used substantive coding derived from classic grounded theory to process the social and traditional media data. Substantive coding includes both open and selective coding procedures.⁴⁸ During the open coding phase, we scrutinized and examined 100 discursive texts, searching for themes and recurring concepts and identifying major topics. During the selective coding phase, we coded the remaining data according to the previously established categories and removed repetitive text from the database. We then categorized and configured the codes and selected 132 pieces of discourse for further analysis. We also used semantic analysis, examining textual meaning, characteristics and structures to explore the inherent patterns of the discourses. When processing the data, we

46 “Main mechanism.” Lancang-Mekong Cooperation China Secretariat, 2016, http://www.lmcchina.org/eng/zyjz_3/jwgpaf/. Accessed 1 March 2020.

47 We used the following sources: LexisNexis, WiseSearch and CNKI database.

48 Holton 2007.

Table 1. Major Events Relating to the Lancang–Mekong Cooperation (LMC)

Date	Location	Event
13 November 2014	Nay Pyi Taw, Myanmar	Chinese premier Li Keqiang proposes a Lancang-Mekong dialogue and cooperation mechanism at the 17th ASEAN–China Summit
12 December 2015	Jinghong, China	First LMC foreign ministers’ meeting
23 March 2016	Sanya, China	Sanya Declaration and Joint Statement on Production Capacity Cooperation among Lancang–Mekong Countries are released following the first LMC leaders’ meeting, focusing thematically on “shared water, shared future” and marking LMC’s official launch
23 December 2016	Siem Riep, Cambodia	Second LMC foreign ministers’ meeting
12 December 2017	Dali, China	Third LMC foreign ministers’ meeting
10 January 2018	Phnom Penh, Cambodia	Phnom Penh Declaration and Five-Year Plan of Action of the LMC (2018–2022) are released following the second LMC leaders’ meeting, organized on the theme of “Our river of peace and sustainable development”
March 2018	Six countries	First Lancang-Mekong event week
17 December 2018	Luang Prabang, Laos	Fourth LMC foreign ministers’ meeting
20 February 2020	Vientiane, Laos	Fifth LMC foreign ministers’ meeting
24 August 2020	Online	Third LMC leaders’ meeting is followed by the Phnom Penh Declaration and the co-chairs’ Statement on Cooperation of Synergizing the Mekong-Lancang Cooperation and the New International Land–Sea Trade Corridor

Source:
Compiled by authors.

paid particular attention to “frames” and “constructs” applied by state and non-state actors to descriptions and evaluations of different aspects of the LMC, which enabled us to capture both the overall discursive framings of the LMC and their nuances among different actors.

China’s Water Governmentality and the Shaping of Hydrosocial Territories

Discourses of inclusion: multilateralism, economic benefits and social integration

Our analysis of China’s water governmentality begins with the framings of hydro-social relations associated with the LMC by including and excluding certain stakeholders and issues. We approach this task through a discursive analysis of the textual materials, within which key discourses were identified through the methods outlined in the previous section. These discourses could serve as a technique of governmentality meant to shape governable hydrosocial territories from the Chinese perspective. Specifically, the discourses of inclusion attribute political multilateralism, economic benefits and social integration to the governance structure and objectives of the LMC to build an imaginary of socioeconomic prosperity for the river basin.

First, the LMC is framed as a mechanism that encompasses all riparian countries; it does not select partner countries or reject existing regional collaboration frameworks. The words “six,” “six countries” and “Lancang Mekong countries” are repeatedly emphasized in the LMC documents, fostering an image of a united community connected by water and shaping a shared identity for this regional community. Meanwhile, the LMC discourse is not disconnected from existing institutions and mechanisms, particularly ASEAN. The Sanya Declaration emphasizes that the LMC should be aligned with the “priority areas of ASEAN community building and ASEAN–China cooperation” and should complement and develop “in synergy with existing sub-regional cooperation mechanisms.” As stated by Li Keqiang in an article published in the *Khmer Times*, the LMC is “conducive to narrowing the development gap within ASEAN and advancing ASEAN integration.” These narratives suggest that China intends to develop an inclusive LMC by promoting multilateralism and integration with other regional cooperation frameworks, rather than replacing any of them.

Second, the LMC, although named after a river, is given a key objective of developing an economically win-win situation in the Lancang-Mekong region. The discourse of benefits not only acknowledges the close economic ties among the riparian countries but also points to specific regional economic development directions such as “poverty reduction,” “agriculture,” “cross-border economic cooperation” and “economic and social development.” The economic discourse is buttressed by affirmations of the comparative advantages of the six riparian countries, legitimizing the potential of win-win economic mechanisms and the need for solid regional economic cooperation. Although water resources

featured in the early stage of the LMC's initiation (for instance, in the titles of two LMC leaders' meetings, "Shared River, Shared Future" and "Our River of Peace and Sustainable Development"), the economic discourse extends beyond the transboundary river. In other words, water is the natural starting point of the LMC, but Chinese discursive framings entail a broader and more comprehensive economic regionalization plan, with water resources being only one of the key components.

Third, the LMC is framed as a socially integrative mechanism that is rooted in the geographical, historical and cultural connections between the six riparian countries. A cultural symbolic approach is used to highlight the "time-honoured" background that facilitates "mutual trust" and "people-to-people exchanges." Beyond the traditional state-controlled media, this discourse of social integration is also reflected in Weibo, where friendship and reciprocal international relations dominate narratives on the LMC. Slightly different from official discourses that focus on overarching framings, popular discourses normally accentuate cases of social and cultural exchanges. In this sense, popular discourses support the official ones by exemplifying specific projects under the aegis of the LMC. The official and social media texts are thus intended to foster the image of a common identity uniting residents of all the riparian countries, framing the relationship between China and downstream countries as one of "neighbours, friends, and partners."

Discourses of exclusion: polarizing politics, external interventions and historical conflicts

In addition to the discourses of inclusion, which emphasize political, economic and social ties, discourses of exclusion, from an alternative perspective, draw attention to the boundaries of hydrosocial territories. These discourses serve to depoliticize the hydrosocial territories by omitting polarizing politics, external interventions and regional historical conflicts from the LMC.

First, China's extensive political and economic power relative to other riparian countries is discounted in this discursive framing. Given the Chinese government's commitment to "adhere to the notion of equal cooperation," the Chinese discourse attempts to depolarize projects and activities under the auspices of the LMC.⁴⁹ This depolarization is evident in official and social media narratives that omit political trade-offs and foreground a series of mutual cultural and technical exchange activities. Despite its "leading" role in the LMC, the Chinese discourse has not framed China as a hegemon; rather, it emphasizes that the LMC "strengthens cooperation to safeguard sub-regional peace and stability," focusing on the strengths of economic reciprocity, geographical proximity

49 "Joint statement on production capacity cooperation among Lancang-Mekong countries." Lancang-Mekong Cooperation China Secretariat, 2016, http://www.lmcchina.org/eng/2016-03/23/content_41449865.html. Accessed 1 February 2020.

and social rapprochement.⁵⁰ Thus, the exclusion of hegemonic power and politics from the Chinese discourse signals an intention to build an inclusive LMC framework under which all riparian countries can engage in discussions and negotiations based on reciprocity and equity.

Second, the Chinese discourse unequivocally frames the LMC as a regional mechanism in which non-riparian countries should not intervene, thereby reiterating the boundaries of the hydrosocial territory. This discursive framing excludes external political powers such as the United States, Japan and Singapore, which, according to some Weibo users, should not be “putting their fingers in others’ pie.” This sentiment is well illustrated in online discussions under the Weibo account of *Lianhe zaobao* 联合早报, Singapore’s widest-circulating newspaper in the Chinese language. A post in January 2018 stated that China’s involvement in the LMC would hamper the Mekong countries’ existing diplomatic relations. This post was heavily criticized by the vast majority of Weibo users, who claimed that the Singaporean newspaper had no right to judge the LMC because China is a riparian country and Singapore is not. An article with a similar message, “The LMC is none of the business of American and Japanese media,” was published in the *Global Times*, an English-language Chinese newspaper, in March 2016.⁵¹ This article pointed out that the Western media’s hype around China’s “dominant role” in the LMC “habitually characterize[s] one or two powerhouses as the dominant party when they interpret multilateral cooperative mechanisms.” It not only asserted that China sought peace and cooperation and would perform modestly in the LMC but also cast the United States and Japan as outsiders and antagonists who should not make irresponsible remarks and groundless accusations. This discursive framing was supported by many Weibo users, who said that China should “set aside others’ opinions,” as the United States and Japan were prejudiced, jealous and trying to stir up trouble for China. Moreover, these social media texts tended to be more straightforward and aggressive than the official discourses. Words such as “instigate” (*tiaobo* 挑拨) and “attack” (*gongji* 攻击) were often used to depict how the United States and Japan were intervening in the friendly relations between China and Mekong countries. To some extent, popular discourses unveil unspoken official texts of controversies, although their stances on excluding external actors are identical.

Third, the Chinese discourse on the LMC obscures the unresolved tensions among the riparian countries. The exclusion of regional historical conflicts reveals China’s intention to selectively define the hydrosocial territories,

50 “Sanya Declaration of the first Lancang-Mekong Cooperation (LMC) leaders’ meeting – for a community of shared future of peace and prosperity among Lancang-Mekong countries.” Lancang-Mekong Cooperation China Secretariat, 2016, http://www.lmcchina.org/eng/2016-03/23/content_41449864.html. Accessed 1 February 2020.

51 “Lan Mei hezuo: hexu Mei Ri yulun shuo san dao si” (Lancang-Mekong Cooperation: there is no need for US and Japanese media to judge). *Global Times*, 24 March 2016, <https://opinion.huanqiu.com/article/9CaKrnJUKNN>. Accessed 10 March 2020.

facilitating the LMC's operations based on commonalities rather than differences among stakeholders. An example is the understatement of hydropower development in the official documents. While the priorities articulated for the LMC include water resources, more attention is paid to adaptations to climate change, hydrological information-sharing and agricultural hydraulic infrastructure than to historically contentious issues, such as dam construction, that are associated with transboundary water conflicts. In addition, several parallel platforms for developing cooperation established under the LMC divert attention away from water resources. The broad scope of socioeconomic issues included in the Chinese discourse may thus deflect public attention away from transboundary water conflicts. This approach also coincides with China's diplomatic principle of "pursuing joint development while shelving disputes" (*gezhi zhengyi, gongtong kaifa* 搁置争议, 共同开发). Likewise, historical conflicts and tensions between the six countries are mostly concealed. For instance, Vietnam's historical invasions of Cambodia and Laos and their continuing conflicts over territory and borders (stemming from historical animosities and nationalism) are absent from the Chinese official discourse on the LMC. In recent years, the conflict between China and Vietnam over sovereignty in the South China Sea has escalated, with clashes between the coast guards of both countries and the deaths of four Chinese citizens during an anti-China riot in Vietnam in 2014.⁵² Such sensitive events are disregarded within Chinese discursive framings of the LMC, which maintain a positive attitude to cooperation.

China's hydrosocial strategies for the production of imaginaries in a transnational context

Following the characterization of Chinese discursive framings of the LMC, our analysis of China's water governmentality continues with a summary of hydrosocial strategies for producing imaginaries of the LMC. We approach this task through a semantic analysis of Chinese official and popular narratives in both Chinese and English languages. Although presumably the official and popular narratives are developed by different actors and should target different audiences, we find that they only demonstrate minor divergence in vocabulary choices and evidence presentation. In fact, official and popular narratives are mostly similar in terms of attitude and rhetoric, regardless of language or platform.

The commonalities can be illustrated by three strategic choices in how Chinese actors shape the imaginaries of the LMC. First, they have produced an overwhelmingly positive image of the LMC. This is reflected in the extensive use of positive adjectives, verbs and expressions in statements on and descriptions of the LMC. For instance, verbs such as "promote," "strengthen," "enhance," "support" and "deepen" appear much more frequently than they usually do. The contribution of the Chinese government to the LMC has also been pinned on

52 Ebbighausen 2019.

livelihood improvement-related nouns, including “healthcare,” “environmental protection,” “regional security,” “poverty reduction,” “employment” and “business.” This glowing vocabulary is a demonstration of the “positive publicity first” principle, which aims to create a favourable image of the Chinese authorities and to legitimize the implementation of the LMC.

Second, a large proportion of the texts on the LMC refer to official visits, international conferences and forums, and statements and speeches delivered by senior governmental officials. In particular, the media coverage of the LMC often highlights the opinions and roles of Chinese leaders. This focus on top-down communication indicates a strategic approach in which the mainstream ideology and authorized points of view are unilaterally dominated by the Chinese state.

Third, metaphor and idioms are frequently used to build imaginaries of cultural similarity and convergence between riparian countries. For instance, terms such as “bridge,” “road,” “engine,” “friend” and “family” frequently appear, linking the LMC to connection, bright prospects, momentum, friendship and cultural inclusiveness, to establish an image of willingness, responsibility and accomplishments in the LMC. Likewise, common proverbs and idioms from China and downstream countries are deployed to convey positive messages such as solidarity, bravery and creativity. These expressions are used to cross cultural barriers and create mutual empathy, to foster support and acknowledgment from the downstream actors for the LMC.

In general, these hydrosocial strategies deploy Chinese power over the LMC in a centralized and selective way. We see this in the consistent attitude and rhetoric used across different languages, users and platforms, in the positive narrative that emphasizes only the benefits of the LMC, and also by dispersed power exercises meant to create a shared identity among riparian stakeholders.

Discursive Contestations over LMC Imaginaries

In spite of the Chinese hydrosocial strategies meant to craft equal, beneficial and integrative imaginaries of the LMC by specific discursive framings of inclusion and exclusion, one cannot ignore the reality that water is intrinsically political and inescapably contested.⁵³ The Lancang-Mekong region has traditionally been rife with geopolitical contestations of discourses and imaginaries centring on transboundary waters, which not only entail diverse interests, natural and cultural traditions, and public opinions⁵⁴ but are also being continually shaped and negotiated by multiple powers at various geographical scales.⁵⁵ Contentious issues, such as the distribution and allocation of resources, benefit-sharing between countries and actors,⁵⁶ ecological migration and social resistance to

53 Agnew 2011; Bakker 2012; Swyngedouw 2004.

54 Hensengerth 2015; Hirsch 2011; Yong and Grundy-Warr 2012.

55 Dore and Lebel 2010.

56 Lee, Seungho 2015.

development projects (particularly hydropower dams) at the sub-national level, have received much attention.⁵⁷ Against this backdrop, questions and concerns about political, social and environmental issues relating to capacities, coordination, empowerment and marginalization under the LMC have emerged within discursive and academic debates.

The first competing discourse centres around the “debt trap” and neo-colonialism which strengthen China’s regional political and economic power rather than facilitate political equity and economic prosperity.⁵⁸ In the “debt trap” narrative, the investments and preferential loans channelled through the LMC are “predatory and opaque business practices of Beijing’s state-owned actors,” which cause unequal economic relations and victimize downstream Mekong countries.⁵⁹ For instance, benefit-sharing and local communities’ welfare in China’s investment and construction projects are questioned.⁶⁰ This competing discourse emphasizes the social and environmental consequences of dam construction, such as habitat loss, social inequalities and ecological migration,⁶¹ and minimizes its livelihood benefits, such as energy generation, irrigation and flood control.⁶² The neo-colonialism narrative highlights China’s political hegemony and asserts that China is promoting the LMC to marginalize previous cooperation systems in the Mekong.⁶³ This is supported by concern regarding China’s control over water resources and their allocation through dams on the Lancang-Mekong River. Its control of water could give China some influence over downstream countries’ water and food security,⁶⁴ constraining their diplomatic stances and compelling them to comply with China’s political agenda.⁶⁵ Thus, China has been depicted as an “upstream dragon”⁶⁶ and a “water power”⁶⁷ that holds great economic and political strength. The neo-colonialism narrative ignores the fact that the establishment of multilateral collaborative mechanisms in the LMC may restrict China’s unilateral dam construction and water flow control and obstruct its power to “punish” or “threaten” other riparians.⁶⁸ In other words, the newly established LMC organizations (for instance, the Lancang-Mekong Water Resources Cooperation Center) might create new obligations for China to consult and negotiate with other riparian countries. Their potential impacts, although to be examined, have not been effectively included in the neo-colonialism narrative yet. Through the

57 Dugan et al. 2010; Galipeau, Ingman and Tilt 2013.

58 Raymond and Dawkins 2019.

59 Piesse 2020.

60 Biba 2018.

61 “Lancang-Mekong Cooperation: blessing or curse?” *The ASEAN Post*, 3 April 2019, <https://theaseanpost.com/article/lancang-mekong-cooperation-blessing-or-curse>. Accessed 1 March 2020.

62 Ho 2014; Middleton and Allouche 2016.

63 “China’s water hegemony in Asia.” *Mint*, 27 Apr 2016, <https://www.livemint.com/Opinion/IqM2LdMPsMd0ILNrDUVjRK/Chinas-water-hegemony-in-Asia.html>. Accessed 28 June 2021.

64 Fernandez 2017.

65 Po and Primiano 2021.

66 Magee 2011.

67 Lee, Yuen-ching 2013.

68 Wu 2018.

narratives of “debt trap” and neo-colonialism, the competing discourse intends to establish hydrosocial territories that exclude the economic and political benefits promised by Chinese discourses.

The second competing discourse focuses on the scale of the LMC. On the one hand, it scales up the governance of the Lancang-Mekong to a spatially broader concept such as Asia or the Asia-Pacific to legitimize non-riparian engagement in the Lancang-Mekong region. For instance, the “pivot to Asia” strategy promotes the US–Mekong partnership and locates it in the whole Asia-Pacific region, enabling the US to establish more linkages with the Mekong and participate in power contestations in wider hydrosocial territories. Thus, in the competing discourse, the power struggle around water allocation and cooperation in the Lancang-Mekong is not limited to riparian countries. Many countries outside the region are actively engaged in regional initiatives, ranging from social development to environmental protection, and inevitably seek to promote their own interests. On the other hand, the competing discourse scales down the governance of the Lancang-Mekong to bilateral conflicts between China and downstream riparian countries to fragment the regional collaborative mechanism in the Chinese discursive framings. For instance, dissension over the Lancang-Mekong River is often juxtaposed with the South China Sea dispute, a fiercer contention between China and Vietnam.⁶⁹ By highlighting inter-state conflicts, the competing discourse reveals historical and current tensions in the Lancang-Mekong, politicizing hydrosocial territories of contradictions and tensions instead of harmony and cooperation.

In general, the Chinese discursive framings are subject to contestations that create alternative imaginaries of the LMC. The competing discourses not only deploy the narratives of “debt trap” and neo-colonialism but also rescale the LMC to legitimize external intervention from non-riparian countries and expose conflicts masked in the Chinese discourses. Controversies over transboundary water flows, economic disparities and asymmetry in political power essentially complicate the dynamics of cooperation mechanisms.⁷⁰ The Lancang-Mekong region is thus a contested developmental arena where multiple constructions of hydrosocial territories coexist and where countries are struggling to achieve a balance of power between China and countries outside the region.⁷¹

Conclusions and Discussion

Since its launch, the LMC has attracted considerable attention, particularly with regards to its economic impacts. However, few scholars have examined the water governance rationalities constituting Chinese water governmentality that works to advance the LMC from a hydrosocial perspective. An understanding of

69 Johnson and Panu 2020.

70 Ng, Wang and Zhao 2013.

71 Hirsch 2016.

Chinese water governmentality in the context of international rivers is essential because water-related tensions and conflicts are imbricated in China's diplomatic relations with neighbouring countries.⁷² China's role in the governance of international rivers is also subject to interpretation based on contrasting geopolitical theories.⁷³ Thus, an exploration of Chinese water governmentality could shed light on the dynamics of Chinese politics as well as the hydropolitical relationships between China and other riparian countries which affect regional water security and the long-term sustainability of water resources in Asia.

Bringing together the scholarship on water governmentality and hydrosocial territories, we examine how discourses on the LMC, as a powerful political instrument, are framed, justified and contested. Our examination of various textual materials produced by Chinese actors reveals two sets of discourses that have been constitutive of the LMC's hydrosocial territories. The first is discourses of inclusion, which encompass multilateralism, economic benefits and social integration. These discourses shy away from power asymmetries and frame the LMC in terms of economic and social ties that bring about win-win outcomes relating to poverty alleviation, modernization and cultural exchanges. The second is discourses of exclusion, which omit polarizing politics, external interventions and regional historical conflicts. These discourses seek to outline the scope of the LMC based on the watershed's natural boundaries. They decry external interventions by non-riparian countries and obscure historical regional disputes that could reignite controversies in order to delineate governable hydrosocial territories under the LMC. One should note that the hydrosocial territorial inclusion and exclusion are constructed by both official and popular discourses. With the former dominating overall discursive framings and the latter serving as a supplement and extension, Chinese official and popular discourses, in general, share significant commonalities in terms of their narratives, attitude and rhetoric.

To facilitate such a specific construction of hydrosocial territories, Chinese officials, media and individuals have used strategies of "positive publicity first," top-down communication and cross-cultural empathy creation. These hydrosocial strategies resemble those used in China's domestic context. The resemblance is visible not only in a unified state-centric approach to framing water and water-related affairs in an apolitical way that highlights water's socio-economic benefits but also in the significant overlap between textual materials in different languages and on different media platforms.

However, in contrast to the domestic context of China's water governmentality in which the state can unilaterally depoliticize and legitimize water-related affairs because of its predominant role in the production of discourses,⁷⁴ the hydrosocial territories of the LMC are highly contested and precarious. Narratives of "debt trap" and neo-colonialism and strategies of scalar reconfiguration propose

72 He 2015.

73 Biba 2014; Hirsch 2016; Ho 2014.

74 Crow-Miller 2015; Wang, Raymond Yu, and Dai 2021.

different imaginaries which challenge the Chinese construction. These alternative narratives not only reveal the controversies, disadvantages and conflicts that are masked in the Chinese discursive framings but also cast China as a “hydro-hegemon” that poses threats to downstream nations, highlighting the complex nature of and power struggles in the Lancang-Mekong region.

The contribution of this paper is twofold. First, it comprehensively presents Chinese discourses on the LMC and situates their deployment as an instrument of governmentality in the international context, where sovereignty-based governmentality relating to domestic laws, regulations and police power is not applicable. Our study of several parallel discourses on international rivers demonstrates how hydrosocial territories are constituted and shaped by Chinese state and non-state actors to render these spaces governable. It encapsulates new features of Chinese water diplomacy and advances understanding of Chinese water governmentality. Second, we present geopolitical contestations of the LMC in terms of its boundaries, scope and impacts. We delineate contested hydrosocial territories, entailing the coexistence of diverse imaginaries of water, infrastructure and institutions. Importantly, despite its overwhelming political, economic and hydrological influence in the region, the Chinese state does not wield exclusive power over hydrosocial territoriality. Moreover, power is not static and fixed within discourses or technologies. Hydrosocial territories are thus associated with diverse ontologies of international rivers and are constantly being reshaped through the simultaneous production of power and resistance.

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Conflicts of interest

None.

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摘要: 本文考察了中国为推进澜沧江-湄公河合作（澜湄合作）的水治理术，尤其关注在国际水社会领域的塑造中，话语如何作为一种政治工具被勾勒、合法化和争夺。中国的官方和流行话语将澜湄合作呈现为推动多边政治、经济普惠和社会融合的机制，同时模糊处理了极端政治、外部干预和地区冲突等问题。通过正面宣传、自上而下的交流和情感联系等策略，这些话语试图将注意力从区域内的争议和地缘政治议题上转移开来，以达到构建可治理的水社会领域的效果。然而，不同于国内情境下的水社会领域塑造，在中国无法单方面控制地理想象的跨国情景中，竞争性的话语将中国表述为对下游国家有威胁的“水霸主”。这种话语上的分歧体现了国际河流治理中水和权力斗争的多元本体论，也给区域稳定和可持续发展打上了问号。

关键词: 治理术; 水-社会领域; 话语; 想象; 澜湄合作; 国际河流

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