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From Zomia to Holon:
Rivers and Transregional Flows in Mainland Southeastern Asia, 1840-1950

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[*Abstract*]

How might historians secure for the river a larger berth in the recent macro-historical turn? This question cannot find a greater niche than in the emerging critique of the existing spatial configuration of regionalism in mainland Southeastern Asia. The Brahmaputra, Irrawaddy, Salween, Mekong and Yangtze rivers spread out like a necklace around Yunnan and cut across parts of the territories that are known as South, Southeast and East Asia. Each of these rivers has a different topography and fluvial itinerary, giving rise to different political, economic and cultural trajectories. Yet these rivers together form a connected "water-world". These rivers engendered conversations between multi-agentive mobility and large-scale place-making and were at the heart of inter-Asian engagements and integration until the formal end of the European empires. Being both a subject and a sponsor of transregional crossings, the paper argues, these rivers point to the need for a new historical approach that registers the connections between parts of the Southeast Asian massif through to the expansive plain land and the

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vast coastal rim of the Bay of Bengal and the China Seas. A connection that could be framed through the concept of Holon.

Keywords: Zomia, Holon, rivers, transregional flows, "water-world", mainland Southeast Asia

Ⅰ. Introduction

The early thoughts on "Holon" are traced to Aristotle who proposed the concept of wholeness as a representation of integration. "Form consists from the matter of the form", declared Aristotle and suggested that "Nature is styled the substance of things that exists by Nature". Within this early conception of Holon, a phenomenal duality ran deep as Aristotle metaphorically referred to it as an organic relationship between, for example, letter and syllable; bipeds and men; liquids and water; *Illiad* and its verses; a house and its stones (2007: 94-95, 121). This duality comprised integration, which saw one part of the dual core of the holarchy holding on to the other, usually a larger or general one (*the genus*). By the time of Galen, Holon came to be viewed as a "total mixture" (*krasis di' holōn*), (Singer 2016), which surpassed the Aristotelian propensity to asymmetrical duality. The modern conceptualization of Holon continues to move beyond the "dualistic way of thinking in terms of 'parts' and 'wholes'" and to reconcile the atomic and holistic approaches, as suggested by Arthur Koestler, the architect of holarchy in late modern times (1967, 1970, 1978). A more recent illustration of holarchy would look like this: An organic whole (holarchy) is comprised of molecules, cells, tissues and organs— the organism is fully operational only with the collaborative functioning of all these organic units, but each of these units also exists on its own, functioning autonomously (Funch 1995).

Since Koestler, the idea of Holon has flourished in numerous lines of thoughts, ranging from "bricks to bable" and in a range of disciplines including sociology, ethnography, biology, linguistics, geography, industrial management and so on. In the wake of the debates initiated by Koestler, Dov Nir was among early scholars

dealing with the question of regionalism from a holonic perspective. Grounded on the systems approach in geography, Nir considers the "place" as a Holon, because it is simultaneously the "summit of a certain system and a component of a larger spatial system". Following this approach, Nir stressed that the "region" is "an entity, a unique individuum, but, being a component of a larger system, it is also a part of the space; *it is both place and space*" (1987: 195). Although Nir makes a useful contribution to the idea of linking Holon with regionalism, there are still debates on the processes in which a place becomes a functional part of a region. If for Henri Lefebvre the creative human labor is crucial in the construction of place, for Bruno Latour, such convergence is possible through a network of relationships existing in nature, including both human and non-human (Lefebvre 1991; Latour 2005).

Latour is particularly important here. All fluvial nodal points together may form a network that more closely fits what he terms 'actant' in the context of his Actor-Network Theory. Fluid riverscapes or apparently inaccessible mountain zones bordering the river valleys propelled human actors to capitalize on the trade routes that crossed their habitats. To imperial gazes, many of them appeared as marauders and disruptive but, in most cases, they were part of the flows, who would claim a stake and ownership of the economic activities that evolved within the network shaped by the river system and to which they were connected. Rivers thus, even in their most inaccessible zones, acted as a powerful actant. Yet if the actor-network theory expands the idea of collaborative existence of human and nature, it leaves room for the discussion of spatial specificities that are shaped by long-term historical practices within a particular ecological regime. This paper suggests that Latour could be better appreciated by looking at the larger process of imperial history and human mobility within nature's network—multifaceted collective that I would call "holon".

Partly responding to the question about the relationships between space and region, this paper stems from an interest in exploring Southeast Asia as a region from the vantage point of the concept of Holon. In its long-term history, Southeast Asia was at the cultural crossroads of India and China; during colonial times it was

under the grip of different imperial economic structures; in the post-WW II period, the region came to be perceived as a strategic "unit", particularly in the American academia (Vandenbosch 1946). In the current environment of geo-economic integration within the framework of ASEAN, there are clearly sub-regional and extra-regional outreaches. Southeast Asia is thus a complicated candidate for a holonic perspective. Despite these limits in the spatial conceptualization of the region, there are ecologically contiguous areas that may be fruitfully engaged from a holonic perspective. In this paper, I would argue that a Holonic perspective of mainland Southeast Asia and adjacent regions could be best explicated by locating the role of the rivers that flow through these regions.

In the holonic projection, rivers are perceived both as a geological and a temporal body. As Marko Pogacnik suggested that from the geomantic point of view, "the river is running inside a rounded membrane that resembles a tube" (2007). In this tube flows geological and biological agents of sand, silt, mud, fish, leaked oils or gold dusts; on the surface there are steamers, boats, teaks, rainwater, fluvial waves and currents; also water that drops on the river body as rain and those that drain through the mountains, each forming an enormous organic flow. Each river in this context becomes a holarchy, a "total mixture" or an "ecosystem metabolism". (Cabello et al 2015). In its temporal sense, the river becomes the site of political power-play, gun-boat diplomacy, trade and commerce, agrarian production choices, irrigation, navigability, ethnic conflicts and coexistence, mobility as well as immobility and a wide range of livelihood options—a combination of temporal flows that may be termed as "societal metabolism".

Recently, there have been attempts to bridge the gaps between societal and ecosystem metabolism (ibid.). These attempts call for reconciliation not only between natural and human activities around the river, but also for reconciliation between multiple river landscapes. In other words, interests are growing on how geological and social metabolism evolved along and across the basins from its source to the sink. This is particularly important in the context of recent historical and anthropological debates on Southeast Asian highlands. Of all major contributions in the field of Tibetan-

Himalayan highlands, known by various names including "Zomia", most references to rivers were furnished in James Scott's seminal work *The Art of Not Being Governed* (2009). Scott's Zomia is an antidote to the nationalist projection of space and landscape that emerged from the German and French tradition of geography. Scott, along with Schendel(2002) and Michaud(2013), have been instrumental in promoting the Southeast Asian massif as a spatial category that embraces the "transregional" in the place of the regional and national— suggesting that the Tibetan-Himalayan highlands developed an autonomous autarky that avoided the political and economic dominance of the centralizing states in the valleys. In the broader conceptual parameter that informs Scott's valley-upland dichotomy, however, only part of the river is intelligible, as Scott notes: '"Easy' water 'joins', whereas 'hard' hills, swamps, and mountains 'divide'" (2009: 45).

This paper builds on the concept of the "social metabolism" of the river in its broader sense and through this it reads the Zomian conception of spatial autonomy around the Southeast Asian massif. In particular, it seeks to examine the connections of rivers that dilutes topographical difference and interrogates spatial dichotomies. It argues that a new understanding of regionalism depends on avoiding consigning human intent and action to a morphologically delimited vision of the highlands and valleys. A more profitable line of enquiry would be to take a closer look at the unity of the river that connects all forms of landscapes allowing it to cross regional boundaries.

In the recent past—as much as in the pre-modern period—the Brahmaputra, Irrawaddy, Salween, Mekong and Yangtze, among other Tibetan-Himalayan rivers, enabled multiple and layered mobilities. These were facilitated by the river as the route of large-scale trade and transport, as well as a site of micro-scale livelihood options. The river was also as much a site of navigability as of directionality both upstream and downstream. It was a site of occasional contestations and conflicts, but also of a referral, a signifier, a meeting place and a crossroads of pathos and pathways. In a narrower spatial context, ethnic groups forged relationships with riverine neighbours to access the ecological resources available

to them. On a broader scale, rivers in both their inland mountainous terrains and deltaic ends saw connectivity through long-distance trade. Do these dual processes of river-induced mobility imply a pattern of holonic connectivity across north-eastern South Asia, northern mainland Southeast Asia and Southwestern China? This paper deals with these queries with a focus on the Brahmaputra, the Irrawaddy and the Yangtze river systems.

Ⅱ. Brahmaputra-Irrawaddy Network

In the late nineteenth century, a European observer compared the mountain ranges that extended from the Tibetan-Himalayan highlands to mainland Southeast Asia and adjacent regions as the fingers of a human hand and the rivers that flowed through these fingers as parts of a radial system (McMahon 1873-74: 463-467). While these rivers, flowing between the Brahmaputra to the Yangtze, joined the seas in disparate locations from the Bay of Bengal to the East China sea, they flowed quite close to each other between north-east India, Tibet and Yunnan. For example, the Tsangpo (Brahmaputra) was so close to the tributaries of the Irrawaddy that for most of the nineteenth century European explorers debated whether the Tsangpo was actually the main source of the Irrawaddy river (Anderson 1869-70: 346-356). While the two rivers had different origins and reached two different destinations, both remained within the watery grid created by a range of smaller rivers and their tributaries and branches.

The Chindwin river, a 520-mile major tributary of the Irrawaddy, was the main artery for the connectivity between the valley of the Brahmaputra and the Irrawaddy. There was a distance of only a few miles between the starting point of the Chindwin river above Hukong Valley and the Dihing, a major tributary to the Brahmaputra. Further down in northern Manipur, the Tuzu river, a tributary of the Chindwin, flowed less than ten miles from the Dhanshiri river, a tributary of the Brahmaputra. Further south, the Manipur river, with a basin of about 700 square miles, was connected with the Chindwin river via its

tributary, Myittha. All the feeders of the Manipur river, including Imphal, Iril, Khuga and Tuitha, were, in their turn, close to some tributaries of the lower Brahmaputra/Meghna, including the Barak river (Ludden 2019: 23-37).

Within these land-river networks, at least three major highways emerged between India and Burma. One route extended from the Sylhet and Kachar districts across the Manipur territories to the Chindwin river and then the Irrawaddy river in the northern region of Ava. Another route extended from the Brahmaputra valley in southern Assam into Manipur. A third network of routes went through Arakan province (Yalak, Aeng, and Tongo) to the towns of Shembegwen, Membu, and Prome on the banks of the Irrawaddy river (Pemberton 1838: 392)

The Manipur river collected a considerable flow from other Indian rivers and carried products from Bengal and other north-eastern regions before entering Myanmar. Manipur was known for its trade in salt, silk, wax, ivory, cotton, and ponies, and attracted Burmese and Chinese merchants from Yunnan. The Maharajah of Manipur made remarkable profits out of tea, which he bought in the trading village of Thaungdut on the bank of the Chindwin river in Hkamti district in Sagaing and sold in Cachar. Significant amounts of rice were carried along the traditional route via the Chindwin river which connected the Irrawaddy and Brahmaputra feeders. In short, what is today mapped as the borderlines of South and Southeast Asia were spread out in an elastic and interlocking network of rivers in this region.

Ⅲ. Brahmaputra-Yangtze Network

The proximity of the Himalayan-Tibetan rivers led to the idea of maintaining communications between Bengal and China by means of rivers, instead of through the Straits of Malacca, particularly because of the shifting patterns of the monsoons (Huttmann 1844: 123). Soon the logic of a volatile sea for advancing riverine communication was replaced by the hope of

the communicational potential of the rivers themselves. In the late 1860s, Arthur Cotton proposed to connect the "heart" of China with that of India by means of inter-valley connections between the Brahmaputra and the Yangtze, which were only 250 miles within their nearest navigable points. Cotton proposed this connection between Sadiya in Assam on the Lohit river (a feeder of the Brahmaputra), and on the Yangtze (Jinsha) near Lijiang in northwest Yunnan. This connectivity was to run across three other major rivers, including the Irrawaddy, Salween and Mekong (Cotton 1867).

Cotton's idea of connecting India and China through the Brahmaputra and Yangtze was partly a reflection of nineteenth-century confidence about conquering nature and partly an outgrowth of his own "river-linking" projects in the valleys of south and north India. But those engineering projects were unlikely to be applicable in these upland regions where the elevation from the Sadiya to Lijiang extended from about 500 feet to 7900 feet with deep valleys between them. Not surprisingly, during the century prior to decolonization, neither the inter-linking of rivers nor through construction of railways were India and China connected across this region. Topographical and financial conditions were of course prohibitive, but the principal factors that prevented a project of the inter-linking of the Brahmaputra and Yangtze was the British annexation of northern Burma in the 1880s. Following this the attempts to connect India and China via the Brahmaputra and Yangtze gravitated to the Irrawaddy and Yangtze network. But the abandonment of imperial ambition to connect these river valleys hardly made any difference to the historical continuity of communications across Tibet, Assam and Yunnan which were largely dependent on a wide and efficient mule-horse-pony network.

Ⅳ. Irrawaddy-Yangtze Network

As the Brahmaputra and Irrawaddy were considered a means to access China, so the Yangtze became part of remarkable efforts to reach out to India, Tibet and Burma. The Yangtze and the city of Shanghai were important for two reasons as far as the connectivity between India and China was concerned. First, by the 1860s the British were increasingly feeling uncomfortable about the greater presence of other imperial powers in Shanghai. So, there emerged the strategy of pursuing a pre-emptive entry to the Yangtze valley from what became known as the "Irrawaddy Corridor". In this connection Edward Sladen, the British political agent in Mandalay during the reign of the last Burmese King, was concerned that the Americans would soon take control of the east coast trade of China, particularly after the opening of the ship canal across Panama to connect the Atlantic and the Pacific Oceans. Because of these issues, which Sladen referred to as the "contingency of US predominance", and in the context of the decline of the opium trade along with the Canton system, he suggested that Britain should attempt to find a western doorway to China. He felt that a route to China through Burma would be of the "highest importance" (Iqbal 2014). Second, Shanghai itself became a starting point for efforts from different imperial powers to gain access to the upper Yangtze region, especially Yunnan, bordering Burma. Thus, by the late nineteenth century, while the British sought to reach the upper Yangtze through Yunnan, other powers based in Shanghai began to establish a presence on the upper Yangtze around Sichuan and Yunnan, making the river a remarkably international water space in the course of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

The trade and commerce that then took place between the Irrawaddy and Yangtze systems looked very promising. The Irrawaddy grew in importance not just because it was a highway to the sea for products from the hinterland, but also because it worked in the opposite directions too as a connection to the Yangtze system. By the 1870s upper Burma under the Burmese king was heavily dependent on rice imports from British Burma in the coastal region; these imports increased from 26,655 tons in 1872/3 to 71,444

tons in 1877/8. The price of rice rose by more than a third between 1855 and 1875 (Webster 1998: 211). After the annexation of upper Burma in 1885, the entire 1000-miles of the Irrawaddy came under direct imperial sway resulting in a seamless mobility that went beyond Burma borders: through a combination of land and water routes connecting the river valleys of the Salween, Mekong and Yangtze across Yunnan.

In the eight years between 1890-91 and 1897-98, exports and imports to and from Western China more than doubled, from Rs. (Indian Rupees) 16,218,400 to Rs. 39,579,400. If the Northern and Southern Shan states are included, the total trade in the same period increased almost four-fold, from Rs. 55,426,300 to Rs. 193,587,300. The import of products into Burma from Western China for the same period increased three-fold, from Rs. 5,343,500 to Rs. 14,785,300. Products included raw silk, hides, opium, orpiment, hides and horns, fibrous products as well as miscellaneous items including gold and silver, brass gongs and pots, iron cauldrons, straw hats, paper, hams, musk, fur coats, walnuts, china root, and coptis root, among many other commodities. Most of the products that moved from the westernmost navigable part of the Yangtze to the Irrawaddy transited through Yunnan and there were five routes for that purpose: Hankow to Yunnan-Fu; Chungking to Yunnan-Fu via Kueiyang-Fu; Chungking via Luchow to Yunnan-Fu; Sui-Fu (Hsuchou-Fu) to Yunnan-Fu; Chungking via Chenghtu-Fu to Tali-Fu. Eventually most of the products found their way to different parts of the Irrawaddy, mostly via Bhamo.

Ⅴ. Symbiosis of Human and Animal Energy: Connecting Rivers, Valleys and Mountains

While the holonic appreciation of the links between the Brahmaputra, Yangtze and Irrawaddy could be examined from the flow of people and products across them, one needs to acknowledge the rugged and difficult routes that had to be negotiated between the upper reaches of these rivers. There are untapped primary materials that suggest that where physical connections between

rivers were not possible due to topographical difficulty or unnavigability, connectivity across the valleys flourished through a symbiosis of efforts, skills and energy, of both humans and animals.

The animals that kept connections alive across and between the rivers in Yunnan, the Shan States and regions east of the Irrawaddy valley included mules, ponies and to a lesser extent oxen (predominantly in the Shan States). Despite their smaller size (their height averaging about 46 inches) and being saddle-galled, an early twentieth-century report noted the quality of the Yunnan mules: endurance, sure-footedness, docility, intelligence and training to follow the instructions of the Mafus (muleteer). They were also inclined to swim in the rivers readily, and temperamentally suited to use swinging suspension bridges or ferry boats even if these were about the height of their shoulders. A mule, despite its small size, could carry more than 200 lbs on its back. Clarence-Smith (2015: 32-45) offers details of the importance of mules, along with horses and donkeys, for the transport system within the particular landscape of the region and the flourishing of the culture of reproduction of the same.

By the turn of the twentieth century, a rough estimate found the number of mules in Yunnan to be at least 40,000, most of which were bred in the upper Yangtze region. After the annexation of upper Burma and the consequent control over the entire length of the Irrawaddy the British administration felt the need to have the service of the mules to continue the commercial relations with south-west China across the Irrawaddy, Salween, Mekong and Yangtze. In addition to the attempts to procure as many Yunnan mules as possible, the British administration started negotiating the importation of mules from other parts of the world. In 1904, 1,200 mules arrived in Calcutta from Argentina for employment on the Burma side of these inter-river valley routes. With mules, ponies and oxen, the difficulties of the intermittent and rugged landscape and unnavigability of river networks were considerably overcome. Some recent scholarship, including those by Ma Jianxiong and Ma Cunzhao (2014), provide interesting accounts of the use of mules that took place within an intricate social organization of networks of

the muleteers. There is indeed a case for a Braudel beyond the Mediterranean Sea, a Braudel of the river-mountain network in which the pack mules loomed large. As Leonard (1982) quipped, Braudel "is brilliant, however, in demonstrating how most history is written on the backs of most people, maybe with hollow-bladed scissors, to cut us down to size so that great men will have somewhere to sit or stand. His perspective, heroically, is that of the pack animal."

Ⅵ. Conclusion

Recent works on deltaic ecology and agrarian relations have shed useful light on social and economic life at the river's end, while being shy of the fuller length of the river and its macro-spatial connectivity (van Schendel 1991; Biggs 2010; Iqbal 2010). Similar caveats apply to a range of studies on Asian highlands, which consider mountainous regions as a site of deliberate distance from the valleys for political and economic reasons. A holonic approach could take us beyond such insularity of area studies in Asia. The Zomian dichotomy between highland and valley seems to have been continually contested by the urge to reach out to navigable river spaces. An attempt to recover the rivers of these regions as a unified "social metabolism" requires looking at a river's entire fluvial body, from its mountainous upper parts to its plains through to the ocean rims and, more importantly, to its outreach to the networks of neighbouring rivers.

It is curious how Southeast Asian Studies has recently shaped two significant trends along two broader spatial contours. Historians have made powerful contributions to the maritime connections and economic trends, often taking a long-term perspective (Chaudhuri 1985; Bose 2009; Amrith 2013). Anthropologists on the other hand have provided an equally impressive contribution to our understanding of the highland Southeast Asian massif, as already referred to in this paper. These important historical and anthropological studies point to the need to explore further how ethnic families and spatially larger economic flows operated within nature's network

spanning the oceanic rims, valleys and upland areas.

Rivers are not hollow liquid space. Once the unity of the river from its origin to its length into the sea is fully appreciated, the multiple temporalities surrounding it must become intelligible. This paper has focused on the way rivers facilitated a connected world of human mobility and connections around trade and commerce during the colonial period. River was central to mainland Southeast Asia's engagement in historical conversations and connectivity with parts of western China and north-eastern South Asia. More research might lead to a deeper understanding of the Holon that the Southeast Asian rivers comprise and represent.

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