The source of the Mekong River is high in the Tibetan plateau, roughly 16,000 feet above sea level in China’s Qinghai Province. Throughout this mountainous region, the river—typically the color of rust and roughly ninety feet wide—is known by its Tibetan name, Za Qu. When it enters the precipitous canyons and gorges of Yunnan Province, the river becomes known as the Lancang Jiang (or Turbulent River). As it forms the boundary between Myanmar (Burma) and China, it lives up to its name—whitewater rapids churn along its length. Here, far removed from the center of power in Beijing, several independent Chinese kingdoms, such as those at Lijiang and Dali, once thrived. In part because of their relative isolation, these kingdoms had large populations of ethnic minorities, such as the Bai, Dai, and Naxi peoples.

By the time the river leaves China and enters Laos, it has traveled nearly 1,500 miles from its source and has dropped roughly 14,000 feet in elevation.