The wealth and strategic significance of the Mekong River region have inevitably attracted outsiders. However, because the Mekong has always been difficult to navigate, the effect of foreign influence on the countries along the river has varied. The history of the upper Mekong in China, characterized by isolated communities separated by whitewater rapids and deep gorges, has been very different from that of the lower Mekong, which—broader and flatter—flows through what is now Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, and Vietnam.

In the first millennium, trade across the southern Silk Road between China and India passed through the upper Mekong, where local people and settlers from central China established small kingdoms. To the lower region, Indian traders brought Hinduism, Buddhism, and irrigation skills that helped give rise to the great city-states of the region, such as Angkor. By harnessing the waters of the Mekong, the inhabitants of these cities built spectacular temple complexes.

Although Europeans first visited and traded in the river’s lower region in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, their colonial settlements began to develop only in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.