Asian river Cities Bangkok and Phnom Penh in local politics of resilience: a buzzword or an operational concept for Asian Cities?

Celine Pierdet

1Connaissance et Organisation des systèmes techniques (COSTECH EA 2223) – Université de Technologie de Compiègne : EA2223 – Centre Pierre Guillaumat B.P.60319 60203 COMPIEGNE Cedex, France

Abstract

The two Asian river metropolitan areas Phnom Penh and Bangkok are subject to very high stresses in their urban development. The natural site constraints are very important because they are located one another in the center of the alluvial plain of the Mekong and the Chao Phraya River. So these river capitals have expanded behind the bank of the rivers with dikes and embankments on the river floodplains. These diked-cities are very vulnerable to natural disasters such as flooding.

Since the early 1970s, it is now common to assimilate a city to a system, closed (Forrester W.J. 1969) or opened (Rosnay de J. 1975). From the example of the Phnom Penh metropolitan area, we assimilate to an opened system these cities which are surrounded by dikes, subdivided into catchments areas and covered by a sewer network which allows discharging waters out of the city core. Water is at once entrance, component and exit of the city-system. So we can consider it as a hydraulic system (Pierdet C. 2008). The major crisis suffered under the Khmer Rouge damaged hydraulic networks. Moreover, most of the city dwellers and elites were killed in a genocide charge of 1.7 million victims. So how Phnom Penh did ensured its survival since 1979? Why can we talk about resilience for this city-system?

We define resilience as "the ability of a system to integrate a disruption in its run, without changing the qualitative structure" (Holling C.S. 1973). Since 1979 the city-system comes into social and spatial resilience through ad hoc interventions of "pioneers" actors on the networks, despite the occurrence of new crisis such as flooding. More recently, in Phnom Penh and Bangkok, speculative projects to private investors reject in the outskirts of cities the poorest populations. The consequences are social, but also environmental. Firstly the peripheral areas, in contrast to the city center, having no embankments, are prone to flooding, with no proper drainage systems. Secondly the proliferation of high-rise towers worsens the process of subsidence and flooding vulnerability of cities.

From the Hyogo Conference held in 2005, the word "resilience" is distributed worldwide in a systemic sense by the United Nations and other international organizations. It is accepted by all parties to the most local level, particularly in developing countries where it is primarily associated with the theme of climate change. But the specific programs on disaster risk reduction focused on cities are few, including in Asia. However the Asian coastal cities

*Speaker
are identified as highly vulnerable to flood risk and marine submersion. Finally, at national and local levels systemic frame of reference is avoided by the actors. What would be the advantage of the systemic approach in local politics of resilience to reduce flood risk? How local actors are they appropriate the concept of resilience? So is it just a buzzword or a real operational concept to reduce vulnerability to hydraulic crisis in Asian Cities?

**Keywords:** resilience, systemic, environment, politics, Asian Cities