

# Delta Cities: Rethinking Practices of the Urban

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Above: Exploring the maze of canals in the Mekong Delta. ©Vu Anh Thu.

In the morning of 10 December 2018, nineteen graduate students from thirteen different countries met at the University of Social Sciences and Humanities - Vietnam National University (HCMUSSH) in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam, to participate in the in-situ graduate school co-organized by the International Institute for Asian Studies (IIAS), HCMUSSH, and the 'Engaging with Vietnam' initiative. What brought them together was a strong research interest in the social, economic, cultural, and environmental consequences of living in a constant connection to water, in coastal or deltaic environments.

They were about to enjoy the unique experience of discovering, observing, and understanding the Mekong Delta, a region with which most of them were not particularly familiar, under the guidance of three leading scholars with complementary perspectives on the deltas of the world: Dr David Biggs, History professor at the University of California, Irvine (USA), author of *Quagmire: Nation-Building and Nature in the Mekong Delta*; Dr Debjani Bhattacharyya, History professor at Drexel University (USA), author of *Empire and Ecology in the Bengal Delta: The Making of Calcutta*; and Dr John Abgbonifo, Sociology professor at Osun State University (Nigeria), author of *Environment and Conflict: Place and the Logic of Collective Action in the Niger Delta*.

## Water as the 'ground' for rethinking urbanism

The conceptual challenge driving the in-situ graduate school was to make water the 'ground' for rethinking urban practices. In the global context of climate change, water has come to be conceptualized first and foremost as a threat against which human beings have to protect themselves. Meanwhile, two-thirds of the world's population live in either deltas or in estuaries. These regions are considered most vulnerable to sea level rise, yet they have the highest urban development rates in the world, and they concentrate the majority of resources and economic opportunities, especially in countries of the Global South. Architects and engineers transform water-based landscapes with an imperative of fortification and resilience, with dykes and cement, thus solidifying and fixing in time and space what had originally been malleable, fluid, and constantly changing at the rhythm of seasons and tides. How can we change our approach to human settlements and urban development in light of delta cities' experiences, where people and places thrive in a relationship with – and not against – water? Can we bridge the water-land divide by adopting a 'watery' perspective? These are some of the questions the group was invited to ponder as they discovered the Mekong Delta together.

## Understanding space by traveling through it

Any tourist would have envied the students' program. They first traveled to Long Xuyen, capital of An Giang province, in the heart of the Mekong Delta. Over the course of three days and four nights, their journey also brought them to the cities of Chau Doc and Can Tho. They had a chance to visit several Khmer pagodas, one Muslim mosque and many Buddhist temples, as well as the Oc Eo archeological site, Can Tho's floating market, and an industrial zone. They drove between places, walked through villages, climbed up the Nui Sam mountain, and went on boat explorations in the maze of canals. They tasted the finest fish specialties the region has to offer and let the sounds, smells, and rhythms of the delta shape their experience. However, one should not underestimate the educational value of traveling with a group of specialists from a range of disciplines – urban planning, environmental studies, history, anthropology, sociology – reading the same landscape, but with different lenses. Every meal was a chance to learn from each other's research and background while sharing observations, experiences, and knowledge. Every bus ride was an opportunity to raise questions as they came to mind. Why are some canals straighter, longer, or higher than others? Why are some houses on stilts while others are not? Every field trip was an invitation to discuss and reflect on the readings the conveners had carefully selected prior to the school, and on the occasional lectures delivered throughout the trip – sometimes on hilltops, at pagodas, on buses, or at conference halls. The collaborative nature of learning was emphasized throughout, as participants were encouraged to learn from people they met on the road or from guest speakers.

## Themes and learnings

The conveners exposed the students to the theoretical frameworks they had developed in their research. Dr Biggs suggested reading the Mekong Delta's landscape as the Vietnamese people conceive it, i.e., as neither human made

nor natural: "nature is what you make of it". Dr Bhattacharyya suggested a framework she has developed and used extensively in her research in the Bengal delta – that of property rights – to understand the slipperiness of making property claims in a context where the lines between land and sea are continually shifting. Based on his research in the oil-rich and conflict-ridden Niger delta, Dr Abgbonifo's approach was to pay attention to the power dynamics embedded in the different ways in which people access the delta's resources. Three major recurring themes emerged from these frameworks.

The first theme was seeing and perceiving water as a constitutive part of the landscape. Common understandings of human settlements tend to forget and ignore water, whereas its presence can be perceived everywhere in an environment such as the Mekong Delta: in the rust on the corrugated metal of the stilt houses; in the humidity in the air; in the wetness of the clay on the riverbeds; and so on. Why have we forgotten to see water around us? How might we stay attuned to its presence? Such questions allowed participants to experiment with the concept of wet ontologies.

Secondly, delta-based thinking is a way to stay attentive to the continuities between land and water as opposed to seeing them as distinct entities. In other words, a recurring theme of this workshop was to develop a sensibility that takes the blurry lines and boundaries between land and water seriously. To 'think with the delta' means being able to surface the continuities between the seemingly fixed categories of rural/urban, land/water, fixity/mobility, river/ocean, industrial/natural, and so on. Ultimately, it means being open to seeing newer rhythms and orders that would otherwise be cast away as unplanned, chaotic or illegal.

Thirdly, it soon became apparent that the landscape is a layered palimpsest, where each layer has multiple sets of meanings, at times in contradiction with each other. A seemingly peaceful stretch of rice paddy fields is in fact highly political. It is the result of centuries of conflict and negotiations: between indigenous populations and colonizers; between different

ethnic and religious groups; between different countries fighting for the border; between agriculture- and industry-based approaches to economic development. Altogether, the themes that emerged from the graduate school shed light on the importance of interdisciplinary thinking about the connections between land, water, and people – by definition a multidimensional issue.

## Creative learning

The in-situ graduate school ended where it started, at HCMUSSH in Ho Chi Minh City, for a one-day workshop. In groups of three or four, the students presented a number of structured outcomes of their visits and observations to their peers, the instructors, and a few outside guests. While the choice of presentation topic was entirely open, the groups had to comply with one strict presentation rule: no PowerPoint. The final workshop was in the same spirit as everything else in this in-situ graduate school from its inception: lively and cheerful, yet intellectually ambitious and creative.

At the end of the week, both students and professors had humbly learnt from each other outside conventional academic formats. What made the learning process unique was the fact that the graduate school allowed each participant to develop their observations in a collaborative and experiential manner. In the end, the participants had become collegial peers with overlapping research interests, if not friends. None of this would have been possible without the discrete, but infallible, organizational support from Mrs Martina van den Haak from IIAS and Dr Hoang Ngoc Minh Chau from HCMUSSH. Everyone went back to their research sites – ranging from an industrial landscape in India, to heavily urbanized Shenzhen, to the streets of Saigon – with new perspectives on delta cities, climate change, and social relations as shaped by water. They also brought back with them sweet memories of a unique learning experience.

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