

Iftekhar Iqbal

The Range of the River: A Riverine History of Empire across China, India, and Southeast Asia

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I read Iftekhar Iqbal's newly published *The Range of the River* as a reflection on how to recover the biography of rivers within human history. In *The Invention of the River*, Dilip da Cunha critiques the ontology of 'the river' as a bounded object. What we habitually call 'a river', a line with a source, a course, banks, and occasional 'flooding' beyond its proper boundary, is a historically produced way of seeing and governing water. Therefore, writing the history of the river is an epistemological project. Iqbal's book treats rivers as dynamic forces whose agency shaped human institutions and political imagination. By emphasising riverine agency, Iqbal writes a collective biography of six rivers, asking how this riverine world shaped, limited and outlasted imperial power before being curtailed by postcolonial states. This review argues that the book's greatest value lies in shifting river history away from imperial control and toward riverine constraint and transregional mobility. At the same time, its account sometimes overstates ecological agency and under-specifies the institutional forms through which empire operated.

The book is a transregional environmental and imperial history of six major river systems: the Brahmaputra, Irrawaddy, Salween, Mekong, Red, and Yangzi, collectively named BISMRY. Iqbal argues that these rivers formed a vast 'fluvial Asia' linking China, India, and Southeast Asia across complex terrains. His central claim is that rivers were active historical agents that shaped mobility, commerce, ethnic interaction, imperial ambition and ecological life. Imperial powers attempted to control them, but the rivers' physical difficulty, seasonal instability, and local societies made exclusive control impossible.

One of the book's larger concepts is the BISMRY commons: a shared riverine world produced by different actors such as boatmen, ethnic communities, confluences and markets. This commons emerged through friction, negotiation and practical interdependence. Iqbal's vivid metaphor is to place the riverine world alongside human empire: the six rivers constituted a transregional realm, segmented but never fully governed by any single imperial power. To protect commercial interests and facilitate mobility, empires and riparian communities had to negotiate with one another and treat the river as a common pool. Many imperial actions thus demonstrated the agency of rivers, but under conditions of compulsion. The emergence of rivers as collectively shared resources challenged political, economic and geomorphological boundaries across regions and territorial sovereignties. In this sense, the riverine world existed within the claimed territories of empires while remaining partially independent of

imperial control; it was, in Iqbal's formulation, a riverine empire competing with human empires.

Iqbal's intervention operates on three levels. First, against the Zomia paradigm, he argues that uplands were not simply spaces of flight from lowland states, but were connected to imperial and commercial worlds through river valleys, tributaries, mountain passes and caravan routes. Second, against declensionist environmental history, he treats rivers not only as victims of extraction but also as active forces limiting imperial projects. Third, against conventional commons theory, he does not define the BISMRY commons as a stable institution of collective management. Rather, he presents commoning as a process that emerged from enforced interdependence among different human and environmental actors.

The book draws mainly on imperial and multilingual materials, but it relies heavily on English-language archives and published primary sources. The author appears to have at least reading competence in Bengali and Assamese, since he uses original sources in these two languages in his regional discussion of the Brahmaputra, Assam and Bengal. Yet 'fluvial Asia' spans six river basins from South Asia to East Asia and necessarily involves more languages than one monograph can fully command. English translations of Vietnamese, Burmese and Chinese sources constitute an important part of the evidence in the fourth, fifth and sixth chapters. Although Iqbal states that conversations with local scholars during visits to Bangladesh, China, India and Vietnam helped prevent the English-language source base from overwhelming local perspectives, the book would have been stronger if it had treated English materials more explicitly as mediated descriptions of local landscapes and compared them more systematically with local-language documents.

Moreover, the book could have distinguished more clearly between ecological constraint and administrative strategy. In some cases, limited imperial intervention may have resulted not only from the natural resilience of rivers, but also from empires' own preference for low-cost indirect rule. The Chinese empire offers a useful example. The state often remained an indirect presence in local society by sanctioning informal institutions such as lineages, temples, chieftaincies, gentry committees and religious sects. To minimise administrative costs, it commonly deputised informal agents to collect taxes, mediate disputes and maintain social order.¹ Iqbal does not fully demonstrate the correlation between the natural resilience of the riverine world and the limited imperial projects of human empires. In China, informal governance was employed not only in the uplands between the Yangzi and the Brahmaputra, but also in many borderland and hinterland regions, depending on shifting calculations of administrative return. The book therefore still lacks a more precise empirical scrutiny of the specific administrative strategies that empires adopted

1. Michael Szonyi, *The Art of Being Governed: Everyday Politics in Late Imperial China* (Princeton University Press, 2017), 245-46.

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in the BISMRY river systems, especially in comparison with other governed regions.

To sum up, Iqbal's book is conceptually powerful and potentially field-shaping, but its transregional ambition also creates problems in the use of regional case studies to sustain a broad conceptual framework. Its greatest value lies in its effort to move beyond human-centred narratives and to reconstruct a fluvial world in which rivers, tributaries, boatmen, merchants, upland communities, animals, markets and imperial agents together produced a transregional commons. Yet the author's limited engagement with local-language materials, together with the rigorous demands that area studies place on scholarly training, prevents a deeper understanding of some regional histories. The argument would have been stronger if it had more carefully distinguished different modes of imperial governance across regions and engaged more directly with local-language sources. Even with these limitations, *The Range of the River* remains an important and provocative work. It invites historians to reflect on the role of rivers in the transformation from empires to postcolonial states.

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