

## *Contests over Water and the Yuam River Water Diversion Project: Participation, Exclusion and Resistance*

*Zali Fung*

Contested large dams and water diversions have been proposed for decades in the Salween River Basin and in Northwest Thailand. Yet the Salween River remains Southeast Asia's longest free flowing river. My research explores the dynamics of development in the Salween River Basin, and the ways communities respond to and resist development, through a focus on the Yuam River Water Diversion Project. The Thai State led project is being proposed in Northwest Thailand near the Thai-Myanmar border, and in the transboundary Salween River Basin. The project will divert water from the Yuam Dam along a 61-kilometer tunnel to the Chao Phraya River Basin in Central Thailand. This is occurring in a dynamic authoritarian environment, where contestation and resistance is ongoing. In this context, my overarching research question explores how different actors participate in and shape development in the Salween River Basin, in the context of power imbalances, authoritarian rule and incomplete information.

My research has two research questions or themes. First, I seek to understand why and how such a contested project is being pushed forward. This includes examining the key narratives and justifications being used to develop the project, for instance, the framing of the Yuam River and other Salween tributaries as 'underutilised' and running 'wasted' into Myanmar (see Bakker 1999). As the project is being proposed in a transboundary river basin, I will also examine the project's geopolitical implications. Claims have been made by politicians and in the media that China may be involved in the financing and construction of the project. If this is confirmed, there are implications for China's investment in Thailand and the region, including via the Belt and Road Initiative, and for mega-development in the Salween River Basin.

Second, I examine responses and resistance to the project by communities and civil society. Research on resistance in human geography largely examines overt and immediate forms, and generally in liberal contexts. Yet non-overt, not centrally organised, quieter, and slower forms of resistance are often overlooked (Hughes 2020), particularly in authoritarian contexts (Malseed 2008). Considering this, I examine diverse strategies of resistance to the project, which include overt forms such as protest; less overt and 'slower' forms of mobilisation, including tree ordination ceremonies, and organising over long periods of time, as well as contests over knowledge. In doing so, I recognise that communities do not necessarily resist development and 'the state,' but seek meaningful participation in development processes and engagement with project proponents (Hengsuwan 2019; McDuie-Ra 2011).

During my time at the RCC, I will be transcribing and analysing data from my fieldwork, which was conducted online from July-December 2021, and in person from late-December 2021 until April 2022. I also hope to submit and complete revisions of a journal article on resistance during this time.