

Long Shadow of Xayaburi

by Alison

This came about from an essay I had to research in university about the economic and environmental effects that will be done to the Mekong River and the people who live along the river if a massive hydroelectric dam is built there.

Complete short story

Chapter 1 of 1

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There is a lot of time to think, panning for gold on the edge of the mighty Mekong.

I love the quiet, the gentle tug of the current around my legs, and I take pride in carefully sifting the water, washing out the mud for the few sparkling flecks of gold in the bottom of my pan. Usually I am happy because the water is warm and the day is bright. There are birds in the trees along the river, and other people here and there, also panning for gold, or washing clothes, or fishing from the banks or small boats. Now and then a big motor boat full of tourists will come past. They wave at me and take photos. I always smile at them because they look so happy to see me. I am only a young girl from a small village, but for a while, I feel famous!

But lately I have become fearful. My brother and father have heard news that the hydro-electric dam is going to be built. People have been protesting, saying that the dam will kill the river and the river life that depends upon it. What would my family do without the river?

Every day, my brother and father take out their small boat to fish. I remember they used to come back with big fish, enough that our family could eat well and still have some left to sell at the market. But lately, the fish catch has been smaller, and the fish are little, as well. My father says he would have thrown such small fish back when he was a boy. There were always other big fish; he could afford to let the small ones go so that they might become big. But now we have only enough for our family, and they are so small!

My father says that building the dam is a bad thing, that the fish will not be able to go upstream to have their babies anymore. The big dam will block their way, and soon there will be no more fish left in the river. My brother has argued that the dam is a good thing; he says that it will make lots of power that Laos can sell to Thailand and China. My brother said we may even get power in our village so that we can have lights and television, and my mother can have an electric oven to cook on. But my grandmother argued that if we have no fish left, what will we cook on the electric oven?

Every day my mother, grandmother and little sister work on our garden along the riverbank. The annual flooding of the river brings rich mud. When the river recedes we grow vegetables: eggplants, lemongrass, garlic and ginger. We take it to sell in the market and buy sticky rice with the money. My mother has said she is very worried about the dam because if it no longer floods each year, the soil will become poor and it will be difficult to grow good vegetables that people want to buy. My brother says that it won't matter because the power that the dam generates will make us all rich, and we will no longer need to grow vegetables. My grandmother asked who will grow them, then?

As I stand here, listening to the river chuckling and flowing past my legs, I feel a great sadness. If the fish all disappear and the gardens are not fertile, how will we live? I pan for gold now with a feeling of despair. My efforts only earn the family a little money, but it was always enough to buy clothes and other things that we could not make ourselves. It made me feel that I was helping the family in a small way. But now, many more people will have to pan for gold from the river to live. All the fishermen and market gardeners will crowd onto the banks and into the water.

It will no longer be a peaceful activity; it will be a hungry, desperate need. There will be less gold to go around, and the strong will take from the weak. For the moment I am so horrified by the vision in my head that tears blur my eyes. The long shadow of Xayaburi Dam reaches out, and I can no longer see the sunlight sparkle on the warm, life-giving water.

The End