

## **Ganga-Mekong: Tales of Two Rivers.**

By Gilles Massot

Sometime in late October 1997, I found myself spending the afternoon in a café in Kunming, Yunan, China, waiting for my flight back to Singapore. After two weeks spent trekking in the mountains, the weather had turned a little chilly, and the warm atmosphere of the friendly place was so comforting that I had let go of any urge to be a tourist and explore the city any further. Time was passing by gently, reading, sipping warm drinks, sketching, when at some point I began to be fascinated by a large map of the Himalayan range that stretched on the wall in front of me. As I looked at it, fascinated by the vastness and geographical complexity of this region home to an infinity of distinctive cultures and natural wonders, a new understanding of Asia intuitively began to take shape, as if the pieces of a jigsaw scattered until then were finally coming to fit together.

By then, I had travelled extensively around Asia for well over a decade, and two of my favourite destinations had definitely been Nepal and Darjeeling. Although born and raised on the Mediterranean, my father ancestry comes from the Alps. To me nothing beats a clear crisp morning in the highlands, surrounded by mountains. And the feeling of being "on top of the world" is certainly nowhere as real as in the Himalayan. In 1989, a 3D model displayed in Darjeeling's mountaineering institute had already given me a very explicit understanding of the physical structure of the majestic mountain range, and a clear illustration of its position as an impassable barrier stretching along the edge of the Tibetan plateau from the western exotic land of the "Something-stan" countries where ended the Silk Road, to the eastern reaches in Chinese Yunan and Zechuan. A different facet of the Himalayan waited there: the region better known as "Shangri La", a region where Siva would be replaced by Kuan Im.

Eight years later, I took time to relax at the end of my trip to Yunan. Due to time constraint, the journey had stopped in Lijiang, short of reaching Tibetan Deqen, the famed "Shangri La". But I had done numerous treks to isolated temples in the mountains around Dalat and Lijiang. These had been elating moments brighten up by the light and colours of autumnal ginkgo foliage. The voyage had been everything I expected and more. And so there I was, gazing at that map, reflecting on the different journeys accomplished over the years, able as I was by then to connect through my memories the sensations and emotions garnered in the Hindu environment of the Indian Himalayan to those just experienced in the Chinese Buddhist side. I guess that it is this bold contrast of cultures, now well-balanced and whole, that made me to look at the map from a different perspective: suddenly, a new cultural layer came to overlap the geographical understanding acquired in Darjeeling. These two realms, this contrast between the Indian and Chinese civilizations that I knew so well for being defining

elements of my everyday life in Singapore, were now inscribed physically in space, right in front of me. I could see where they came from, I could even see them talking to one another over a boundary that delimited their zone of influences, a sort of spine running all the way from Tibet to Singapore. The boundary was at first cultural in Myanmar, but soon it became a geographical peninsula separating the respective seas. Yet, just as in Singapore, I knew that the countries all along that spine had developed their own blend of cultural influences over millenniums of interaction with the two regional giants. Geographical and cultural understanding had come as one. Another geographical aspect in the map was going to provide the frame for a long-term project, one that has yet to be completed.

Rivers are the soul of the land, and this is even more so in this part of the world. They run through it, bringing the water, life and joy of the snow-peaked mountains to the low lands, scorched by the tropical sun. In India, so important is this life bringing element, that the river has become a goddess around whom much of the country's identity and psyche is articulated. Ganga is life, death and rebirth all at once. Although of much less spiritual significance, a possible Chinese equivalent to Ganga from a geographical point of view would have to be the Yangtze River. However, I had just visited the district of the Three Parallels Rivers in Yunan, where three rivers run close to one another in a southern direction through their respective gorges, on the way out of the mountainous upper-reach. They are to the east the Yangtze that will end its course in faraway Shanghai, to the west the Salween that will quickly exit China to flow across Burma and reach the Adaman Sea; in between the two, the Mekong, the multi-facetted river that flows across China, Burma, Laos, Thailand, Cambodia and finally Vietnam. Most importantly, the last two countries had experienced some past golden age as Hindu kingdoms, a historical fact that connected them to India. No doubt that the Mekong was a much better reflection of what I had just perceived with the help of the map. The Mekong was the mosaic river, the puzzle the pieces of which had just come together. Taken together, Ganga and Mekong would become the running threads tying together my innate wandering, the double axis around which my work on Asia could be structured from then on.

### **Ganga-Mekong: The Performances.**

By 2001, I had embarked on a book project about the Indonesian Island of Bintan, facing Singapore on the other side of the Singapore Strait. Looking at Singapore, and the main land beyond it, from the shore of this Indonesian island, the first at the tip of the Asian continent, made me realise two things. Firstly, that due to some relatively recent historical developments, Singapore had lost contact with the immediate historical, geographical and cultural hinterland to which it originally belongs: the Riau Archipelago. Secondly, that the two rivers Ganga and Mekong metaphorically meet via the intercession of their respective seas in the Straits of Singapore, between Singapore and Bintan, indeed right at the southern tip of the Asian Continent. The frame provided by

the two rivers for what I had thought initially to be mostly a pictorial work, was calling for a performative interpretation: to physically realise what I had perceived on the occasion of my first climb to the top of Gunung Bintan. There, while looking north in the direction of the Himalaya, I had sensed India and Ganga to my left, China, the Mekong and its mosaic of cultures to my right. I had to physically mix the waters of the two rivers in Singapore, just as they metaphorically did in the strait, just as their cultural universes did in the motley of Asian cultures making-up the local society. It meant travelling with this specific purpose in mind.

And so it went. The first trip was completed in the later part of 2003 over a course of three month along Ganga, from Gangotri in the Himalayan to Gangasagar in the delta. During that trip, I collected water in three places of high significance: Gangotri, the spiritual spring, if not quite the geographical one, Gangasagar where the river go to dissolve into the sea, and Devprayag, or "Godly Confluence, where the river Bhagirathi flowing from Gangotri meets the Alakananda that combines the rivers of the Hindu trinity further up stream in Uttarakhand to form the actual river Ganga. Done in one stretch, the trip along Ganga reflected the monolithic identity of Ganga, a river that flows in one single country from spring to delta and defines the very soul of that country. The Mekong had to be dealt with a different tactic. The multiplicity of identities encountered along its course called on the contrary for a fragmented approach. In 2006, I did a first trip along the Thai bank of the river in the northeast Isan region where it makes a physical border between Thailand and Laos. Again I collected water in three different places, at the start of the trip in Chiang Khan and at the end in Kong Chiam where the Mekong respectively exit and re-enter Laos, and also in Thanon Phanom, an important pilgrimage town in Thai spiritual life. I was back in Singapore on the 31<sup>st</sup> December, in time for a New Year evening of performance art organised by a few friends under the name Episode 5. The performance started with a lecture presenting the project and overall concept, after which I proceeded with the symbolic mixing of the waters, first the respective three waters of each rivers and then the mixing of the two rivers. Ganga had physically met Mekong in Singapore.

Six month later, an opportunity arose to proceed with step two of this performance in the context of another performance event, this time curated by Jeremy Hia and presented under the title Fetter Field. For this phase two, I intended first mix soils collected on each side of the strait, in Bintan and Singapore, and then wetting these mixed earths with the mixed waters. Soil in Bintan was symbolically collected at the top of the Gunung Bintan at the centre of the island and in Singapore, in the little man-made island south of Sentosa, said to be the southern-most point of the Asian construction, in fact a simulacra that stole the actual geographical title from the cape Tanjung Piai in western Johor. The performance was presented in the art space of the collective Plastic Kinetic Worms, again opening with a lecture expanding context and content, followed by the performance proper at the end of which the resulting mud was

used to create a painting. Done in a bold and gestural manner, it visualised the spiritual, cultural and geographical mapping of the whole process.

This is where the project stands as of now. Since then life has diverted my time and attention onto other matters. So far the Ganga part of the project and the two performances have been the most resolved, either in the form of publication of articles or public events. To fully complete the Mekong part of the travelling, I would need to close the loop and go back to where it started, Yunan, and follow the Mekong there, from the Tibetan plateau to the sub-tropical low land of Xishuangbanna. And maybe from there finally come to an exhibition and possibly a book. But then again... follow the flow.

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