From Hydropower Construction to National Park Creation: Changing Pathways of the Nu River

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Introduction

- Nu River (Upper Salween) runs from Tibetan Plateau, through Yunnan Province of China, before entering Myanmar

- Five pathways:
  - Hydropower construction
  - Civil society river protection
  - Energy reform
  - National park
  - Water conservancy

Pathway: “… the particular directions in which interacting social, technological and environmental systems co-evolve over time” (Leach et al, 2011)
Pathway 1: The Hydropower Development Pathway

- Two scales of hydropower:
  - Large mainstream dams under the West-East Power Transfer (WEPT) regional development scheme
  - Medium- and small-scale tributary dams for provincial or prefecture-level initiatives

- Energy sector reform encouraged corporatized SOEs to compete to build hydropower dams on rivers in Southwest China
Project development, suspension and consequence

• The Nu River has 36,400 megawatts (MW) of potential hydropower resources, and plans for 13 large dams were prepared on the mainstream
  • In January 2003, that signed an agreement with Huadian Group to develop the dam cascade

• In July 2003, the UNESCO World Heritage Committee voted to list the “Three Parallel Rivers” as a World Nature Heritage site

• The State Environmental Protection Administration (SEPA) played a key role in evaluating the project’s EIA studies

• In February 2004, Premier Wen Jiabao (2003-2013) officially suspended the Nu River hydropower development plan.
Current Status of WEPT in Yunnan Province

• Following the suspension, the Nu Prefecture government reoriented towards promoting small- and medium-scale hydropower

• Less regulation and public awareness led to a rapid expansion of these projects

• Projects have been proposed to bring benefits for local community, but there has also been significant environmental degradation including due to linkages with mining in the area

• In 2015, the Yunnan provincial government had halted further small hydropower construction on the Nu River
Pathway 2: Civil Society River Protection Pathway

- China’s environmental NGOs have influence hydropower construction in the Nu River basin.
- In 2004, a range of environmental groups formed a loose coalition called the China River Network. They signed petitions, worked with the media, and built coalitions with influential public figures.
- Central to the perspective of civil society was that local communities should be positioned as policy actors.
- The NGO network also communicated regularly with the UNESCO World Heritage Committee.
Pathway 3: The Energy Reform Pathway

• Competition among between the “Big Five” corporatized SOEs accelerated exploitation of Yunnan’s hydropower resources in the 1990s and 2000s

• Recently, China’s Eastern seaboard has faced power surplus, and Yunnan’s power generation is not fully utilized

• Policy shift from “WEPT” to “Yunnan Hydropower for Yunnan Use.”

• Power surplus has reduced pressure to build Nu River dams for the time being
Pathway 4: The National Park Pathway

- The Yunnan Provincial government and Nu Prefecture government has proposed the establishment of the Nu River Grand Canyon National Park, approved in 2016

- The proposal emerged in the context of national plans for an “Ecological Civilization” in China since 2012

- There has been little public consultation to date, and concerns have been raised how large-scale tourism would benefit local indigenous communities
Pathway 5: Water Conservancy Pathway

- Stated rationality of dam construction is shifting from solely power generation to more comprehensive functions, including water supply, irrigation, flood control and drought resistance
- Few details in the public domain
Conclusion: From Hydropower Construction to National Park Creation

- There are many possible alternatives for the Nu River. However, not every pathway has been given equal consideration.
  - At first, the hydropower development pathway has been given more consideration
  - The river protection pathway of China’s civil society moved from a marginalized position to being influential
  - The national park pathway, in the context of China’s ecological civilization policy, is current increasingly influential

- Decision-making about which development pathway is chosen for the future for the Nu River, should be inclusive, informed and accountable with the rights of ethnic communities recognized
Thank you for listening

[Image of a river and mountains]

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