

The 53rd Broadyard Workshop
Toward Shared Growth and Prosperity
China-Thailand Lancang-Mekong Water Resources
Cooperation Seminar
July 23, 2022

The Institute of Area Studies, Peking University (PKUIAS), in collaboration with the Klang Panya Institute for National Strategies, held the China-Thailand Lancang-Mekong Water Resources Cooperation Seminar on July 23, 2022. The seminar comprised two sessions: in the first session hosted by Yuwadee Kardkarnklai, vice president and research project manager of the Klang Panya Institute for National Strategies, experts and scholars discussed topics including promoting sustainable development, water resources cooperation and water resources information sharing in the Lancang-Mekong basin; in the second session, Dr. Yannick Mieruch from the Klang Panya Institute for National Strategies read out the Sino-Thai Think Tank Cooperation Initiative by China-Thailand academic community with a shared future on promoting Lancang-Mekong water resources cooperation.

Research fellow Fang Ning, former director of the Institute of Political Science of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, made an opening remark at the seminar. He pointed out that, by taking shared ecological prosperity and common development as its theme, the seminar focused on a highly practical issue of

making efforts to jointly develop, utilize and protect resources to ensure rational water utilization. Having been friendly neighbors through history and both being part of the same cultural sphere, China and Thailand can learn from each other in many fields. Both countries are facing challenges from industrial modernization, as national industrialization and modernization would involve high risks in final stage. In order to overcome difficulties and seize opportunities, it is essential to focus on economic and social development and maintain friendly relations with neighboring countries for win-win cooperation. As Thailand is an important neighboring partner to China, the social sciences circle has an important role to play to promote common development between China and Thailand. To that end, it is imperative that we broaden and deepen relevant research and increase bilateral conversations and communications to reach consensus.

Ms. Yuwadee Kardkarnklai, vice president and research project director of the Klang Panya Institute for National Strategies, explained the background to the seminar. It is a milestone achievement of the “China-Thailand Community with a Shared Future” Academic Research Network, a cooperation project between the Thai Klang Panya Institute for National Strategies and the Chinese Grand Academy of Xiangshan. The cooperation agreement on the Network was signed last April (2021). The Network abides by the principles of diversity,

openness and inclusivity, and endeavors to strengthen communication and cooperation between academic circles in both countries. It aims to promote concerted efforts to build the China-Thailand Community with a Shared Future and to promote it to the general public. The Network also supports scholars to conduct academic research in each other's countries.

The reason that the Network chooses the Lancang-Mekong River as the focus of its first project is because the River is a practical concern to both China and the other five Lancang-Mekong countries, and it is high time to address the challenges the River and its riparian communities have been enduring. It is important to promote research on the River under the framework of the China-Thailand Community with a Shared Future on the basis of mutual trust and cooperation. The first phase of the research focused on gaining effective understanding of the changes that have taken place along the River as well as the problems and impacts these changes have brought about, including the shifts in the ways of life in local communities. After extensive interviews and research, it came to the following conclusions. First, the Mekong River has changed significantly over the past decades and the damage to the riverbanks by sudden fluctuation in water levels have impacted the life and production of riparian communities. Second, many construction projects, especially the increasing number of hydropower dams built in recent years, are often blamed by the media as a source

of various problems along the River. Finally, people have come to realize the direct link between these changes and global climate change.

As Thailand has been significantly impacted by the changes to the Mekong River, people in the eight riparian provinces in North and Northeast Thailand formed the Network of Thai People in Eight Mekong Provinces (the Thai Mekong People's Network from Eight Provinces) to look for solutions and call for the government's attention. Since the Mekong River flows through multiple countries and no single country could deal with the challenges on its own, mutual trust, communication and cooperation are crucial for Lancang-Mekong countries. This seminar is a joint effort to promote research on the China-Thailand Community with a Shared Future to seek solutions. Ms. Kardkarnklai thanked PKUIAS and other academic institutions from both China and Thailand for their great support and introduced the eight experts from the two countries.

Zhai Kun, deputy director of PKUIAS and professor at the School of International Studies, first gave a speech titled "Promoting Lancang-Mekong Water Resources Cooperation by Solidifying the Idea of Common Development", in which he discussed the development paths for building the China-Thailand community with a shared future and Lancang-Mekong water resources cooperation from the

perspective of strategic motivation at national level. The latest national-level strategic motivation for these two initiatives is the Global Development Initiative (GDI) that President Xi Jinping proposed in his address at the UN General Assembly in September 2021, which has now entered implementation stage. The GDI is, first of all, the latest development of China's global strategy. As a continuation and innovation of China's strategies – the Five Principles of Peaceful Co-existence, peace and development remaining the theme of the times, where to steer the world toward into the 21st century, harmonious world and building a community with a shared future for mankind, the GDI represents the latest development of and a Chinese solution to building a community with a shared future for mankind.

Secondly, the implementation of the GDI reflects what China has been practicing all along as “unity of knowing and doing” in carrying out its international strategies. To implement the GDI, China proposed more than 30 measures at the High-level Dialogue on Global Development in June 2022, including the most important measures such as creating the Global Development and South-South Cooperation Fund, increasing China's input to the UN Peace and Development Trust Fund, establishing a global development promotion centre, publishing Global Development Report and building a global knowledge network for development. Finally, China's GDI is a different initiative from those proposed by Western countries

mainly in that China's initiative emphasizes inclusivity and shared benefits, whereas some Western proposals target and exclude specific countries or regions. China's GDI aims to promote the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

The GDI is reflected in the following themes of the seminar. First, Lancang-Mekong water resources cooperation, a part of the cooperation between China and Thailand, is expected to be the first field and region to implement the GDI. China-Southeast Asia relations are best maintained among all China-foreign relations and therefore provide the most favourable conditions for the GDI to be first implemented in Southeast Asia and especially in the Lancang-Mekong River basin. Second, China-Thailand cooperation or the Lancang-Mekong water resources cooperation could use specific criteria of the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development to evaluate its progress and develop criteria specific to water resources for evaluation of the cooperation, and share the evaluation reports with relevant authorities in China and related countries for improvement. Finally, China should make more efforts after the pandemic to carry out field research in related areas of cooperation as soon as possible to catch up with the changes that have taken place in Lancang-Mekong countries over the past two years to overcome the "awareness gap" developed during the pandemic.

The China-Thailand academic community with a shared future gives us an advantage. Meanwhile, the Lancang-Mekong

water resources cooperation is a key part of the GDI and the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. If we act quickly, we could ride the tailwind of the latest national-level strategic motivation to make the China-Thailand Community with a Shared Future and Lancang-Mekong water resources cooperation exemplary projects or demonstration fields for implementing China's GDI.

Dr. Apichart Anukularmphai, associate professor and President of the Thailand Water Resources Association, presented his advice on Lancang-Mekong water resources information sharing. As Mekong River and Lancang River are indeed the same river, China, Myanmar, Laos, Thailand, Cambodia and Vietnam should make joint efforts to address issues related to the river. Apart from the countries along the river, countries outside the river basin have also begun to pay attention to the Mekong River, especially through activities initiated by non-governmental organizations with a particular focus on the impact of dam building, which has become a geopolitical issue. As for information and data sharing, in addition to sharing scientific data, it is also important to share successful governance experiences, as they may be relevant for other localities in the region to achieve common development.

With regard to information and data sharing, it is important to recognize that, first of all, sharing information about policies and implementation measures could deepen understanding,

generate benefits and promote future cooperation. Second, sharing information could make project implementation more efficient and bring more benefits to all parties concerned. Finally, sharing information could deepen communication and increase happiness of the riparian communities. In order to achieve the expected effect of information and data sharing, first and foremost is to establish a joint commission to oversee the collection and sharing of relevant data. Second is to set up an efficient secretariat to communicate with all relevant parties to collect and share information. Last but not the least is to establish an advisory board that comprises scholars, experts and government officials. Only when all parties collaborate with each other, can the project be comprehensively implemented without missing out any field or area. More importantly, the joint commission of the six Lancang-Mekong countries must have a well-planned roadmap and clear goals as well as political support from respective governments before it can play its role.

However, Lancang-Mekong water resources information sharing faces three major challenges that can only be dealt with by the six countries working together. First, global climate change is having an impact on all member countries. Second, economic development has led to dwindling natural resources and food shortage. Furthermore, non-governmental organizations tend to be over-simplifying in blaming dam constructions for everything without considering various

underlying factors. Dr. Anukularmphai suggested taking measures to prevent risks from the perspective of sustainable development. Information sharing should not be confined to water resources cooperation only, but instead should be expanded to many other social and economic fields, so that it can benefit the communities along the Lancang-Mekong River. Meanwhile, he expressed hopes for a non-governmental Lancang-Mekong exchange centre to be established in the future, where people from the riparian region could communicate with each other. He believes this would help improve people's living standards and promote the development of the whole region.

Dr. Anukularmphai also analysed the advantages and disadvantages of the operating mechanism of the Mekong River Commission. Currently, the Commission is only a loose organisation, which only has recommendatory power without the power to make decisions, while member states have great discretion over their projects. Although this mechanism does avoid the potential interference of each other's internal affairs, member states find it hard to face the problems on their own, as the Mekong River is, after all, an international river. It is important to encourage public participation and seek public support before launching a project, so as to prevent unnecessary troubles and facilitate smooth project implementation. The purpose of establishing a joint commission and an efficient secretariat on top of the Mekong River Commission is to collect

first-hand data to inform the public of real situations in an effort to reduce negative impacts and avoid conflicts.

Prof. Emeritus Viboon Tangkittipaporn, chairman of the Thailand Far East Legal Counsellors Ltd., shared his thoughts and suggestions on promoting Lancang-Mekong cooperation through differentiated development with a focus on economic and cultural issues. Having been a lifeline for riparian peoples through history, the Lancang-Mekong River is a river of history and culture as well as a river that serves as a political bond, creates economic prosperity and brings together different ethnicities.

Regrettably, the Mekong region is not as vibrant as it used to be, and the once close ties between the communities are weakening on rising conflicts along the River and changing ways of life. Today, the River is not as busy as before due to declining freight transport and tourism. At the same time, people living in different sections of the River hold different views on the causes and effects of draughts and floods, which has created frustrations and discontent to the extent that it is almost impossible to carry out successful joint development projects. Despite the efforts that leaders of the Lancang-Mekong countries have made to establish cooperation organizations and mechanisms for the development of this border river, the announced policies have all failed to fulfil their goals.

One of the reasons behind these failures is that the policies

lack economic incentives to appeal to entrepreneurs. Another reason is that using a border river as a transport route may create other problems. Still another is the lack of understanding of root causes of natural disasters. Thailand once introduced an initiative to develop the Mekong River as a freight transport waterway between Thailand and China, but it came across setbacks and boycotts from the very beginning – the plan to demolish islets in the river is long overdue to roll out and the Second Viang Chiang Saen Port, a 1.2 billion-Thai Baht project, has been little visited – mainly because local people oppose expanding the waterway by demolishing small islets in the river, as they believe this would work to the benefits of upstream countries at the expense of the environment and ecology in downstream countries. If local people could see the benefits of the waterway expansion project to local communities, for example, the benefits of a profitable freight transport route, then there might be room for negotiation with opposing local residents.

Therefore, it is important to attract the interest of local businesses and entrepreneurs in the waterway and freight route with economic incentives. Exports from Thailand to China, which are regarded as international trade, do not enjoy the preferential policies granted to border trade, as Thailand does not have a land border with China. However, since the two countries are connected by the Lancang-Mekong River, if China

extends border trade privileges to Thai businesses that utilize the Mekong River as freight routes from the Chiang Saen Port in Thailand to Chinese ports on the Lancang River, more entrepreneurs can be expected to use the River as their freight transport pathway to China. With increasing number of Thai entrepreneurs promoting freight transport with large ships, local people could clear up the misunderstandings among themselves.

Prof. Tangkittipaporn also pointed out that draughts and floods, which have taken place along the Mekong River over thousands of years, are not recent phenomena that only happen after the construction of dams. In some cases, water resources management in upstream regions may differ from the traditions, cultures, and ways of life in downstream regions. Insufficient understanding of other regions' cultures may cause trouble and damage to people living downstream. Therefore, mutual understanding and learning, especially about traditions, cultures, ways of life and religions of each other, are crucial, as true facts can clarify situations and help create effective solutions to avoid conflicts. It is an inescapable responsibility and mission of riparian peoples to develop the Lancang-Mekong River basin into a fertile land and a lifeline that nurtures riparian populations. The key to solving related problems lies in promoting people-to-people bond through the Belt and Road Initiative. Meanwhile, proper supporting policies are also important to involve people from all Lancang-Mekong countries in

addressing the challenges together.

Dr. Anukularmphai acknowledged the importance of people-to-people bond and noted that the current situation regarding draughts and floods is different from before, as they happen significantly more frequently, and therefore it is important to weigh the benefits and risks. Decision makers should fully consider the trade-offs before launching and implementing a project, so as to minimize the damage to the nature. He agreed with Prof. Tangkittipaporn's view on people-to-people bond and commented that popular discontent may have arisen from not knowing the truth or only seeing the downside of projects. The importance of mutual understanding once again highlights the necessity of establishing a joint commission. In implementing a project, it is as important to make it appealing to entrepreneurs as considering the interests of those affected by the project and compensating them appropriately. This would help alleviate the complaints and conflicts that the project may cause and reduce thorny problems.

Prof. Chen Shilun from the School of International Relations at Sun Yat-Sen University shared his thoughts on prosperity and development in the Lancang-Mekong River basin and analysed related contradictions from a political ecological perspective. Past media coverage and field research have shown that the main disputes in the Lancang-Mekong cooperation arise from dichotomous development dilemmas: economic

development versus environmental protection, upstream interests versus downstream interests, dam construction and energy development versus ecological conservation. From a political ecological perspective, these phenomena derive from the complexity of human society and ecological development. However, from a triangular model, the market is not only characterised by dichotomies, but also by multilateral prosperity.

Examining the development of the whole river basin against a broader context of natural environment and ecology as well as the cultures of China-Indochina Peninsula and Southeast Asia, it is clear that the cultures and ecology of the whole river basin had already entered a self-sufficient and self-consistent ecological equilibrium before boundaries between modern states came into being. Humans have been adapting and adjusting as a part of the nature and modern ecology. Countries on the China-Indochina Peninsula have seen constant interaction between urbanization and development and gradually entered the stage of balanced development. However, various short-term crises have emerged amidst the development of modern states, accelerated industrial and national development and rising globalization and urbanization. The intensifying dichotomous conflict between economic development and ecological conservation between states with different views and perspectives due to varying international media propaganda, combined with intensified competition for national interests,

have given rise to the current dilemmas.

For the development of the Lancang-Mekong River basin, it is essential to re-define the current challenges and, especially, to capture the essence of the crisis, which boils down to national sovereignty and the consequent issues of border demarcation and cross-border movement. Apart from sovereign boundaries between states, cross-border movement of resources and people as well as global climate change are also front and center to international relations. States could take completely opposite positions on issues involving ownership of resources for economic development. The most challenging contradiction we are now facing is the need to maintain each state's sovereignty and integrity, while recognizing the importance of cross-border movements and interactions between people and states. To resolve this contradiction, we strive to become a community with shared interests.

These contradictions, in the context of international cooperation in the Lancang-Mekong River basin, reflect the fact that countries concerned have been caught in a zero-sum game mindset. However, there is indeed no such marginal utility between exclusivity of sovereignty and limited environmental capacity or between development and sustainability. States can maintain their integrity of sovereignty by trusting each other and sharing information to enable peaceful negotiations for all cross-border activities, and utilize the spill-over effect to

generate new benefits and create win-win cooperation. Once all parties put emphasis on achieving an equilibrium between various interests, including long-term, short-term, past, present, economic, social, cultural and ecological interests, all issues that appear contradictory could be negotiated through a multilateral system to support a new ecology of international cooperation.

The spill-over and sharing of part of the decision-making power or the sharing of information in multilateral negotiations could increase prospective benefits as well as the efficiency and quality of decision-making. Rather than worrying about which side benefits more from specific short-term projects, states should seek long-term and effective sharing of information and resources to pursue sustainable development of the whole river basin. The future development may undergo three stages, from the previous surrender of sovereignty to information exchange to building a cross-border sustainable system. This transition first aims to create a more sustainable ecological system by re-constructing collective interests. Second, it looks to establish a rational overall accounting balance system of investment and expenditure in environmental conservation. Third, it aims to achieve a balance of interests in international cooperation through self-adjustments by weighing the benefits and risks in economic, regional and national development, in a bid to realize a more sustainable conservation. The whole Mekong River basin, from where the River starts to where it joins the sea, should

become an independent and integral system of water resources ecology. Efforts should be made to construct a collective identity for the Lancang-Mekong countries, or the Peninsular or the Southeast Asian region through de-regionalisation, de-spatialization and de-centralisation to maximize the trade-off between safeguarding sovereignty and creating prosperity.

Prof. Tian Fuqiang at the Department of Hydraulic Engineering, Tsinghua University, shared his thoughts on water resources conservation and cooperation in the Lancang-Mekong River basin. From a hydrological perspective, “water resources” discussed in this seminar is a broad concept that includes not only traditional water supply in industrial and agricultural production, but also management of water resources for hydropower as well as flood and drought prevention. The challenges in water resources management in the Lancang-Mekong River basin are part of the crucial challenges faced by the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The Lancang-Mekong River basin is comparable with the Yellow River basin in drainage area, but it has almost ten times of total water resource amount and only half of the population of the latter. However, uneven water resource distribution causes droughts and floods, posing a series of challenges. An examination of the data from the past 120 years shows an overall increase in the number of draughts and floods in the basin, mainly as a result of climate change. The record high

occurrences of these natural disasters in recent years is an indication of further deterioration in the situation. In addition, draughts are particularly more frequent during dry seasons than rainy seasons.

Prof. Tian Fuqiang proposed three I's for addressing the above challenges: infrastructure, information and institution. The importance of infrastructure to managing water resources can never be overestimated. There is a strong positive correlation between a country or region's water storage capacity and its level of development. Realities in the Lancang-Mekong River basin underscore the need for improvements in infrastructure, mainly in flood and draught control, water supply and salt tide prevention in the Mekong delta. The infrastructure then needs to be managed with scientific information analysis, including data, knowledge and wise solutions, for example, water level data, patterns of draughts and floods and better programs for draught and flood control, on which fronts more comprehensive and profound knowledge and wisdom are needed to guide the management of facilities. Therefore, better information sharing is important for the Lancang-Mekong River basin, and so is cooperation between governments. At present, the lack of information sharing has led to inadequate understanding of certain critical issues, such as the causes of the 2016 draught.

Institution building is also important. The wealth of

cooperation mechanisms in the Lancang-Mekong River basin brings both opportunities and challenges. One question to address is how to combine these different mechanisms to create synergy to promote the development, utilization, cooperation and conservation of water resources in the basin. Elinor Ostrom, winner of the 2009 Nobel Prize in Economic Sciences, believes creating knowledge and trust is key to taking collective action. Trust is built on shared values and common understanding. It is crucial that all countries concerned, upstream or downstream, share the same views on their rights and obligations. Therefore, communication, including that between experts and scholars of the riparian countries, are necessary for creating knowledge and trust. It would be important and beneficial to strengthen communication and exchanges on this shared basis between decision makers of countries concerned at various levels.

Prof. Emeritus Surichai Wun'gaeo, director of Center for Peace and Conflict Studies at Chulalongkorn University, analysed the challenges and opportunities that China faces in Lancang-Mekong water resources cooperation. The Lancang-Mekong cooperation is not only about the nature but also about mutual trust, which bears on both current and future cooperation. Some problems have arisen from differing views on Lancang-Mekong-related issues, as each section of the River has its own experiences. Countries should give each other due respect. One of the problems is that we take the River simply as

a river, without giving due consideration to the riparian communities. However, it is in communities that conflicts arise as happened in the demolition of islets in the River. Therefore, to advance the Lancang-Mekong cooperation, we should take a multi-perspective approach without limiting our attention to only certain fields or areas, so that we can take into account the environment and bio-diversity of the whole river basin.

Furthermore, policy making lags behind emerging problems. In many cases, no relevant policies were in place long after problems came into being, which reflects a lag in awareness and should be given attention. The issue is whether water resources management should be a sole responsibility of governments, or riparian communities should also be included in the policy-making process? As policymaking currently remains a process only at government level, the needs of people living in remote mountainous areas far away from political and administrative centres are not considered. As a result, current policies do not prioritize water resource management, and there is a lack of fair and rational distribution of water resources, as well as an absence of the notion that power should serve the people. The discussion on water resources management and cooperation concerning an international river should not revolve solely around state sovereignty, but should emphasize mutual understanding and joint efforts, and involve riparian

communities and village residents by giving appropriate consideration to their opinions and suggestions.

Prof. Wun'gaeo agreed with Prof. Tian Fuqiang's opinion that knowledge and trust are indispensable to solving any problem. With both, cooperation can be established in any field, which in turn can enhance mutual trust between collaborating parties, thus forming a positive loop. Knowledge can be gained from our past experiences and lessons learned. To live and thrive together with the nature is an eternal pursuit. We should emphasize the role that development plays in facilitating the recovery of natural environment rather than focusing only on the so-called technological innovation. Development is a new notion that we should expand to include ecological considerations to minimize unnecessary conflicts and misunderstanding during the process of development through cooperation at various levels. Without mutual trust, information sharing could go awry. Only when we work to maximize collective benefits, can we achieve sustainable development in the Lancang-Mekong River basin.

We should draw on our experiences in the past two or three years since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic to guide our future work. We should accelerate the process to establish relevant joint institutions to promote exchange and cooperation among the riparian communities. In many cases, we have been simply emphasizing independence and integrity of national

sovereignty when it comes to the rules and principles of development. However, in order to solve regional problems, sometimes we need to follow international principles. China has been emphasizing ecological civilization construction, an idea that it believes could benefit the Lancang-Mekong region and advocates that material development should not be overemphasized. The development of the Mekong River provides a good opportunity for the riparian countries to establish mutual trust. The principle of peaceful coexistence between countries, win-win cooperation and the idea of building a community with a shared future are all important principles that we should abide by to better create mutual trust and apply to every aspect of interaction not only between countries but between peoples as well. We should involve more experts and scholars specialising in fields related to water resources in the cooperation, so that they can contribute their knowledge and experiences to solving the problems facing the Lancang-Mekong region.

Prof. Fang Ning agreed with Prof. Wan'gao and stressed his belief that both China and Thailand hope to cooperate and achieve win-win development and that people from both countries share the same aspiration to benefit from the cooperation. He emphasised Prof. Wun'gao's view that we should consider realities of the river basin and respect and appreciate what local communities might feel, as people in

Beijing or Bangkok, or people in other parts of China and Thailand, or people living along the Lancang-Mekong River, all have their own experiences. In addition to our good will, we also need to fully understand what local people feel and think, before we can provide the help they really need.

Man Purotaganon, Secretary at Thai Water Partnership Foundation (TWP), shared his thoughts on addressing the development needs of residents along the Mekong River. Dr. Purotaganon, who has 12 years of experience in field research along the tributaries of the Mekong River, believes the Mekong River plays a crucial role in the development of the China-Indochina Peninsula, because it nurtures hundreds of thousands of people living in the basin, given its location in a monsoon area, where there is abundant rainfall. The section flowing between Thailand and Laos is most important from the ecological and environmental perspective, as there are large stretches of wetland along the river. Aside from its mainstream, the Mekong River's tributaries are also important. The tributaries in Thailand have formed floodplains. When water level rises in the mainstream, water flows back into the tributaries and forms wetlands, providing a biologically diverse ecosystem of particular importance to fish.

The Mekong River has been playing a vital role in economic development and social life of the riparian communities since ancient time. The co-existence between the

people and the river created a unique ecosystem. Relying on the river for sources of necessities and the means for accommodation and transportation, local communities have developed distinctive cultures and customs. The river and the surrounding wetlands provide the habitat for local people to thrive. According to statistics, as many as 100 million people in six countries or regions rely on the water from the Mekong River, a majority of whom live in rural areas. Some of these people, including their ways of farming and fishing, have been impacted by the development of government projects. Seasonal workers are also influenced by these projects. In addition, local cultures, especially the traditions and customs related to wetlands and rainforests, have also felt the consequences of these projects. As the Mekong River is home to various ancient civilization heritages, one question is what could happen to the villages that inherited the traditions? Are they going to take the path towards urbanization or industrialization and agricultural modernization, that is, collective farming with large machineries?

The several dams built on the River have changed the life of local communities in many ways. Though local people have been adjusting their ways of life to cope with these changes, it is still a daunting challenge to manage the rapid changes taken place in recent years. For example, riparian residents have been struggling to deal with the impact from fluctuation of water

levels. What is worse, the more frequent occurrences of flood and draught pose an even harder situation for riparian residents, whose necessities, such as food and water safety, are under threat. These situations have led local people to complain and believe they deserve a better life than it is now.

Dr. Purotaganon made the following suggestions to help improve the living standards of local residents. First, create fair and reasonable compensation mechanism. Second, develop more inclusive policies. Third, adhere to the principle of common development and promote sustainable development. Every project along the Mekong River should be carried out based on mutual consultation and joint participation and should be communicated with local people to address their concerns. Based on the current situation, the most important priority is to share information and data to evaluate the impact of projects more precisely, so as to make feasible adjustment to safeguard riparian residents' right of survival and development. In addition, projects should utilize both local knowledge and modern technology to solve current problems in natural ways.

Prof. Fang Ning highly valued Dr. Purotaganon's views. He emphasized the importance to better understand the life of people living along the Lancang-Mekong River in order to make the River a source of happiness, and to ensure better development, utilization and conservation of the River. He noted that many of the attendees of the seminar might not have seen

the River for themselves, and so it was necessary to organize a group tour to visit the River and feel the local life to enhance our understanding of the region as well as the sense of mission and dedication to ensure better development and conservation of the River. He suggested that think tanks of China and Thailand should, if possible, organize a field trip along the whole Lancang-Mekong River, so that people or government officials of both countries could see the River for themselves. He believed this would be more effective and impactful than writing articles and making speeches. Dr. Purotaganon agreed with the proposal.

Yu Haiqiu, director and research fellow of the Institute of Thailand Studies at the Chinese (Kunming) Academy of South Asian and Southeast Asian Studies, proposed to strengthen exchanges between think tanks in joint poverty reduction initiatives in the Lancang-Mekong region. Being personally involved in poverty reduction projects from early 2016 to late 2020, Yu Haiqiu made a presentation in 2018 on China's targeted poverty reduction policy (such as the supportive policy of "twinning") in a seminar on the experience and inspiration of China's development path hosted by the Thai Klang Panya Institute for National Strategies. Thanks to Thai scholars who drew wide attention to the speech by actively distributing the presentation materials, the Thai government announced on November 18, 2021 to roll out a twinning policy to promote the

progress in Thailand's poverty reduction initiative.

Yu Haiqiu was assigned to Labo Township, Linlang County, Lijiang City, Yunnan Province of China, a multi-ethnic community located in a mountainous area that is 600 kilometres, or a 16-hour drive, away from the provincial capital of Kunming. Apart from poor access and a lack of supportive industries, various other reasons, such as drinking alcohol and aversion to hard work, contribute to its poverty. Yu Haiqiu and Thai experts recognize that these are common causes of poverty across the world. The six Lancang-Mekong countries, including China, all face poverty issues, albeit to different extent. Riparian residents, whether relying on farming or fishing, all suffer from various levels of poverty, but none have found a way to utilize local natural resources to relieve themselves from poverty. Therefore, it is important for think tanks to work together to explore ideas and methods for poverty alleviation.

Chinese think tanks have played the following roles in poverty alleviation. First, participation in the making of targeted poverty alleviation policies. In 1982, China launched its development-oriented poverty alleviation initiative. The initial idea was to adapt local production methods to form a development model that best suit local situation, and move away from the old developmental model in which the government was responsible for everything. In this process, experts involved in government consultation played crucial roles. Second,

continuous observation and policy adjustment. In the first 20 years of the development-oriented poverty alleviation initiative, the effects of poverty reduction were not as good as expected. Income disparity was still common in countryside, as richer households were more likely to benefit from the policies. Think tank experts therefore advised the government to adopt social security measures, such as the subsistence allowance system and the endowment insurance system for rural residents, to alleviate poverty. Last but not the least, developing methods to accurately identify poor households. It was once widely seen in the countryside that some townships that had not met the standards for poverty-stricken counties reported their situation much direr than they actually were in order to receive government subsidies and aids. Experts at think tanks thus developed a set of methods to identify poverty levels more accurately.

Cooperation between think tanks should therefore be strengthened to better alleviate poverty in the Lancang-Mekong River basin. Firstly, experts of think tanks should join forces to expand the scope of research to include not only economic and social issues related to targeted poverty alleviation but also fields such as ecological technology and culture. Poverty alleviation through the development of science and technology and ecology should focus on helping farmers and fisherfolks utilize scientific mechanisms to improve their productivity and increase their income in agricultural production and hydraulic

construction. Secondly, experts of think tanks should emphasise results, rather than simply focusing on policy studies in the decision-making process, and special attention should be given to implementation of policies and specific projects in poverty alleviation. Furthermore, experts should work together to promote the implementation of poverty alleviation to serve the society. Engaging think tanks in all fields in poverty alleviation could facilitate the introduction of advanced technologies as well as social and cultural knowledge to poor areas. Lastly, think tanks in the Lancang-Mekong countries should join forces to expand the influence of regional poverty alleviation initiatives. Think tanks should actively introduce China's achievements and experience in poverty alleviation to other countries in the region, and learn from other countries' successful practices in poverty alleviation as well by, for example, engaging international anti-poverty experts in China's effort to alleviate poverty. Dr. Purotaganon applauded experience-sharing in poverty alleviation between China and Thailand and noted that Thailand appreciates the opportunity to learn from China's experience to advance its own poverty alleviation and development initiatives. Achievements by institutions from both countries in poverty alleviation would be highly beneficial to Lancang-Mekong cooperation. Executive director Kardkarnklai suggested taking poverty alleviation and development as a research topic for the next seminar.

Prof. Zhai Kun made a concluding remark at the end of the seminar. He noted that, firstly, the China-Thailand Lancang-Mekong Water Resources Cooperation Seminar came at an important point of time – July 2022, as the 20th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party would convene later this year, when Thailand would also see some crucial political events. Both countries would undoubtedly be more open after these events and would thus make more contribution to regional cooperation. This seminar was therefore a preparation for such development. He then pointed out that the seminar was a unique event in the sense that it approached the topic of regional cooperation from a bilateral perspective, while multilateral seminars, though covering a wider range of topics and involving a larger number of countries, could rarely go into such depth on many issues as in this bilateral seminar between China and Thailand. Furthermore, the seminar had a diverse makeup of participants and thus engendered rich and fruitful discussions. He also noted that Thai scholars were from a wider range of backgrounds than their Chinese counterparts and urged for a more diverse representation of Chinese scholars in the future. Finally, he called attention to the new issues raised in the seminar. Both Chinese and Thai scholars have seen some new challenges, to which they made feasible suggestions. Think tanks should then play a more proactive role in promoting these suggestions to the government to form concrete policy

proposals.

Prof. Zhai Kun thanked the organizers and staff members from both sides and extended special thanks to Dr. Zhou Fangye, who arranged the seminar in a way that participants could easily interact with each other on various topics. He also thanked the interpreter for the Chinese-Thai consecutive interpretation that facilitated accurate understanding of experts' ideas and opinions.

In the second session, Dr. Yannick Mieruch, a German researcher at the Klang Panya Institute for National Strategies, read out the Sino-Thai Think Tank Cooperation Initiative by China-Thailand Academic Community With A Shared Future on Promoting Lancang-Mekong Water Resources Cooperation.

In recent years, the Lancang-Mekong water resources cooperation has achieved positive results. The six Lancang-Mekong countries have deepened the top-level design of cooperation on sustainable utilization of water resources, enhanced the exchange and communication on water control concepts and policies, steadily implemented the Five-Year Action Plan for Lancang-Mekong Cooperation (2018-2022), jointly designed and implemented water-related livelihood projects, improved the level of information sharing, enhanced personnel exchanges, and promoted coordination with other mechanisms. However, through joint research and interviews, we also realized that the six Lancang-Mekong countries are facing rising demand for water resources, frequent floods and

draughts, degradation of water ecosystem in some areas, increased water pollution, and other challenges brought by climate change.

We believe that, through joint efforts and following the principle of “extensive consultation, joint contribution and shared benefits”, we are able to properly solve the problems and difficulties facing Lancang-Mekong water resources cooperation, and build the Lancang-Mekong River into a river of friendship, a river of cooperation, and a river of prosperity.

To this end, we propose:

1. Aiming at sustainable economic and social development of the river basin, adhere to the concepts of people-oriented development and harmony between people and water, fully respect the laws of nature and coordinate economic and social development with the development, utilization and conservation of water resources to promote the high-quality green development of the Lancang-Mekong region.

2. Actively carry out cross-border joint research between Chinese and Thai think tanks, strengthen the sharing of water resources information and experience in the Lancang-Mekong River basin, and actively promote the construction of the Lancang-Mekong water resources cooperation information sharing platform to provide scientific basis and technical support to the rational development, utilization and conservation of water resources and water ecosystems in the basin.

3. More young people are welcome to actively participate in Lancang-Mekong water resources cooperation, publicize advanced water control concepts and practices, play a pioneering role in information sharing, project cooperation, joint research and other aspects to make positive contributions to addressing water resources challenges in the Lancang-Mekong region and across the world.

We welcome more think tanks, universities, enterprises as well as non-governmental organizations from China and Thailand to join this initiative to form synergy in the Lancang-Mekong water resources cooperation and make efforts to achieve sustainable development, mutual benefits and win-win cooperation for the Lancang-Mekong region.

Initiators: Institute of Area Studies, Peking University; Klang Panya Institute for National Strategies; Thailand National Institute for Strategic Studies; Grand Academy of Xiangshan