

BUILDING THE COMMUNITY OF ENVIRONMENTAL INTERESTS IN LANCANG-MEKONG RIVER BASIN

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Abstract: *The development and conservation of water environment in Lancang-Mekong Basin (LMB) has been a critical issue. This paper proposes building a community of environmental interests (COET) in the basin as a means to solve the problem regarding basin-wide water resources governance from a community point of view. This paper first introduces the concept of COET as an organic life form with multiple participants and presents four characteristics of COET combined with the feature of LMB. Then the necessity of building COET is analyzed from three aspects. Furthermore, a “five-step” plan to build COET is suggested. In the last part, both theoretical and practical values of this paper are discussed, and directions for future research are provided. This paper tries to enrich the work of the community by reconstructing the concept in the context of water resource governance, which expands the theoretical boundary of community theory. By identifying the four main characteristics of COET, this paper tries to enrich the body of knowledge in this field.*

Keywords: *Lancang-Mekong basin, community, water environment*

Introduction

The development and conservation of the water environment in Lancang-Mekong Basin (LMB) has always been critical. The main issues include: maintaining the balance between water resource development and environmental conservation, and rationally allocating costs and benefits between upstream and downstream countries. However, due to the inconsistent interest appeals among countries in LMB, the “mechanism congestion” has caused fragmentation of LMB’s environmental governance (Guo & Ren, 2013). It is difficult to form a unified comprehensive basin-wide governance, which leads to serious problems in basin management.

In order to resolve the above mentioned issues and provide a global governance mechanism with Chinese characteristics, China and other countries in LMB (namely Thailand, Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar and Vietnam) initiated Lancang-Mekong Corporation (LMC) in 2016. Such an initiation guided by the spirit of community has paved the way for the era of building a community with a shared future. Building a community with a shared future with Lancang-Mekong nations under LMC mechanism is not only a Chinese solution to solve the dilemma of the water environment governance in LMB, but also an important support to China’s “One belt and road” initiative.

For the successful implementation of the project, it is vital to combine the characteristics of the river basin and take into account the common environmental interests of the basin countries while alleviating the pressure of environmental encroachment in the basin. Therefore, this research proposes building a community of environmental interests (COET) because of the natural characteristics of international rivers. As one of the most important international rivers in Asia, the demand for water resources in the countries along the Mekong River is more diversified and the environmental problems caused by it are increasing. As a responsible country, China has the obligation to maintain regional stability and environmental security. This requires China and countries in LMB to jointly build COET to solve environmental problems.

However, the research on COET at this stage has just began, and no theoretical system has yet been formed. The literature review reveals that the existing research lacks a clear understanding of environmental interests and COET from a perspective of river basin water resources management. The review also shows a lack of a multi-subject, multi-level, multi-objective framework design and a sound promotion strategy for building COET. As a result, the purpose of this paper is to propose a "five-step" building path for COET by first defining COET and then identifying why COET is necessary.

Concept of COET

Concept of community

The word community originally comes from Latin and means fellowship. Despite its use in many fields, the definition of community is still debatable. However, scholars' understanding of community has shifted from the "original community" that grew up naturally to the "contemporary community" that was built.

The earliest attempt to define community as an independent concept in sociology was made by a well-known German sociologist Ferdinand Tonnies (Tonnies, 1957). For him, a community is primarily an organic whole that naturally grows as a link between blood, emotion, and ethical unity. Its basic forms include community of blood relations, neighborhood and spirits. The essence of a community is a realistic and organic lifeform, including all intimate, secret, and simple common life. In a community, human beings are willing to share common issues with each other. The community is not the sum of several different forms of expression, but a vibrant organism that combines the body with the blood.

Based on the classic definition, an original community can be interpreted as a social community naturally formed under the ties of blood, geographic region,

religion, and ethnicity; in fact a community consists of a stable group of people whose common life is linked by a certain bond.

Yet the concept of original community continues to collapse with the development of globalization, advancement of scientific and technological communication methods, and the decreasing influence of blood relationships and association with a region. The relations between an individual and group is constantly redefined in new contexts and it leads to a shift from original community to contemporary community. The main reason for the emergence of contemporary community is dis-embedding caused by modernity which led to be reconstructing of the original scene by reinstalling time and space (Giddens, 2000). It is well established that characteristics of a contemporary community includes homogeneity (Redfield, 1941), emotional resonance, and publicity (Brint, 2001), dependency and exclusivity (Webber, 1997). Built on their previous work, Zhao *et al.* (2016) also argues that publicity is an inherent characteristic of contemporary community, and dependency is a deserved characteristic.

Based on reviewed literature, COET in this paper is taken as a form of contemporary community. It can be understood as an organic life form built by people and groups, who have similar lifestyles, cultural traditions, and value appeals and shared interest, with a strong sense of collective identity and a high degree of social integration of the political and economic lives in a specific region (Zhang, 2010; Zhao, 2016).

Concept of community of interests

Contemporary community, though discussed in various contexts, can be understood as a community of interests which serves the purpose of fulfilling the needs of its members.

'Interest' is an important basic point for the existence and development of a community as an organic life form, and is also an important link for sustaining a community. In this organic life form, interest is the core content, in which shared interests become the basis, and community remains the organizational form (Marx & Engels, 1985). To be more specific, interests are multivalent (i.e., national, regional and global) and comprehensive. They include various dimensions such as economic, political, cultural and security aspects.

The community of interest in this paper refers to a community of international interests, which is formed against the background of power transition and international system transformation. Essentially, such a community is a corporation mechanism aimed at improving its members' abilities to cope with risks. As such the purpose of such a community of interest is to deepen regional cooperation, eliminate

regional security risks, and ultimately seek common areas of development by expanding the mutual interests of its members. The community interests include: economic, security and humanistic interests.

Specifically speaking, economic interest is a driving force and one of the most important national interests. Due to globalization, the power of any single country is limited; therefore, countries strengthen their cooperation to safeguard and expand their own economic interests. The important premise of the existence of communities of interest is that the increment of net income of each interested body is greater than zero. After joining a community of interests, each interested body needs to take into account the benefits of other members of the community while pursuing its own interests (Yi, 2009; Zhang & Zhang, 2012).

The concept of security is no longer limited to the military but also to economy, finance, energy, ecology, information, and culture. A community of security interest is an integrated group (Van, 1952; Deutsch *et al.*, 1957). A multi security community is an institutional arrangement made to eliminate disruptions as the members in the community have strong mutual trust among each other (Adler & Barnett, 1998). Members of a community of interest may have different security interests because they come from various political and cultural backgrounds and share inconsistent interests and geopolitics. Hence, common security awareness and responsibility should be enhanced.

Humanistic interests act promotes a healthy development of community of interests. Members of community of interests articulate political systems, mode of development, and religious beliefs; therefore, expanding humanistic interests by mutual communication plays a key role in ensuring a healthy and stable development of community of interests. It is essential to keep in mind that there is no good or bad culture. As a result, members need to make themselves understandable instead of being assimilative. In other words, members need to respect cultural diversities and differentiations, and weaken and shelve the contradictions and disagreements implicit in the ideological and political systems within the community.

Concept of COET

With increasing emphasis on the environment in recent years, the concept of a community of interest has been reinterpreted. In LMB, water environment governance is the core of inter-national environmental cooperation. Hence, this paper proposes the concept of COET by focusing on the water environment. The COET refers to the organic life form in which interested bodies jointly govern the water-related environmental issues in the river basin and share the benefits brought in by the healthy water ecological environment based on the integrity of the eco-system and the

dependency of the impacts of water environment. COET is built upon shared water-related interests and trust rooted in collective identification among countries in LMB. According to this interpretation, the COET has the following characteristics:

First, the formation of COET is based on the joint water-related interests of the basin nations. Participants do not passively acquire ecological benefits. Instead, under the guiding concept of sustainable development, they obtain more economic benefits from the environment through organic integration and scientific management of watersheds.

Second, the COET works as an action-based coalition for the participants to develop water resources and protect water environment in LMB. Nations in LMB, as the most important participants in COET, strive to identify with each other. Each subject realizes its own interests without prejudice to the interests of other participating parties, thus promoting the development of the basin's environmentally interested community.

Third, the COET is a geo-community as it exists in a specific basin and inherently possesses a geographical relationship. Participants rely on each other as they pursue similar values in preserving water environment and, therefore, develop trust among each other based on the similar environment they live in. In this sense, the COET is also a contemporary community of spirits.

Fourth, the COET is a specific form of the "community of shared future for mankind". Building COET requires empathy from every nation involved. By means of emphasis on emotional bond among the nations, it helps promote friendship among nations, thus promoting deep and sustainable cooperation in the development and utilization of water environment. This approach could effectively transform the original water ownership threat to resource development. With the participation of water environmental governance as a turning point, nations in LMB can form a mutually interdependent relationship, thereby constructing a "community of shared future for mankind".

The necessity of building COET

There are three reasons why building COET is necessary in the context of transformed international relations.

First, building COET plays a critical role in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), proposed by Chinese President, Xi Jinping, in 2013. It emphasizes building a community of shared interests, destiny and responsibility featuring mutual political trust, economic integration and cultural inclusiveness. The initiative covers the entire region of LMB, which makes the basin a very promising economic zone. With the cooperation of water resources management, the establishment of COET will provide

a practical mechanism for cross-border cooperation among countries in the basin so as to fully tap the potential of the basin countries and promote the implementation of BRI initiative in LMB.

Second, building COET could strongly support the process of building a community of shared futures with Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). Dialogues between China and ASEAN began in 1991. Since China participated in the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia, (TAC), it has formed a peaceful and promising strategic partnership with ASEAN. In October 2013, while visiting Southeast Asian Nations, Chinese President, Xi Jinping, advocated the building of a community of shared futures with ASEAN. China and ASEAN have chosen the development of LMB as a key area of cooperation. In this sense, building COET would be important in supporting and promoting cooperation in the region. Third, building COET would be a concrete implementation of Lancang-Mekong Cooperation mechanism. In November 2014, Chinese Prime Minister, Li Keqiang, proposed discussing the establishment of a dialogue and cooperation mechanism in LMB under the China-ASEAN (10+1) framework. In March 2016, the first 'Leaders Meeting of the Lancang-Mekong River Cooperation' was held in Sanya, Hainan. In Sanya Declaration, China and other nations in LMB listed political security, economic and sustainable development, and social and humanitarian action as the three pillars of Lancang-Mekong cooperation. Five major areas of priority have been identified, including cross-border cooperation in water resource governance and poverty reduction. This shows that Lancang-Mekong Cooperation is a multilateral dialogue mechanism focusing on water resources and the environment. Hence, building COET and its subsequent implementation guarantees the implementation of Lancang-Mekong cooperation.

The path to building COET

Existing research on building a community of shared futures for mankind has proposed different directions. For example, Wang (2016) argues that it needs to follow the principle of easy-first. Others have suggested three stages to build it. They are: developing the economy first, gaining political security, and then developing mutual trust and common prosperity (Zhai, 2013; Liu, 2014; Liu, 2015). This paper draws on the propositions made by previous research and proposes a five-step path

Step 1: Expand common water-related economic interests among participants by exploiting the advantages of hydropower cooperation to the fullest, as common economic interests is the driving force in building COET. In LMB, most countries are economically under-developed; and are therefore, constantly expanding their mutual

interests in water-related field and developing the basin's economy. Participants in COET have ample hydropower resources and member nations enjoy a long history of cooperation in hydropower. Thus, it will be easier and more efficient to make hydropower development a starting point to enhance the economic development in LMB.

Drawing upon the theory of governance, it is important to motivate non-government participants to boost their legitimacy by adopting marketing operations to achieve multi-agent coordinated development (Yang & Yu, 2004). On one hand, on the basis of the cooperation framework established by the central governments of various countries, local governments should vigorously advance the process of cooperation and make decisions when necessary. On the other hand, as a participant in market activities, relevant companies should take into account the economic interests of the company while not engaging in "one-shot sales" and communicate with other relevant entities to ensure the sustenance of development activities. That is, they need to communicate with other related participants to ensure that development activities are sustainable. Furthermore, Non-governmental Organizations (NGOs) can communicate and negotiate with the government and enterprises on behalf of various interest groups to enhance the people's interests and make up for the inadequacies of governments and the markets.

Step 2: Consolidate the common interests regarding water security of the basin countries by deepening cross-border joint law enforcement and strengthening mutual political trust among countries as water security is the cornerstone of building COET. Although security is the primary need of every country, due to historical reasons, some nations in LMB tend to rely on the United States politically and on China economically. This kind of dual allegiance has lowered the mutual trust of the countries in the basin creating an unfavorable situation for cross-basin governance and construction of COET.

As a major political power in the river basin, China can strengthen mutual political trust among the basin nations through both government and non-government interactions. First, China can better its national image through the cooperation of civil organizations and in the mean time, strengthen the people-to-people diplomacy through Chinese companies operating in the Fen River Basin. By doing this, China can alleviate the perceived threat. Then, it can reduce other participants' political dependency on the United States, Japan, and other countries. By these means nations in COET can adhere to the overall development and strengthen the cohesion of environmental interests. In order to achieve this goal, a more comprehensive dialogue mechanism among local governments and leaders of countries needs to be formed.

Step 3: Upgrade the common water ecological environment of countries in the basin by optimizing the water environment to build “Green Lang-Mekong Basin” for water ecological environment interests. Such an effort plays an important role in making ecology as the foundation of COET.

In November 2017, the Lancang-Mekong River Environmental Cooperation Center was established in Beijing, China. This will promote cooperation between the six countries in the LMB for the ecological environmental protection and promote sustainable development in the region. In the future, countries in the basin need to carry out a top-level design for environmental cooperation and promote regional environmental policies as well as communication and dialogue. In the process of carrying out pragmatic project cooperation, participants can concentrate their efforts on flagship projects and gradually form a new model of regional cooperation to provide the all-round intellectual support for regional cooperation.

Step 4: Establish and improve the institutional mechanism and upgrade common interests into joint responsibility to promote the sustainable and healthy development of COET. A sound institutional mechanism can be an important factor supporting the sustainable development of COET.

China first needs to establish and improve the bilateral and multilateral dialogue mechanisms aimed at building COET under the framework of the existing Lancang-Mekong Cooperation mechanism. Then, it is of great importance to shape the discourse power relationship by interpreting the concept of COET. By avoiding misunderstandings related to COET, neighboring countries will have a common sense of a shared future. To take it one step further, it is also critical to ensure each country's interest, regardless of size and strength, and assume corresponding responsibility in the dialogue mechanism. Countries, therefore, can share the same powers and responsibilities and work together to promote the sustainable development of the community.

Step 5: Strengthen humanistic bonds to connect the people in LMB. To build COET means to strengthen the common identity and values of all the participating countries. Realizing the connectivity of people in LMB is the sign and ultimate goal for the steady development of COET. To achieve this goal, it is necessary to strengthen cultural and educational interaction among the countries in the basin.

The connectivity of people in LMB is complicated. This is because there are deep social and cultural roots that countries in LMB share; however, some difficulties from the past still remain. Hence, on one hand, China needs to continue increasing the number of students from the basin countries to study in China and set up research projects on watershed environmental issues to encourage multinational cooperation in

scientific research. On the other hand, China needs to negotiate visa-free agreements with the countries in LMB to create conditions for expanding cultural exchanges with the basin countries.

Conclusion

In the era of building communities of shared future with Lancang-Mekong nations, it is of great importance to combine the characteristics of the river basin and take into account the common environmental interests of the basin countries while alleviating the pressure of environmental degradation. As an attempt to resolve this problem, this paper first clarifies the concept of COET and explains its characteristics by drawing on previous research. In this paper, COET is understood as the organic life form in which interested bodies jointly govern the water-related environmental issues in the river basin and share the benefits brought by the healthy water ecological environment based on the integrity of the eco-system and the dependency of the impacts of water environment. It proposes building COET upon shared water-related interests and trust rooted in collective identification among countries in LMB. Then, the necessity of building COET is justified from three aspects. In the last part, this paper proposes a “five-step” path and offers several strategies at the macro-level on how to build COET.

The paper tries to enrich the work of community by reconstructing the concept in the context of water resources governing, which expands the theoretical boundary of community theory. By identifying four main characteristics of COET, this paper tries to enrich the body of knowledge in this field.

The spirit of building the community of shared future for mankind, the path of building COET suggested in this paper could be a specific solution. For future research, more attention needs to be paid to the specific cooperation mechanism of participants in COET at multiple levels. Another research direction could be to establish a measuring system to test the degree of cooperation among participants in COET.

Acknowledgement

This paper is supported by China National Social Science Fund (Fund NO. 16ZDA046).

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