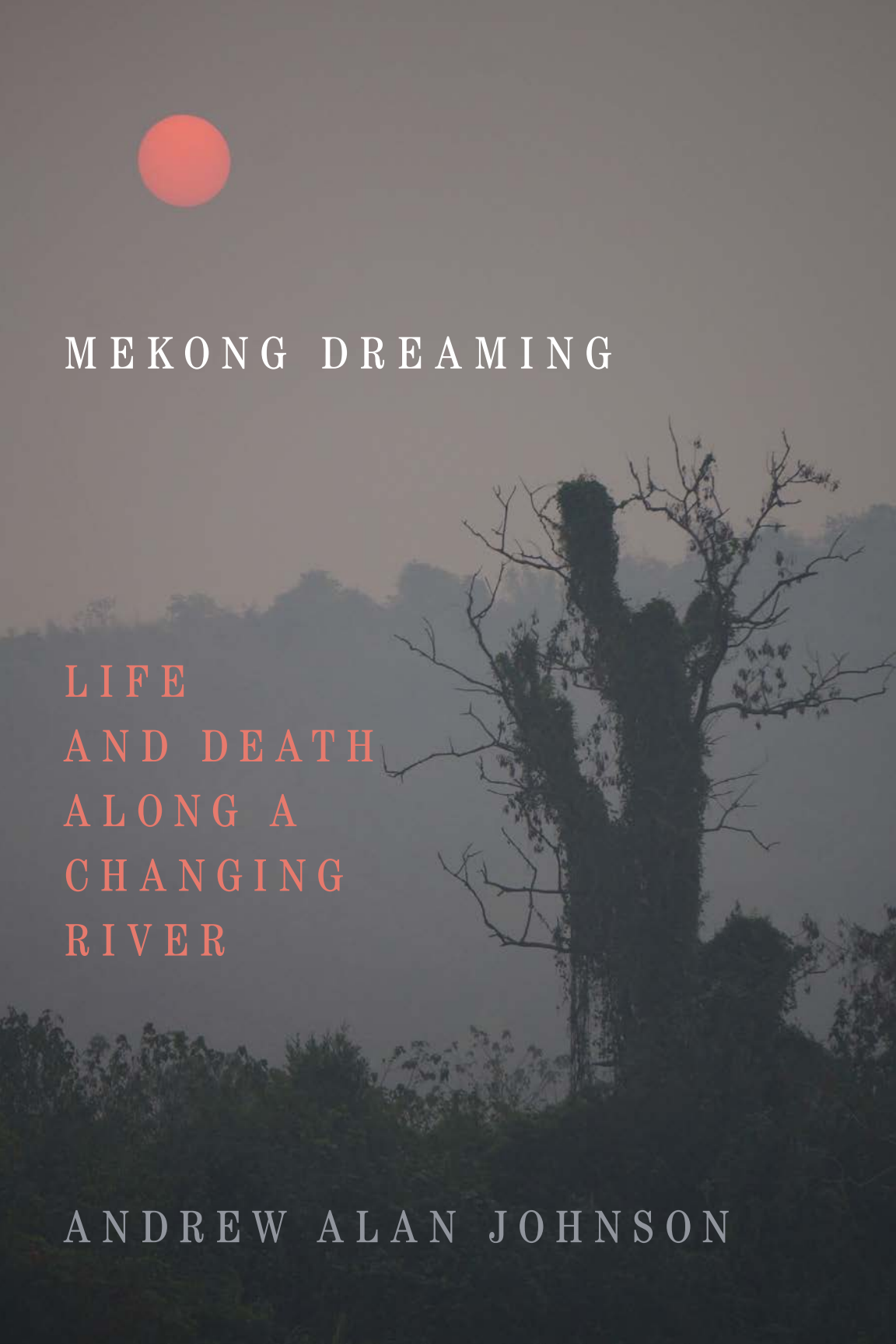

MEKONG DREAMING

LIFE AND DEATH ALONG A CHANGING RIVER

ANDREW ALAN JOHNSON

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Cover art: The sun rises over Bird Island. Photograph by Andrew
Alan Johnson.

For Dad

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This book was written across multiple places, and within multiple academic and nonacademic appointments. I first turned toward working with fishermen when fishing on the Nansemond River with David Racicot, my parents' neighbor, where I found that two men who didn't know each other well could have long conversations so long as they were looking together at a river, or a fish, rather than at each other. I began my fieldwork the next year, in 2014, while I was a faculty member at Yale-NUS College in Singapore. I conducted additional research and most of the writing during my appointment at Princeton University and, later, at Stockholm University and the University of California, Berkeley. This latter period was also an extremely difficult time in my life, and I am grateful for those people and those institutions that helped me through.

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THROUGH A GLASS, DARKLY

"At night, I close my eyes and all I can see is the dam."

Lert told me this as he lay back in the hammock underneath his house, as we both waited for the afternoon heat to fade and the time to come for the evening's fishing. Lert's house was on the bank of the Mekong River, where it forms the border between central Laos and northeastern Thailand. He and I had been talking about the decline in his fish catches in recent years. The troubles began with the construction of the Jinghong Dam in southern China, a dam that cut across the main stream of the Mekong just north of the Lao-Chinese border, about 500 kilometers upstream from Lert. But it wasn't just the numbers of fish that the dam affected. Lert described how, after construction began, the water in the Mekong began to act "against nature" (*phit thammasat*).[1] This disruption started in the middle of the dry season in 2006, when the river rose and tore through Lert's house without a drop of rain having fallen. After this, problems continued. The steady, constant torrent of 2015 starved riverbanks of sediment and smothered dry-season plants. The drought of 2016 dropped the river to record lows.

And the dam sent Lert dreams.

> [The dam's Chinese engineers] promise that they built it solidly, but I don't believe [them]. When I see the dam [behind my closed eyelids], I see a crack. It is long and black, running from the base to the top. Dark water is spilling out from the crack. I see that one day the dam will break open. And when it does, everyone here will die. Everything here will disappear, fallen into the water.

I wish to be clear here: Lert did not see his dream as arising from his anxiety about the dam. He did not dream about the dam (*fan kiaw kap khuean*). Rather, he saw the dam (*fan hen khuean*), although whether he saw the dam in the future or in the present, in a physical or figurative sense, was not clear to him.

Lert's apocalyptic tone is shared across the community. Others in "Ban Beuk," Lert's town, spoke in such a register about the impact of the Jinghong Dam and the potential impacts of the new Sayaburi Dam under construction in Laos.[2]

These dams were only the latest environmental and economic interventions in what planners term the Greater Mekong Subregion, including new Special Economic Zones and high-speed rail projects, each received with pronouncements of both ecological and economic transformation: a diversion project was to take water straight from the Mekong and pipe it to farmers in the Chao Phraya (Central Thai) basin, starving the northeast to save Bangkok; China's Belt and Road Initiative was to include a high-speed rail line running straight through Nong Khai, not far from Ban Beuk.

The dam here emerges as a new figure in the ecology, economy, and cosmology of Ban Beuk. Here, I see infrastructure as more than material; rather, as in my previous work (Johnson 2014) as well as in new scholarship on infrastructure (Anand, Gupta, and Appel 2018; Larkin 2013; Schwenkel 2017), I ask: what is the relationship between infrastructure and a form of dwelling that includes dreams? Objects like the Jinghong Dam interpose themselves between fishermen and their fish, between riverbank farmers and their crops, and insinuate themselves into fishermen's dreams. With changes in the hydrology of the river—with the, in Heidegger's terms, challenging-forth of the dam and the loss of lived worlds—comes a sense of menace, a shadow that affects ecology, economy, love, and cosmology downstream. It is a shadow that provokes Lert and others to think about the nature of their relationships with other sources of potency—human, animal, ecological, and supernatural—and it signals that these relationships are in flux.

Juxtaposed with Lert's vision of the breaking dam is another, similar vision, another dream of water flowing from a distant source. This is the revelation of new sources of potential, of a utopic reshaping of the world as opposed to the apocalyptic. One night, like Lert, I too dreamed of the river. In my case, I dreamed of an island. I had been sleeping in a hut at the edge of the river, facing east across the flow into the Lao People's Democratic Republic (PDR). The first thing that I saw each morning was the sun, reddened by the smoke hanging in the morning air, rising over an island midstream. This island, Bird Island (*don nok*), was a hill about half a kilometer long and a hundred meters

wide, covered in dense vegetation. Standing up from the center of the island, just where the sun rose, was the stump of a *takhian* tree (*Hopea odorata*).

In my dream, I saw this island clearly (figure I.1). Each leaf on each tree was fully illuminated from all directions, making the colors stand out as if drawn in crayon. Near the base of the takhian tree, crystal-clear water was gushing from a spring, but the water seemed viscous and thick. Thick globs of transparent fluid rolled off the tree's leaves and plopped down, disappearing into the reddish-brown Mekong. They left football-sized chunks of perfectly clear water in the otherwise opaque stream.

Over breakfast, Thip, a woman in her early forties and the sister of the man in whose compound I was living, asked me about my dreams. She had started asking me to describe them in detail each morning some weeks before, after I had given her and her sister, Yai, lottery tickets as gifts, one of which turned out to be a winner (Thip and Yai won about $200 each—not a small amount). But my dreams always disappointed her—she hoped to hear about a prominent animal that would "really" be a code for a particular number, or perhaps a lottery number given to me by a woman wearing ancient Lao dress, and the litany of anxieties infesting my junior academic's subconscious frankly bored her.

This dream, however, did not. She listened with interest to my description, a description that, I should note, might paint a different picture in Lao than it does in English (compare terms like *nam yot khon-khon, sii sai, meuan kaew* [viscous drops of water, clear like crystal] instead of "thick globs of transparent fluid"). The takhian tree, too, was significant. It was a kind that often was host to dangerous but potentially powerful spirits known to give good fortune to people—especially men—that they fancied. Thip asked me for more and more details, and I filled them in as best as I could. At last, she was quiet. "So, what do you think it means?" I asked.

She shrugged. "I don't know. The island's king [*jao don*] was talking to you," she said succinctly. "But sometimes it's hard to understand him when he speaks. The water is coming from him. It is his *barami* [charismatic power]." She thought it might indicate the potential for *sok lab* (sudden, unexplained fortune). She thought for a moment. "Or maybe it was the tree [that sent dreams]."

I asked her to elaborate on what she knew about that island. Was Bird Island, like an island a bit farther upstream, the center of a cult of a jao don, an island lord? Thip was adamant that she did not know. In her experience, Bird Island was just an island, one where she had grown up and that she had lived next to for her entire life. Sometimes her brothers would go there to hunt birds or gather fruits—indeed, that was why they had given it the name. Others might call it something else. Sometimes a Lao man would come from the opposite bank to

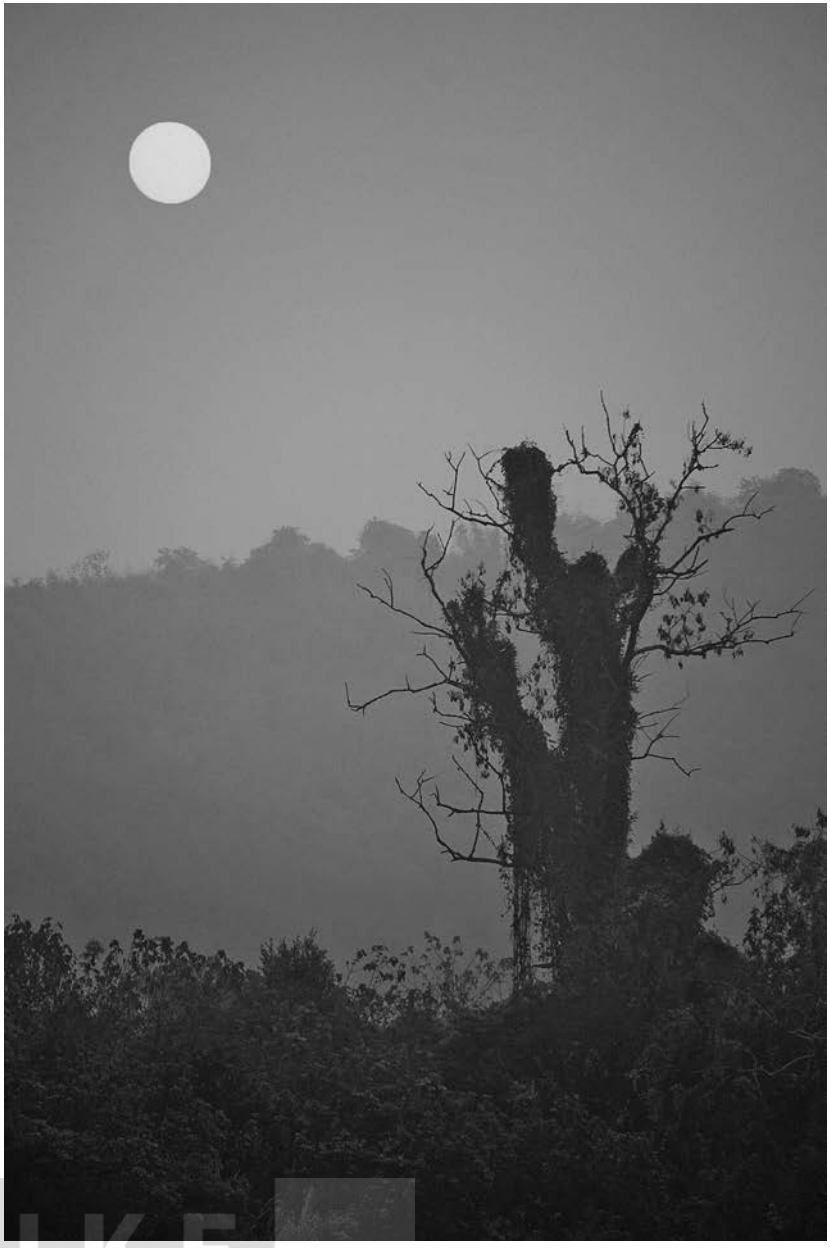

Figure I.1: The sun rises over Bird Island

plant a banana orchard (*suan*). While sometimes islands had jao, "kings," divine lords that would occasionally possess mediums and show their favor to those who made them offerings, she wasn't aware that this island had one until my dream. The dream, too, was merely suggestive: it meant that this island could have a king, perhaps one that had been hiding and was only coming out now as it was interested in talking with a foreigner. But you could never tell.

These two dreams tell us particular things. Just as the hydrology and ecology of Ban Beuk have altered, and just as new biological species enter this disrupted realm, new sources of potency (spirits, among others) also emerge. After the day of my dream, Thip asked me each morning (and continues to ask, when I am in Ban Beuk) if I have dreamed again about the island and, of course, if I should like to choose any lottery tickets for her. While she remains uncertain as to the exact identity of what spoke to me in my dream, she is convinced that something did. And it is this uncertainty, this sense of coinhabiting a space with things that, like both the dam and the island, carry the potential of an alien agency, something distant from us epistemologically or spatially, but under whose influence we exist.

These two dreams—Lert's dream of the wounded dam leaking dark water and threatening to destroy everything along the river, and Thip's interpretation of my dream of a heretofore unremarkable island gushing prosperity and fortune to those on its banks—share much. In each, there is the perception of a powerful controller sitting astride the river, deciding when to release and when to hold back fortune. They also reflect two potentialities in the Mekong and its apocalyptic/messianic futures. On one hand, environmental, economic, and political catastrophe has damaged the lives of those living on its banks and threatens to do so in the future, and on the other hand, forces of prosperity reemerge in new ways to those who can perceive them. Both potentials emerge from present-day disruption.

In each, dreams reveal something. Lert is specific—he is not dreaming of the dam because he is worried about the dam. Instead, in his dream, he sees the actual dam. Mine, in Thip's interpretation, is also a communication. Dreams here are not a subjective interpretation of one's inner life, but intersubjective. They are connections with something outside, not a turning inward, but a perception outward that goes beyond waking life.

This communication is with something distant and only partially known, something occult, in Cornelius Agrippa's (1486–1535) sense of a thing possessing a hidden cause but perceivable effects (Agrippa 2018). Occult worlds, involving

fortune, magic, or river gods, or at the same time a foreign spouse or a dam controller in China, are only partially accessible to humans. From the vantage point of Ban Beuk, dams and spirits are both occult forces in that their power stems from an unseen place. What these forces say (in dreams and otherwise) and how they operate is unclear. One possesses only fragmentary awareness of their experience. Here is a world-making project that entangles people, animals, water, and spirits in its nets, but the resultant world is graspable only in parts, such that complete knowledge is always elsewhere.[3] Other people—especially unusual people such as mediums, the disabled, or foreigners—may perceive the world better (see also Sprenger 2015). The (possible) island king, who sees things more clearly than Thip does, sends incomprehensible dream messages not to her or to her brother, Mon, but to a foreigner. In other examples that I address in this volume, the actions and intentions of a far-off dam controller are only guessed at via changes in the water level and clarity. The divine king of the catfish draws his subjects away from the world of fishermen because of a breach of trust over fishing practices in the river. Migrant laborers attempt to understand cryptic messages sent to them via spontaneously appearing shapes and images on a tree trunk. Something in the experience of Mekong lives has changed.

Such a world revealed in fragments, where each individual can see only a shard, holds utopic as well as apocalyptic potential. Spirit messages were often winning lottery numbers, and, for development agents and those in Ban Beuk following them, the Mekong dams would control (not cause) floods. As a related part of national and international projects involved in developing the Mekong, Special Economic Zones connected to high-speed rail corridors would lead to the region's ascendance. Mirroring state promises of coming fortune were other utopic promises spread by more local interests: entrepreneurs would drive around Ban Beuk in shiny new cars selling miraculous new seeds that they claimed would revitalize the flagging rubber industry. Elsewhere, new democratic political movements promised to remove Bangkok from its privileged position in Thailand and give power to the marginalized northeast. In short, in the dreams that those in Ban Beuk revealed to me, utopia and disaster both lurked just over the horizon.

This world also speaks to the entanglements that we have with other beings. In a recent collection, Anna Tsing, Elaine Gan, Heather Swanson, and Nils Bubandt (2017) take up the idea of the ghosts and monsters of the present era. But these are not ghosts in the sense of the island king; rather, they are those plants whose pollinating partners have gone extinct, introduced species that wreak havoc on local ecologies, the futures that haunt the landscape. The ghosts and monsters of the Anthropocene[4]—that climatic moment in which

we find ourselves—are similar to what I seek to explore here: the nonhuman, the material, but also what I call the *in*human, those other beings whose subject position is uninhabitable or unlocatable.

These beings include a host of materials, spirits, humans, and nonhumans. First, there is the river itself, newly made unpredictable and unreadable. Then the dam that blocks it and its controller, upstream in China, have a profound effect, but are practically unreachable (except in dreams or rituals I describe elsewhere in this volume). There is also the large Mekong fish, desired and sought but no longer appearing in nets except as a hybrid species. Within families, too, the problem of opacity emerges with family members who have migrated to foreign places and send remittances back, but who in their absence have grown strange. There are spirits of the water: nagas, island kings, and divine catfish whose messages grow obscure as the river changes around them. And, finally, there are those divine beings that look after migrant workers, threatening them with accident and promising fortune in equal measure.

With this emphasis on distant, opaque sources of potential, I turn also to the fantastic and messianic qualities of such beings. Their presence in the world reminds us that we do not wholly know the world in which we live, and that reality is fundamentally unfamiliar and uncertain. Such beings and forces that I discuss here can never be entirely understood, but they can be lived with.

Indeed, as I show here, not only can they be lived with, but they must be in order for a world to take shape. Heidegger (1977) argues that modern technology—in his case, also involving a river—leads to the destruction of worlds. But via *techné*, we can reforge those links and learn to dwell, to live in a way that preserves and exists in harmony with a world. In Heidegger's famous example, a silversmith allows a silver chalice to take form (*eidos*) via anticipating its function (in a Christian ceremony of communion), considering the potential of the material and the idea of the chalice. Through this craft, the silversmith opens a space for Being, for something larger. It is a nice expression of how things come into being, but it does not work on the Mekong. A fisherman might imagine his catch, work with his net, and engage with the water, but without result. Instead, on the Mekong another power is needed, something from outside both the fisherman and the material: an excess. A potency. And what has changed in the shadow of Jinghong is the source of this potency.

This book explores the idea and allure of distant potency and present moment on the Mekong as one of estrangement from (but immersion in) an opaque world. I do so via looking at the entanglements between human, nonhuman, and inhuman entities. It is via engagement with the potential in distant beings and objects that the possibility for radical change—in the self, in the world—emerges.

This is not the first study of uncertainty upon the Mekong. While scholars have focused intensively upon the entanglements of expert knowledge and development ideology along this and other Southeast Asian rivers (see Goldman 2005; Jakkrit 2018), Jerome Whitington (2018) provocatively takes up the link between hydropower and uncertainty. Whitington notes how hydropower projects create uncertain ecological and economic environments, environments that in turn create new managerial needs, but needs that arise from the very ecological unpredictability that the dam has created. In a similar vein, the nonhuman turn in anthropology (Grusin 2015) has addressed how people manage the emergent and often unpredictable worlds that arise out of the wake of human destruction. Indeed, the term Anthropocene or, in Whitington's case, Anthropogenic points to a clear cause and a clear break—the present moment is separated from the past.

But I am deliberate in my invocation of spells and spirits in the same breath as hydropower and fish—these are things that cocompose "divine worlds" (Ishii 2012) or composite objects (Jakkrit 2018). I do this because this is precisely what my interlocutors in Ban Beuk do: I (and they) see the present moment as a transformative time, one that alters both the material and immaterial—indeed, I deal with spirits as no less material than absent lovers, migrant workers, distant dams, or missing fish. It is a transformation enabled by Ban Beuk's entanglements with and dependence upon the sources of power elsewhere: migrant remittances, dead nagas, and genetically modified organisms, to name a few. The foundations of the earth change and new beings arise. This time, sources of potency in Ban Beuk become distant, be they human (fishermen who disappear for hours at a time turn into migrants who leave for years) or nonhuman (hybrid catfish whose qualities are uncertain), or inhuman (nagas who no longer sun themselves on the bank nor intermarry into the village but which send lottery numbers from afar). The price of rubber, the attention of a foreign spouse, international migrant labor, one's livestock, and now, after the construction of the Jinghong Dam, the river itself all come to be operated by distant but potent sources of power.

Distance here is important. It implies both physical and epistemological distance. When I sat across from Thip, relating to her my dream, I did so as a person whose subject position is difficult to inhabit—she often cobbled together ideas about the "outer lands" (*meuang nok*), from which I come, from things she had seen on television, most of which seemed to be related to India. Similarly, as I sit on Mon's porch and look across at Bird Island, I am physically close to the island king, but cannot imagine what his thoughts or perceptions

might be. He is elsewhere metaphysically, even if physically he is present. It might be easy to imagine distance as a kind of failure, as something that weakens. But here, I show how distance acts as a kind of potency. Power accrues as it rolls to us over distance, and the mark of the foreign is a mark of this power.

But distance in this sense is not just external—we also find a sense of distance within ourselves—namely, the unconscious. Here, I do not necessarily mean the unconscious in a strictly Freudian sense of a world repressed that emerges in unexpected ways, but rather an unconscious that reflects the way that we open ourselves toward the world outside of our cognition. As we live with other beings and landscapes, the material qualities of this world, the ways that we interact with these material qualities, and the actions of other-than-human actors shape us. As such, the unconscious here is a Deleuzean unconscious, an openness to the world, and the target of schizoanalysis, not psychoanalysis (Deleuze and Guattari 1980, 18).

Consider the dream of the island king. It is my dream, and my own interpretation and memory of my dream. But it arises out of my openness to the island king, from sleeping in his shadow each night. A psychoanalyst attentive to the influence of the material world, Gaston Bachelard (1999), might also mention the ludic qualities of the water that runs between the island king and myself, a materiality that impinges upon me in ways that I only partially know. In short, just like the Mekong, just like the realm of foreigners, we also contain distances within us or hidden depths that are intertwined with the world around us in ways of which we may not be immediately aware. And these distances—present, but absent from our conscious consideration—can be powerful.

The distant dam—a thing that Lert has never seen—is likewise absent-present in the water's flow. Water rises and falls owing to distant action, exerting power that no proximate source could ever have done. At the same time, spirits and other forces are integrated into villagers' networks not as explanations for (mis)fortune, but as adaptable (but distant) partners that also contend with such forces. Imperfectly known beings—naga, dam, and migrant—become the sources of potency in the world, and those at risk of losing their own ability to act seek out these new sources of potency.

My perspective, then, is to approach networks of human, nonhuman, and inhuman actors from the viewpoint of my interlocutors. Other than drawing in things that are not always present in the world (such as nagas), this perspective also gives weight to things that might be there, or that are sometimes there (like island kings). I find that I am speaking of potency rather than action, of presences that are often absent, usually distant, and sometimes unknowable. I use this term—*potency*—to mean the potential for action, even if action is

not taken. A focus on hidden and distant sources of potential should not be surprising to scholars of Southeast Asia. *Potency* is my own word—in Thai and in Lao it might correspond to aspects of "force" (*phon*), "sacred power" (*sak*), "royal charisma" (*barami*), or "existence" (*khwam pen*).[5] Elsewhere in Southeast Asia, Benedict Anderson (1990) writes in the case of Java, and Geertz (1980) in his model of the Balinese "theater-state," of potency at the still center, in the figure of a ruler who draws upon hidden sources. The Javanese king who retains a *halus* (placid, calm) composure despite the frenetic flailings of demons, or the Buddha seated slightly smiling in the face of tumult—these are the signs of potency in the world. Similarly, for Margaret Wiener (1995), it is not actions taken and resources controlled in the physical realm that generate power, but rather the occult links—sources of secret knowledge, favors of holy sites and gods, and the keeping of magical objects and texts—that give rulers their charismatic draw. Thai and Lao speakers might immediately think of the distinction between barami and *amnaj*, between the gravitational pull of a charismatic king versus the rough hand of a military general. Thus, potency is the capacity to effect change in the world, but it does not necessarily imply action upon that capacity. It is, like the Javanese *sekti* (Anderson 1990; Thai *sak*), something that causes ripples downstream without having to be physically present.

In the present tumultuous moment, the focus of what is potent changes. As in other such moments, potency changes as infrastructure alters the fabric of the world. New beings become potent in new ways as what was previously potent fails, and new sources of potency are identified, unreachable but nonetheless present. Thus, unknown or partially known things act upon us from an occult distance—their sources hidden by physical or metaphysical distance, but with a power nonetheless.

THE PROMISE OF "MAYBE"

This notion of Ban Beuk as caught in the gravitational pull of such distant but nonetheless powerful forces is something that pervaded my fieldwork. Indeed, my own presence in Ban Beuk was often given as an example of distant potency coming to bear, and the links that brought me to Ban Beuk were continually explored by many of my interlocutors. Thip's sister, Yai, used the Mekong as an example of just such a link: "If I were to take a boat and go upstream," she asked me, "would I get to your home?" She continued, recounting her imagined journey: "I would pass Laos, pass China, go through mountains with snow on top, and then to the land of Westerners [*meuang farang*]."[6] Yai imagined here a line extending out from her home that draws a physical link between us,

one separated by foreigners similar to herself (Laos), less-similar foreigners (Chinese), different biomes (snow), and finally the land of entirely different foreigners (farang)—distant, but linked by the Mekong.

This connection is more than just geography. At the same time as she posited this geographic link, she also posited a kin and temporal one: "Your name is An," Yai told me, dropping off the last syllable of Andrew. "My [deceased] son's name was Man.[7] You call me *mae* [mother]." She flatly stated, "You are him, returned in a new body." We are linked.

Here is something like what Thip sought (unsuccessfully) to do with my dream. A few months after meeting me, Yai draws me to her in terms of geography ("we are linked via this river"), kinship ("you are my son"), and temporally ("you were here [as Man], then left and returned [as An]"). But, of course, unlike Man (but like his ghost), I retain my foreignness. Indeed, this is my appeal—Yai constantly asked to be taught English or, like her sister, for winning lottery numbers. In other words, I am not rendered "known" to Yai even though we share this geographical, lineal, and temporal link: I am not identical to Man, nor is my home in "meuang farang" rendered the same as Ban Beuk. This would be to give Yai a perspectival outlook upon the world, where all places are knowable in a similar cultural configuration. Rather, I am for Yai a thread linking her to some unknown quantity, toward a new realm of possibility.

For many others, too, links in the networks of humans and nonhumans often point toward distant or nonlocatable points. For Lert, the dam controller is just such a distant figure with whom communication is difficult, as is the island king. While one may argue that the former, being a human in an office in China, is fundamentally different from the latter, a possessing spirit, I see these figures from Thip's perspective. Thip might be able to communicate with a spirit; she cannot communicate with the controller of the Jinghong Dam. While the dam controller is a human, Thip could never travel to meet him. Even were she to do so, they could not communicate, and he is a foreigner. Spirits at least speak Lao.

Each distant point, too, is a potential source of power and knowledge and a new perspective upon the world, something necessary, as no one entity has complete knowledge of what is "out there"—there is no hermetically sealed world that encapsulates all the beings in the world and their relationship with each other outside of the Buddha (who has departed the world) and the dharma (the world as it is and should be). Instead, unenlightened beings (i.e., everyone but the Buddha) gaze only upon a small part of the world, and even then what they see gives conflicting and contested images. Distant forces, magic, and radical change in the world are rolled into one another.

This would come as little surprise to anthropologists of magic. For Marcel Mauss ([1950] 2001), whereas religion occupies the role of collective effervescence and social unity, magic exists on the sidelines, associated with marginal individuals and foreign influences and thriving exactly because of the patina of the exotic and the unknown. Marginal groups—Roma ("gypsies"), Saami ("Lapps")—were seen to have special access to power.[8] Such association holds today in tropes such as the "magical Negro" (Glenn 2009) in Hollywood film, the mystical indigenous person in New Age spiritualism (see Castaneda [1968] for a classic example), or the exotic East in the lives of bourgeois white Americans (see Gilbert 2006). But the trend persists in many places: Vinay Kamat (2008) notes how Tanzanians seeking magical healing consistently preferred healers from a distant village to healers from their own precisely because of the imaginary that such distance provided, or in Kamat's terms "the allure of the culturally distant."

The distant and the partially known, then, have power. But what is this power? Jean and John Comaroff explore how distant forces—neoliberal capitalism, in their example—become locally understood as the workings of sinister magic (Comaroff and Comaroff 1999; 2001). As the Comaroffs argue, in the wake of South African liberation, certain individuals became rich while others did not. Saturated in the narrative that the end of white supremacy in South Africa would raise all fortunes, those who found their situation unchanged began to suspect that others had mystically stolen it from them, or had discovered secret, magical means to fortune. Pyramid schemes, rumors of magical get-rich-quick techniques, and hidden monsters proliferated. These were, the Comaroffs argue, the mysterious workings of capital translated via the logics of magic. Commodity fetishism (in its neoliberal, more abstracted guise) becomes mystical fetishism.

I have argued along the Comaroffs' lines in an analysis of the cults of nature spirits among migrant workers in Bangkok (Johnson 2012). Faced with the chaos pervading their precarious lives, workers seek out sources of that very chaos—spirits associated with traffic deaths, for instance—as ways to ameliorate and engage directly with that precarity. Making friends with death in the form of a spirit means making friends with it in the form of the potential fatal accident.

But perhaps this conclusion is too simplistic. The "occult economies" approach is one that Bruce Kapferer (2003), among others, has criticized for overemphasizing the role of mystification. In short, Kapferer's critique is that the idea of occult economies assumes that people who don't know the real reason (economic exploitation from afar) that they remain poor and others become rich mistakenly attribute their loss and others' gain to the occult. Neoliberalism is the man behind the curtain, and monsters and magic are simply the face of Oz, the great and terrible.

This is really a question about symbols versus content, and whether one can neatly separate the two. A critique of this divide is what drives the "ontological turn" today (Holbraad and Pedersen 2016). Ontological anthropologists, criticizing the turn toward representation, correctly argue that the proposition that ontological objects encountered in the field (e.g., ghosts) are really other objects native to the ethnographer's world (e.g., the market) fails to do adequate justice to peoples' lived worlds and wastes the opportunity to present novel forms of philosophical analysis. If, as Freud is supposed to have said, a cigar is sometimes just a cigar, maybe we should start from the basis that a ghost is sometimes just a ghost.

But, as any ethnographer knows, ontology is messy, and a ghost is a ghost for some and not others. The island king of whom Thip speaks might not actually be there. The medium might just be a crazy old lady (as Lert asserts). My dream might just be a dream. While Thip and Lert (and anyone with whom I spoke in Ban Beuk) accept that island kings as a rule exist, their ontological status in any one instance is far from certain. Some element of representation—that word *belief*—comes into play here. Do island kings exist? Do nagas—those subterranean and aquatic serpents that spit fire into the sky on the full moon—exist? Does it matter?

The answer that my interlocutors in Ban Beuk give is a forceful "maybe." Maybe they're real at some times and not at others. Maybe the island king isn't there, but another ghost is. Maybe someone else knows better than we do. As with numinal objects, their actual existence lies hidden behind an opaque screen, through a glass darkly, and one must find other ways—dreams, for instance—to see past it.[9] If ontology determines the possibility that a particular kind of entity exists, here I show how we do not actually know what kinds of things can manifest—rather, we know that there is a potential for novelty, for our understanding of the world to be broken.

The question of opacity is one that Nils Bubandt (2014) also addresses in his analysis of Buli witchcraft. For Bubandt, Buli witchcraft is a problem of doubt. Rejecting accounts of witchcraft that seek its cognitive, social, or symbolic function, Bubandt (2014, 6) focuses on witchcraft as a Derridean aporia, "an impassable situation, where understanding and the will to knowledge fail." And, like aporia, cannibal witches are the dragons that haunt the blank spaces on the map, spaces that persist despite (and, Bubandt further argues, because of) new technologies, religions, and epistemologies.

Similarly, Lisa Stevenson (2014), working in the Canadian Arctic, is also concerned with such "maybe" beings that mark an outside to knowledge. One of her interlocutors mentions that a raven in his backyard might be an ancestor,

or might just be a raven. He's not sure. Then, he adds, "It's still there." The raven, the uncle, the potential, in other words, is still there. Even if its ontological status as ancestor or bird (or both) is unknown, something certainly exists.

Returning to Lert, Thip, and Yai, and anticipating others in and from Ban Beuk that I mention here, what is the importance, then, of this opacity, the screen between how the world is and how we can perceive it? Good ethnography, and really listening to what our interlocutors say, requires us to reject the idea that the dragons in the blank spaces on the map (or beneath the surface of the river) are either stand-ins for our beasts (of the neoliberal market, for instance) or defined entities fully real within a particular worldview or ontology (and not within others). But in our analysis, can we build upon what our interlocutors say about such problematic spaces—spaces where things might be—in human/nonhuman networks as sources of potential? And, why are, for my interlocutors, such blank spaces all the more attractive for their uncertainty, their otherness?

My focus here is on the productive potential of "maybe." I see "maybe" as a space of possibility. By announcing that a thing may exist, or by asserting that its essential qualities are uncertain, one allows for the possibility that the present order of things might be overthrown. "Maybe" points to the existence of things beyond apprehension, and to their potential ability to overturn the mundane. The uncertainty opened by "maybe" allows for new things to enter into the world.

This attraction comes at a moment of catastrophic change. Here, rather than seeing alterations in the nonhuman world as imaginative responses to the environmental and social disruptions that I describe here, changing spiritual and other worlds on the Mekong are one part of the larger changes in the material, animal, and social worlds brought about by the Mekong dams, military crackdowns, and new free trade corridors in the area. I argue that these alterations amount to a fluttering of an opaque curtain: just as old situated knowledge fails, new knowledge can suddenly work. And dreams occasioned by an unconscious opened to networks only partially known are not the curtain's removal: just as new insights (new sources of potency) are revealed, old ones have their power stripped away. Power requires engagement with this unknown place.

WEIRD PHENOMENOLOGY

A perspective that is concerned with the unknowable state of reality and people's limited perspective upon it invokes phenomenology. But here I wish to depart from a tradition entirely rooted in Western epistemology. In other words, this is not an issue of simply Kant's numina (things as they are) and

phenomena (what we can perceive of them); instead, it is informed by the Theravada Buddhist/Thai-Lao animist worlds of my interlocutors.[10]

In *Ghosts of the New City* (Johnson 2014), I describe "progress" in the Thai idiom of *jaroen* as a great ladder.[11] On this ladder are all things—spirits, gods, monks, humans, animals, and ghosts. In *Ghosts*, I was concerned with movement up or down this ladder (i.e., progress and ruination) and anxieties about something that might appear to have jaroen but which in fact was a ruin-in-waiting. But here I am interested in the vantage points that various rungs supply. A being higher up sees more of the world than a being lower down—something true of both humans and other-than-humans (e.g., a spirit sees more than a person; a person sees more than an animal; a malevolent ghost might be somewhere more complicated). Upon reaching the top of this imaginary ladder, one exits (*nibbana*—what in Sanskrit is *nirvana*). Only one being, the Buddha, has done so, and because of the knowledge gained from achieving this top rung, he is now no more.[12] He exists only in the path he has left with his teachings. Knowledge annihilates.

This is an idea of knowledge that sits oddly alongside phenomenology. Essences are unknowable, and the only being to truly know them has vanished—indeed, he has vanished because of this very knowledge! Thus, all knowledge (that non-Buddhas have) must be partial. So with all perspectives partial and impermanent (*anitjang* in Thai, *anicca* in Pali), one must guess at these essences. But we are not alone in this search—others assist us: those above us on the ladder, who see things (and, indeed, who see us) more clearly than we do.[13]

But because of our human status, the glimpses that we receive are often strange. Thip reads my dream as a message, but a confusing one. "It's hard to understand him when he speaks," she says of the island king. As Lert examines the Mekong in the evening for signs that it will rise in the night (thus threatening his house and livestock), he looks for water clarity or evidence of a recent surge, and finds instead a strange foam floating in a long trail downstream—a foam trail no one in town has seen before, nor can anyone attribute it to a distinct source. When a medium becomes possessed by a naga, he at first jabbers in a high-pitched voice, "angelic language" (*phasa thaewada*), before lowering himself to speak in Lao. Even the foreign professor is hard to understand, when he mispronounces things or badly mangles an attempt to explain his writing in Lao.

How to think about such moments when a glimpse into a higher plane reveals a garbled, incomprehensible message? I have mentioned Agrippa's notion of the occult—a force that one sees in its results but cannot perceive its cause. But there are other, more recent attempts to deal with such uncertainty. Structuralist literary critic Tzvetan Todorov argues that, in literary

works, the fantastic is just such a moment. The fantastic emerges when "an event [occurs] which cannot be explained by the laws of this same familiar world. The person who experiences the event must opt for one of two possible solutions: either he is the victim of an illusion of the senses, of a product of the imagination—and the laws of the world then remain what they are; or else the event has indeed taken place, it is an integral part of reality—but then *this reality is controlled by laws unknown to us*" (Todorov 1975, 25, emphasis added). Todorov (1975, 35) argues that the fantastic is unstable—one either asserts that the irruption of the unusual into the everyday is explainable by the laws of the everyday (and thus is uncanny), or one learns the new laws of the new world (the marvelous). One thinks of Harry Potter's initial wonderment when he sees the wizards' school Hogwarts later turning to a banal inhabitation once he learns the rules. But on the Mekong, this state of the fantastic is maintained: the everyday world is dependent on other, deeper forces, but these are forces whose contours remain opaque. There is no such revelation of the laws of the world—there is no Dumbledore who knows and can guide us in our knowledge—instead, the world is revealed to be always already unknowable and unknown.

"Object-oriented ontology" philosopher Graham Harman (2012), in looking at the fiction of early twentieth-century "weird fiction" writer H. P. Lovecraft, argues for a "weird realism" in which there is "a 'cubist' tension" (34) between objects and their sensual qualities, especially when these qualities each give very different perspectives. But where a cubist perspective presents different angles upon a coherent object, a "weird" object has contours that suggest a tension that is fundamentally unresolvable (Harman 2012, 258). That is to say, two different vantage points upon a weird object do not give a better image of a thing, but rather suggest that the thing can never be fully perceived, at least by a subject similar to the observer.

The distinction between cubist and weird is important. Most ethnography has been positivist in the sense that we assume that we are describing a very different take upon a shared world—a cubist perspective. You see this face in this way, whereas I see it, from my vantage point, like so. By comparing our perspectives, we can agree on how the face really is. But whereas new ontological anthropology posits worlds not shared (de la Cadena and Blaser 2018), what of the weird dimensions within a subject? That is to say, what of those moments when I (or Thip) see the contours of a thing (e.g., Bird Island) in ways that do not line up?

Thinking of the ladder of jaroen, one sees the difference between a Buddha or a spirit, who can—more or less—see things as they are (but whose position is uninhabitable), and a human, who sees that s/he does not see clearly.

Thus, perceiving an object and recognizing that one is unable to resolve the properties of the object into a whole reveals, for Harman (2012), the "separateness" between observer and reality. Reality is revealed to be more than can be comprehended by the observer, at least without radically transforming the observer himself (as in the case of the Buddha as much as in Lovecraft's protagonists). Reality is weird, at least when seen from human eyes.

Moving from Todorov's fantastic to Harman's weird, then, we see a reality that eludes capture. It is that state of unknowing that is, here, sought out not to reconcile its weirdness (as in the detective novels or horror literature that Todorov or Harman analyze) and convert it to a branch of the everyday (e.g., Todorov's uncanny or marvelous), but to embrace it because of its alterity. One might call this an "instrumental weirdism."[14] This book is inspired by this notion of the weird, and it is for this reason that its title, *Mekong Dreaming*, refers simultaneously to the distant specter of the dam in Lert's dream, to the dreams of national development of which the dam is a manifestation, but also to this body of "weird fiction" from which Harman draws (cf. Lovecraft's [1933] "The Dreams in the Witch House").

As Lovecraft (1926) himself writes, "the most merciful thing in the world, I think, is the inability of the human mind to correlate all its contents." Lovecraft's stories revolve around encounters between humans and something truly alter—beings, objects, or even a color from a different time and place, a world that Lovecraft suggests is more important or more vital than the human realm. In most of his stories, his protagonists go mad in struggling to make sense of this alterity—seeing things as they really are breaks the mind.

Lovecraft's critics have focused on his racism—he was certainly a racist. His supporters (Harman) in turn argue for its irrelevance. I see things differently. Lovecraft's xenophobia is integral to his writing, as the frightful alienness of the other is precisely his concern, whether that be the other to humanity or the other to Lovecraft's own New England white society. As with Heidegger's Nazi politics, we must surely be repulsed by Lovecraft's racism. But, just as with Heidegger, we must see these repugnant politics as integral to his ideas. Lovecraft's xenophobia is not that of the white supremacist who argues for a war against "impure" peoples—a fear of the outside that manifests in a call to close oneself off from the world. Rather, Lovecraft's racism is one that finds the struggle already lost; the other is simply too great, too powerful, or too *prior*. Further, Lovecraft's characters often find themselves already entangled with these outside forces: the narrator of "Shadow over Innsmouth" discovers that he himself is one of the monsters that so repulse him. Unlike Bram Stoker's Victorian heroes in *Dracula* (1897), there is no pure English blood that can be

transfused into the tainted victim. For Lovecraft, one cannot fight the foreign, as the foreign is too powerful, and at the same time one cannot shut it out, as the foreign is already inside us.

Early twentieth-century American horror writing may seem to be a long distance from the Mekong, giant aquatic beasts notwithstanding. But the link here lies in the revelation of a world that is unknown and unknowable, but one more powerful and vital, more real even as it is inhuman. But, unlike Lovecraft's haunted New England, there is little horror in Ban Beuk, at least as concerns river beings. Thip reacts to the island king not with fear, but with interest. Mon (as I detail elsewhere in this book) responds to sightings of naga (water dragons) in the river not with avoidance, but with offerings of coffee and Fanta soda. Absolute knowledge will not break the mind, as it does for Lovecraft's protagonists, but is accepted as fundamentally unknowable. In these, and also with Thip, the world is revealed to be incomplete from a human perspective. Thip tells me that humans cannot see the world as the island does, and so she does not try to see like an island. Devotees of tree spirits in eastern Bangkok understand that their karmic power is not visible to themselves but is known to a ghostly observer (see also Johnson 2012). In short, like a character in a Lovecraftian story, we do not and cannot fully understand the world and its contents—including ourselves—and must rely upon partial signals and indications from fundamentally Other intelligences.

Lovecraft's idea of being always already interpenetrated by foreign forces has been taken up in lectures by Donna Haraway (2016). Modifying the term *Anthropocene* to *capitalocene*, to indicate that it is not necessarily humans but capitalism that has engendered the wide-scale changes normally associated with the former term, Haraway also introduces the term *Chthulucene*, taking both the name of one of Lovecraft's (1926) hostile entities, Cthulhu, and also playing upon the meanings of "primal, earthy" in the term *chthonic*. For Haraway, the *Chthulucene* is a time when we find ourselves living in aggregate with nonhuman forces, already dependent upon other powers that move through us and without which we are incapable of life.[15] We are physically alien to ourselves. We must be, or we die.

I take this long detour through contemporary ecophilosophy and early twentieth-century horror to highlight the contribution that a Mekong phenomenology makes in establishing an open-ended network of beings, only some of which are captured by human perception, but also to point out where such a

perspective can contribute to current scholarship on such worlds. The unknown and unassimilable for each of these authors discussed above—Bubandt, the Comaroffs, and Lovecraft—is a place where the uncertain is unquestionably negative. Buli aporia become cannibal witches in Bubandt's (2014) *Empty Seashell*. Capitalist networks become zombie-making sorcerers in the Comaroffs' "occult economies" (Comaroff and Comaroff 1999). A glimpse into a reality inaccessible to humans induces madness in Lovecraft's (1926) stories.

Here is a common theme—ontological uncertainty is a problem. But I argue that it is not always so. Returning to Ban Beuk, in the Hindu- and Theravada Buddhist–influenced orbits of Southeast Asia, we see something else. In Bali and Java, for instance, potency rests in invisible—and here I would say "opaque"—sources of power. I argue that these sources of power are not simply known sources rendered invisible to the uninitiated (as I believe Anderson [1990] intends), but rather areas with entirely open signifieds. It is not that one knows that a god exists but the ways of getting at him are complicated; rather, there is a great unknown that exists (and, additionally, ways of getting at it are complicated). The unknown is limitless, and gods are limited.

Elsewhere (Johnson 2012) I have written about the act of naming sources of danger and thereby entering into a relationship with them. But, as James Siegel notes, naming does not bring a thing entirely into domestication. For Siegel (2005), naming allows for individuals to temporarily address and resolve "death" (what Siegel terms that which lies outside of culture or comprehension) in ways that eventually demand another naming when death persists. Something dangerous and unknowable is abroad in East Java, as Siegel writes, and the identification and killing of someone labeled a witch temporarily convinces people that this thing has been dealt with, at least until it recurs. Here, I argue that, on the contrary, there is power in keeping one end of this relationship open, in acknowledging that the named being or object is still fundamentally unknown and thus has additional potential.

It is my argument here that the ecological, economic, and cultural shifts that confront my interlocutors present moments where new vistas onto reality present themselves. New realms of the unknown and unnamed present themselves, and there is potency—apocalyptic and messianic—in the distant, fantastic, and weird. Rather than a bounded worldview (which places meaning and essences at the center of things), and rather than a rhizome (which places relation and action at the center), I present a middle ground: a hauntological alternative, where meaning exists and influences, but is only partially accessible.

METHODOLOGY

I deliberately chose the example of my own dream in this introductory chapter to make a particular point about the boundaries of fieldwork—or lack thereof. If my interlocutors in Ban Beuk struggled with the questions of reality, opacity, and the attempt to resolve the two, I was not the dispassionate observer watching them squirm. Nor was I asking questions and seeking elucidation of what they believe. Rather, my interlocutors and I were in a similar situation—each possessing the knowledge that truths are inherently partial, and holding the idea that the paths toward that truth run through empirical exploration, the key difference between myself and Thip being the kinds of questions asked of dreams and mediums, and the sorts of information desired.

Fieldwork pushes boundaries. Such was the crux of anthropology's "reflexive turn," a turn that is largely relegated to anthropology's recent past. But in Thai-language anthropology, this notion of "boundary" (*chai-daen*) has found new relevance. Expanding upon the notion of "border" and "boundary," Jakkrit Sangkhamanee (2017b) argues that ethnographic fieldwork is a process of pushing the boundaries not of knowledge, but of what falls under the gaze of knowledge in ways that also complicate the divide between the personal and the academic. One recalls the disbelief in an undergraduate student's voice when reading ethnography for the first time—"This isn't *data*! This is *personal anecdote*!" Contributors Samak Kosem (2017) and Soimart Rungmanee (2017) each in different ways expand upon the personal nature of ethnographic fieldwork—separations and boundaries between informant and researcher are as extensive as the other kinds of boundaries that I complicate here. As coresearchers, my interlocutors and I speculated about things as varied as the affection of a distant romantic partner, the nature of reality, or the quality of data, and in our talks we attempted to understand (but not resolve) the incommensurate glimpses that we each gleaned. It is this mutual entanglement of ideas about the mutual entanglement of human, nonhuman, and inhuman worlds that I seek to elucidate here.

The research that I conducted took two phases: one based in Bangkok among migrant workers, and another in the town of Ban Beuk, a municipality (*tambol*) in Thailand's northeast. Within tambol Ban Beuk are three subunits: Ban Beuk village, Ban Thong village, and Ban Kham village—all within fifteen minutes' drive from each other. While I lived in Ban Beuk, many of my interlocutors (Lert, for instance) came from these nearby towns.

Bangkok and Ban Beuk are linked: the majority of my interlocutors in Ban Beuk had worked as migrant laborers in Bangkok. Indeed, it was partially through meeting the latter that I initially became interested in working in Ban

Beuk. The flow back and forth between a remote rural fishing village, the Thai capital, and international chains of labor demonstrates the impossibility—if it was ever possible—of conceiving of small-scale, village-based fieldwork; the villagers of Ban Beuk are certainly cosmopolitans "from below," in Breckenridge's sense (Breckenridge et al. 2002).

All of my interlocutors were northeasterners, a label with heavy significance in Thailand, something into which I delve in more detail in chapter 1. Thailand's northeast, or Isan (I use the terms interchangeably), is its poorest region and one known for political divisions with Bangkok. It was and is still occasionally referred to as a Lao region, as its people before the twentieth century leaned closer to Vientiane than Bangkok (or Bangkok's predecessor, Ayutthaya). Indeed, the label *Lao* before the twentieth century indicated not a specific language or ethnicity as it does now, but a pejorative term referring to anyone from the lands north or northeast of Bangkok—*Siam* being the older term for the Central Thai heartland. Under the heavily centralized Thai state, Isan languished in relative poverty, poverty that bred resentment toward Bangkok and occasionally flared into various revolts (from millenarian to communist to democratic) during the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries (see Pattana 2015).

Today, Isan is still largely Lao-speaking, although the label *Lao* covers a multitude of different dialects. Lao is close to, but not mutually intelligible with, Thai, and the similarities and differences between the two languages (and local dialects) lead to an intricate array of code switches in everyday conversation, with local terms played up to emphasize difference from Bangkok or, occasionally, Central Thai features (e.g., a rolled *r*) when people wanted to adopt an official, authoritative stance. Occasionally, this latter drops into satire, with heavy Bangkok *r*s dropped into the middle of words where they do not ordinarily go (e.g., "Nong Khrrrai" instead of the province name Nong Khai). With me, most used Vientiane Lao or Bangkok Thai, two languages in which I am fluent, although local dialects varied from village to village (villagers in Ban Thong, for instance, spoke a dialect more similar to that of Loei province in Thailand or Luang Prabang, in Laos).

Ban Beuk is a town of approximately three hundred households. In turn, Ban Kham has eighty and Ban Thong, 110. I chose the site for a number of related reasons: some of the interlocutors that I got to know working on spirit shrines in Bangkok were from the district; an environmental nongovernment organization (NGO) leader whom I knew from Nong Khai had a friend in the village headman; and Ban Beuk sits close to where the Mekong emerges from Lao PDR to form the Thai-Lao border, thus making it one of the first sites in Thailand to be downstream of the Sayaburi dam project.[16]

During my fieldwork, I lived in a room that Mon, a fisherman of around my age, let out during the winter months to passing tourists (indeed, he often let out his own room and slept in a tent on the riverbank during the high season). In 2015–2016, and for periods in 2017 and 2019, I stayed close with him and his family, fishing with his brothers, attending temple services with his sisters, and interviewing (and fishing with) men in the town. Later, Pla and Kai, two local activists, moved into town, and together we arranged for a group of local high school and college-aged students to conduct a formal survey of fishermen in the area (for most of these, this involved interviewing their parents, aunts, uncles, and grandparents).

Ban Beuk is a pseudonym, as are Ban Kham and Ban Thong. The names are the most generic that I could come up with—although "Beuk" is named after the giant catfish that forms a central part of this book (not to mention the pun on *book*), "Kham" and "Thong" are words for "gold."[17] In addition to the standard ethical practice of granting anonymity to research interlocutors, the current Thai political climate raises the stakes for all involved. The Ban Beuk section of my research was done in the wake of the 2014 coup d'état and subsequent political repression of prodemocratic Red Shirt activists.[18] My informants who self-identified as former Red Shirts (and even some of their rival Yellow Shirts) now report fear over political repression and harassment by police.

This threat extended to me as well. At the International Conference of Thai Studies in 2017, where I presented this work, five Thai studies scholars were charged with unlawful assembly (Pratchatai 2017). Based upon my support of these scholars, I am detained and questioned by immigration police each time that I enter and leave Thailand. At another presentation of this work at Chiang Mai University, soldiers lined the back of the room and photographed my talk and others. While this book does not deal directly with the coup and the subsequent repression and crackdown, the simple topic of Isan evoked political divisiveness. Former Red Shirts were deliberately targeted by the military following the coup, and environmental issues and activism of any kind were—are—sensitive topics.

With that in mind, I trust the reader can forgive the omission of an exact location for Ban Beuk. But I can give a general introduction.

BAN BEUK

Ban Beuk is three parallel lines running southeast.

The first of these is the ridgeline of a low series of hills, covered in alternating forest and small-scale plantations of rubber, papaya, and banana. The ridge

marks an important geographic distinction, separating the central Isan plateau from the Mekong valley proper, and dividing realms dominated by farmers from those dominated by fishermen. Except where rural roads cut through passes, this ridge is sharp enough that farmers must come and go on foot, up red-orange dirt tracks.

An hour farther south, past the district seat, enterprising temple administrations have built platforms from which one can look out over the Mekong River, especially in the winter, where morning fog makes a "sea of clouds" (*thale mohk*) over the valley.[19] In Ban Beuk itself, a shrine to the lord of nagas—river dragons that play an important role in this book—sits atop one such viewpoint, and a medium for this spirit makes his practice here in a cave that was, thousands of years ago, a copper mine.

From these viewpoints, one looks out across the Mekong River into the Lao PDR. Excepting slightly fewer electric lights on the Lao side, the view toward either bank is much the same: secondary-growth forest alternating with plantations and small towns. In the dry seasons, fires planted by farmers often run out of control, and plumes of smoke dot the horizon during the day, changing to low red flames at night. But these fires burn on the Thai side as well.

The next line is the highway. It is a narrow road with a single lane running in each direction, built in the 1980s with the assistance of the military. It is not a major traffic artery—to get between provincial capitals in the region, such as Loei, Nong Khai, or Udon Thani, one should take Highway 210, much farther inland. But there is some traffic heading between district seats, stocking markets or transporting livestock. Occasionally this combination of narrow road and traffic can be deadly: in 2016 in Ban Beuk, an eighteen-wheeler went off the road and destroyed a villager's house, killing the woman inside—an aunt of my key interlocutor, Mon.

Mostly, one takes this road just to take it. It makes for a pretty drive, when it comes across broad vistas over the river. In the cold season, domestic tourists—mostly Thais from Bangkok or Khon Kaen—descend upon the district seat, looking for Mekong River fish and cold lemonade in the afternoon, but these tourists usually pass by Ban Beuk in a blur on their way to the trendier town of Chiang Khan.

Alongside the highway run Ban Beuk's houses. Most stick close to the main road, but in the centers of Ban Beuk, Ban Kham, and Ban Thong, side roads branch off for two or three blocks. These houses are made partially of cinderblock and partially of wood and follow the pattern typical to Thai-Lao homes: two floors, with the upper story for sleeping, and the lower used for housing animals, fishing nets, and motorcycles. This lower level is where people rest

during the heat of the day, sleeping in hammocks, doing laundry, mending nets, or chatting with neighbors. It is where most of my fieldwork took place.

On the side of the road, bamboo platforms create other ubiquitous spaces. These are spaces of waiting. One waits on the platforms for the bus or for fishermen to return, or one just waits there for the day to pass. In the middle of the day, older women sit watching people come and go. On other platforms, women lay out the day's catch, the fish often still gasping in the air. A big fish—a large goonch catfish (*pa khae*), for instance—will draw people from across the street to ask about it: where it was caught, by whom, how much it will sell for, what techniques brought it in. This last question is a loaded one; it means, "Did the fisherman use an electric shock or dynamite to get the fish?," techniques that are extremely common but also universally frowned upon. Alternately, it might suggest a particular magical spell (*khatha*) that particular fishermen were known to use (but never divulge). At night on these platforms, men gather and drink Sangsom rum, industrially produced rice wine (*sii-sip degree*), or large bottles of Leo beer, and talk about migrant work, the river, women, and ghosts, if not always in that order.

The third line is the riverbank.

At Ban Beuk, the Mekong River forms the border between Thailand and the Lao PDR. The word *Mekong* is a simplification of the Thai *mae nam khong* (Lao: *nam khong*). While foreign travelogues have pointed to the evocative "mother of waters," which is the literal translation of *mae nam*, in practice the name is not so poetic. It is just "Khong River," or simply, in local parlance, "Khong water."

The river flows from its headwaters in Tibet, through China, where it is the "Turbulent River" (*lancang jiang*).[20] Then, as it emerges from Yunnan Province, it weaves between the Southeast Asian countries, first creating the border between Laos and Burma near the infamous Golden Triangle, then demarcating the border between Thailand and Laos at Chiang Khong. Disappearing back into Laos, the river reaches the old Lao royal capital of Luang Prabang, flows through the Sayaburi Dam site, then reemerges to create the border again at Chiang Khan. For a great stretch, the Mekong divides Thailand and Laos before it disappears back into Laos near the old city of Champassak. At the Lao-Cambodian border, it enters a dramatic series of waterfalls at Khone and flows into Cambodia. There, in Cambodia, where the river simply becomes "the great river," the Mekong becomes the environmental, ecological, and agricultural heart of the country. As it flows past the Cambodian capital, Phnom Penh, the Mekong performs a stunning hydrological feat: during the rainy season, the river flows backward, filling up the Tonle Sap lake in the cen-

ter of the country, the place where Angkor Wat is located, which was the heart of the Khmer Empire. Finally, the river flows into Vietnam, becoming known as the Seven Dragons as it divides and forms the massive Mekong Delta.

Ban Beuk has also been undergoing rapid change. From incorporation into the Siamese polity in the past century (detailed in chapter 1) to the building of infrastructure, to the communist insurgency that tore apart the village in the 1980s, the area has been in flux for years.

In broad sketches, Ban Beuk looks like many other towns in the northeast. There is a clear class division, with local administrators and teachers on top. Women in Ban Beuk on average make more than men, given the fact that girls are more likely to complete their education than boys, and thus women dominate within middle-range bureaucratic jobs, although the town's mayor, headmen, and district head are men. Among these male officials, most also own a host of fishing and agricultural pursuits, including private fishing grounds (*luang mong*) in the river, riverbank gardens for flood-retreat agriculture, and cash crop orchards stretching up the side of the hill. Beneath this stratum are those who rely solely upon fishing, and beneath them again are those who do so without a dedicated fishing ground. Finally, there are those that own no land and get by doing odd jobs for other villagers or perhaps fishing with a hand net on a public spot.

Nearly everyone, male and female, excepting the very poor, had gone elsewhere for several years to work as migrant labor.[21] Some of these—men of a certain age and women of a younger generation—worked in factories in Bangkok, Taiwan, Israel, South Korea, or a host of other sites. Some women had also been sex workers in Bangkok or abroad, and some married foreigners and sent money back home (see Johnson 2018). All families with whom I spoke had some member located abroad, and all relied upon their own or other family members' remittances to get by.

The road through the town was completed roughly thirty years ago, and most of the wealthier residents travel on occasion to nearby centers in Nong Khai, Loei, Udon Thani, or, more rarely, Chiang Mai or Bangkok. Children grow up quickly, and it is not uncommon to marry and have children instead of going to the final years of high school (*mathayom*). Traditionally, Lao villages are uxorilocal, with men coming from outside into the village. While this is generally the case for those born in the 1970s, younger people might be patrilocal. Indeed, there is a recent trend (expressed more in desire than in practice) for men in Ban Beuk to marry Laotian women from across the river, often in

response to an outflow of women from Ban Beuk who are marrying men from regional capitals, Bangkok, or abroad.

And soon to come is another disruption. Ban Beuk exists in the path of China's Belt and Road Initiative, a proposition that will remake the Mekong River and run high-speed rail from China to Singapore near the town. Another Chinese measure is the blasting of rapids in the Mekong, in order to render the river navigable to container ships, at least from Jinghong past Luang Prabang to Vientiane.

What was always a cosmopolitan town, sending out locals abroad, will suddenly have the world not just at its doorstep, but rushing by at high velocity.

OUTLINE OF CHAPTERS

This book is divided into six chapters. This chapter, the introduction, has described the central ideas of the text and key arguments in the literature as well as Ban Beuk itself. Then, in chapter 1, "Naga and Garuda," I look at Ban Beuk as a border town, between Thailand and Laos. Drawing upon theories of the border (cf. Nail 2016), I see the town's marginality as enabling certain flows and distributions of power. Additionally, I situate Ban Beuk in regional history, especially in light of moments of economic, political, and religious revolution in Thailand's northeast, beginning with the millenarian *phi bun* (Holy Man) revolts around the turn of the twentieth century. These revolutions proclaimed a coming radical change in reality, both political and in the natural world (cf. Keyes 1977; Murdoch 1974; Toem 1987). They coincided with the incorporation of Isan into the Thai polity, and the attempt by Bangkok to create an absolute monarchy where once were tributary states with their own dynasties. This I relate to later revolutions, including that of the Communist Party of Thailand, which had its base near Ban Beuk and whose actions in turn triggered the direct military rule of the town. And, more recently, the Red Shirt movement, which called for, among other things, increased political power in the provinces, had Isan at its core. Revolution seems integral to the soil of Isan, and, accordingly, I discuss the region as Bangkok's "skeptical frontier," where the hegemony of the center-oriented Thai state dwindles.

Now is no different. In the current revolution in the natural world, when nature itself is becoming altered, these latent apocalyptic and messianic futures suddenly seem about to manifest, especially as the Thai monarchy under Rama X has seemed to reach a low point. Here, then, I ask: How are the collapse of political, economic, and environmental futures linked? How is the erosion of royal sovereignty (in a sense of *khwam pen jao*) linked with the

decline of the river? What life is imagined to persist (and how) in the "blasted landscape" (Tsing 2015) after the revolution? How does hydropower play into such moments of revolt?

In my second chapter, "River Beings," I turn to an analysis of the Mekong, those within its waters, and those on its banks. Here, too, I deal with the dam. Unlike previous work on hydropower on the Mekong (Goldman 2005; Whitington 2018), my focus is not on those creating it, but rather on how it affects those downstream. The dam, in this volume, is a distant source—an absent thing that has very real consequences upon the networks of living and nonliving, material and spirit, downstream.

Water, fish, and humans are intertwined in intimate ways, both biological and social, extending even to the incorporation of river flukes into human and fish bodies, changing immune systems in ways that can be both beneficial and catastrophic (Echaubard et al. 2016). As the title of the chapter suggests, playing upon Marisol de la Cadena's "earth beings," I draw here upon new work on new materialism (Hastrup and Hastrup 2016), the "nonhuman turn" in anthropology (Grusin 2015), and the interplay between geography, ecology, and local knowledge (Cruikshank 2005; de la Cadena 2015).

But what I discovered was that, in the wake of the dams, the ways in which one dwells with the river fail—water in the new river comes in the dry season without, or with different kinds of, fish. And as previously known qualities of the river cease to be, water reemerges as something unreadable, something under the sway of a distant force. In short, the whole appears to be more than the sum of its parts—something additional, something occult, is acting along with the material qualities of the river. While new materialist literature stresses the productive power of material actors (Bennett 2010), here I choose to look at those actors that are not directly present.

People, too, are absent-present. I continue in chapter 3, "Dwelling under Distant Suns," to look at the relationship between Ban Beuk and migrant labor. The figure of the migrant, like that of the dam, becomes a lens through which to see how power and potency are experienced in Ban Buek. Via engagement with worlds elsewhere—via learning to live in and be a part of a foreign world, be that world Bangkok, Seoul, or Sweden—these migrants access new sources of distant potential and promise to bring it back home. But as the anxieties of my interlocutors suggest, such a return might not happen. If migrant workers are a sort of shaman, sent abroad to return with power, they, like the shaman, return changed, if at all.

My metaphor of a more cosmological, animist way of seeing power in connection with migration is intentional. Other-than-humans migrate, too. Mon

and others discussed nagas who "died" but returned in a ghostly form to give gifts to those on the riverbank. New spirits arrived, and old spirits either transformed or lost their power in the landscape of the new Mekong. In chapter 4, "The River Grew Tired of Us," I look at this transformation. I ask, how does the movement of gods and spirits, water serpents and ghosts, fit into the larger moment of migrants and dams, changes in the water and in the political fortunes of Isan?

Finally, in chapter 5, "Human and Inhuman Worlds," I return to the theoretical ideas with which I began: potency, dwelling, and opacity. I look at the speculative aspect of the future promised (or threatened) by revenants such as the naga, the island king, the phi bun of the 1920s, the migrant, the dam, or the many others that I describe here. This speculative time becomes intertwined with notions of hope (Miyazaki 2004) and doubt (Bubandt 2014), as it is in the fragmentation of worlds in which one dwells that new possibilities come into being. Here I argue that the search for efficacy along the Mekong reveals the unknown and opaque not as an ontological problem to be resolved, but as a means of productively breaking apart the world in order to open the space for new possibilities. Thus, changes arising from the new Mekong point not to a re-formation around an ontological proposition, an assimilation and dispelling of doubt and risk, but instead a way of living with a new, weird existence, one in which opacity is fundamentally embedded. Out of this configuration emerges the figure of the inhuman—a being who is a subject, but whose subject position is unimaginable. One cannot—and does not try—to think like the naga's ghost, but one must engage with it nonetheless. I argue that this perspective sheds new light on what it means to live with things beyond our ken without reducing them to that which emerges from human worlds.

NOTES

INTRODUCTION: THROUGH A GLASS, DARKLY

1 I transcribe what Lert said here as he said it. Three dialects were spoken in the area where I conducted fieldwork. Central Thai remains hegemonic and is the language of education and administration, while most residents spoke either Northern Lao or Vientiane Lao. I am fluent in all three, although much more comfortable in Central Thai. I spoke Vientiane Lao—heavily interspersed with Central Thai terms—with Lert.

2 All names are pseudonyms. When I refer to municipal zones, I am translating from the Thai terms. Here, *town* refers to a *baan*, *subdistrict* refers to *tambol*, *district* refers to *amphoe*, and *province* to *jangwat.* I am specific only to the jangwat level (Nong Khai). Here, *thammasat* is a Lao pronunciation of what in Central Thai would be *thammachat*. It has nothing to do with the term for Dharmic law, also pronounced *thammasat*.

3 The choice here to use *world* at times and *world-making project* at others is deliberate. As I argue in this book, a Buddhist world (and a "weird" world) is one that exists, but which is inaccessible in its entirety. Thus, a world-making project refers to the actions that reveal portions of the world, and *world* refers to the reality that is (dharma) both inside and outside of human action.

4 While climate change and the unpredictability of the monsoon are issues for the Mekong, the dam is a far more proximate and influential force. The Anthropocene, indicating as it does a world in which human forces are inseparable from nonhuman forces, encapsulates both carbon spat into the air and concrete slung across rivers—both are environment-changing human actions.

5 Each of these words is identically romanized in the two languages (Lao and Thai) used in my fieldwork, although tone, unmarked in romanization, differs.

6 Yai is, of course, not entirely correct. The Mekong has its headwaters in Tibet, certainly near snow-covered mountains but far from the England that she often assumed was my birthplace (however, I was born in the Norfolk in Virginia, not the UK). I could not be American, Yai suggested, as I was too thin and small to have grown up on pizza and hamburgers. As another example of Yai's understanding of geography, she became convinced that I had died during an earthquake in Nepal in 2015, as the Himalayas were, for her, next to meuang farang.

7 Thai and Lao nicknames—used far more often than real names—are often very different from official names, and often are drawn from pop culture. Yai's son's nickname was Superman, shortened to Man. She had named her children after the cartoons she watched while pregnant.

8 *Gypsy* and *Lapp* are offensive terms. I reproduce them here because Mauss used them and because more readers would recognize these terms than *Roma* or *Saami*.

9 Benjamin Baumann chooses just this word—*numinal*—to describe the Thai concept of *phi* (ghost, spirit). I use it here to underscore the idea of a being in touch with something beyond individual ken.

10 Dan Lusthaus (2002) describes a "Buddhist phenomenology" in a rather different manner than I do here, via a deep reading of Mahayana texts.

11 I transliterate the term *charoen* in accordance with the Royal Thai system (Johnson 2014). However, this does an injustice to the consonant *j*, which is an unaspirated *ch*. It is neither the full *ch* as in English (e.g., *char*) nor the voiced *j* (e.g., *jar*), but something in between the two.

12 "Buddha" is not a name but a title for one who has achieved this status. In Theravada tradition, only Siddhartha Gautama has achieved Buddha status, roughly 2,562 years ago.

13 In her analysis of medical health professionals in Thailand, Daena Aki Funahashi (2016) discusses the use of the term *panya*, "wisdom." For Funahashi, invocations of these differential levels of panya by Thai experts was a way to legitimate a hierarchical form of governance. Indeed, this is the implication of such a system. But here I seek to look at the differential invocation of wisdom and knowledge on a more personal level.

14 I am indebted to Daena Funahashi for this term.

15 Haraway also mentions Lovecraft's racism and rejects it as a symbol of xenophobia, while at the same time appropriating the word *Cthulhu* in her own way.

16 Here I am using a romanization of the Thai term for the place. A Lao romanization would be Sainyabuli or Xayabuli.

17 American readers might imagine Smithfield, Springfield, and the slightly more exotic Catfishfield.

18 See Sopranzetti (2012; 2017b) for more detail.

19 I do not name the district seat (amphoe) for confidentiality purposes. It is a town of about three thousand people (i.e., everything within the central tambol), about thirty minutes' drive from Ban Beuk. Here, I refer to it simply as "the district head" or "the district seat."

20 The Chinese *Lancang* may have a relationship with the Lao *Lanxang* or Thai *Lanchang*, "One Million Elephants," the name of the historical Lao kingdom centered on the banks of the Mekong. Such a Tai-langauge link would be unsurprising, as Xisuangbanna, where the Mekong flows last before it enters Southeast Asia, is dominated by Lue speakers, a language close to Lao. Indeed, *Xisuangbanna* is a sinification of *Sip-song panna* (twelve principalities).

21 Indeed, the wealthiest man in the village, Pong, had worked for a time as unskilled labor in Taiwan. To find villagers who were too wealthy for migrant work, one had to go to the district seat.