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The French in Laos, 1887–1945

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Laos constituted one of the five territorial entities making up French Indochina—comprising in addition the colony of Cochinchina and the protectorates of Annam, Tonkin and Cambodia. It was never, however, one among equals. Even before the annexation of Lao territories east of the Mekong river in 1893, Laos was perceived as little more than an extension of Vietnam west towards Siam (Thailand), a much more significant potential prize. The addition of minor extensions west of the Mekong demarcated by treaty in 1904 and 1907 still gave France no more than half the former Lao Kingdom of Lan Xang.[1] Any possibility of reconstituting a greater Lao state was thereafter lost.

Throughout the period of French control until the declaration of Lao independence in 1945, Laos remained the least developed and least important of France's possessions in Indochina. Early anticipation of fabulous wealth to be won from the Lao territories never materialized, and despite heavy taxation of the sparse population revenue was never enough to cover the costs of administration.[2] What most exercised French colonial administrators was how the country's resources could best be developed, not for the benefit of the Lao, but in order to balance the colonial budget.

Though it was largely thanks to French intervention that present-day Laos exists at all, French policies did little to assist in the creation of a modern Lao national state. French interest in Laos was always from the perspective of Vietnam. Authorities in both Paris and Hanoi saw Laos not as a political and geographical entity in its own right, with its own unique history and culture, but rather as a component of Indochina in which Vietnam held pride of place. Plans for the

[1] The traditional kingdom of Lan Xang lasted from 1345 to 1707 and included territory on both banks of the Mekong, notably the entire Khorat plateau, now comprising northeastern Thailand. Cf. Paul Le Boulanger, *Histoire du Laos français* (Paris: Plon, 1931).

[2] An English edition appeared first in 1846. Henri Mouhout, *Travels in the Central Parts of Indo-China, Siam, Cambodia, Laos, etc.* (London: John Murray, 1864; reprinted Bangkok: White Lotus, 1986).

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economic exploitation of Laos involved large-scale Vietnamese migration and the investment of French capital. Thus, economically as well as strategically, Laos was conceived as an extension of Vietnam.

This paper will examine the roots of the French attitude towards Laos in motivation for annexation, and go on to discuss the impact such attitudes had on subsequent attempts to achieve the *mise en valeur* of the territory. Because for the French Laos was little more than a hinterland of Vietnam, hardly any consideration was given to its political future until the crisis of 1940. Even then French authorities seemed incapable of conceiving of Laos as a distinct political entity separate from other parts of Indochina. The reconstitution of the modern Lao state, it will be argued, was not therefore due to France's benevolent protection, as has often been assumed, but to the Lao declaration of their independence and unity in 1945.

The French Annexation of Laos

French interest in Laos in the nineteenth century was not in the country for its own sake. Pressure for annexation came either from those who hoped to use Lao territory as a means for ends that led elsewhere, or from those who saw its value in relation to Vietnam. Laos was to provide access for trade with China, or provide a strategic location from which to extend French influence west to Siam. In the event, annexation was piecemeal, and stopped altogether as French concern over other events in Europe took precedence over further territorial acquisition in Asia. The Lao territories remained divided between Siam and France. Moreover, attitudes engendered by perceptions underlying the process of annexation coloured all subsequent French policies towards their possession.

1. *On the way to China*

For early European explorers, merchants and diplomats, Laos was not limited to those territories, principally east of the Mekong, constituting the present-day Lao People's Democratic Republic. All the Khorat plateau now comprising the northeastern (Isan) provinces of Thailand formed part of Laos, as did much of what is now northern Thailand.[3] In the latter part of the nineteenth century, following the

[3] Carl Bock, *Temples and Elephants: The Narrative of a Journey of Exploration Through Upper Siam and Laos* (London: Low, 1884; reprinted Bangkok: White Lotus, 1985)

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imposition of a protectorate over Cambodia in 1863 and consolidation of Cochinchina by 1867 which gave France control over the lower reaches of the Mekong river system, French interest centred on the middle and upper reaches. For the French, Laos designated those territories on both banks of the Mekong inhabited by people ethnically, culturally and linguistically Lao, virtually all of whom at the time acknowledged the suzerainty of Siam.

The first Frenchman to set foot in Laos did so in the name of science. The naturalist and explorer Henri Mouhout died not far from Luang Prabang in November 1861. By the time the posthumous account of his travels was published in Paris seven years later,[4] other Frenchmen had mapped and explored more of the Lao territories. Their interest, however, was not in Laos *per se.* The Mekong expedition of 1866–68 led by Doudart de Lagrée and Francis Garnier was designed to discover a means of communication with southern China. To their disappointment, the falls at Khone on the Lao–Cambodian frontier and the rapids at Khemmarat south of Savannakhet and between Vientiane and Luang Prabang made the river unnavigable as a 'road to China'.[5] Even so, the Mekong offered commercial and strategic opportunities. Garnier noted: 'Its exceptional position makes Bassac one of the places in lower Laos where French influence must be planted most solidly.'[6] As for commerce, he believed the only circumstance limiting the wealth of the region through which the expedition passed was Siamese oppression.[7]

The disappointing results of the Mekong expedition persuaded the French to look elsewhere for access to southern China. If the Mekong

uses Laos exclusively to refer to northern Thailand. Bock never crossed the Mekong. The Lao of northern Thailand were often referred to as western Lao as opposed to the eastern Lao of Luang Prabang. More recently the term 'Lao' or 'Tai-Lao' has been reserved for the 'ethnic Lao' of Laos and northeast Thailand. The people of northern Thailand are known as Tai-Yuan.

[4] The French increased taxes as high as they dared, but they were always aware that if taxes were set too high, people would cross into 'Siamese Laos'. See 'Note sur la situation du Laos', Conseil Supérieur de l'Indo-Chine (Première Commission) 1802, p. 4. Dépôt des Archives d'Outre-Mer, Aix-en-Provence [AOM Aix] Fonds de la Résidence Supérieur au Laos, D3.

[5] Cf. Milton Osborne, *River Road to China: The Mekong River Expedition, 1866–73* (New York: Liveright, 1975). Osborne's sub-title is somewhat misleading as the Mekong expedition lasted from 5 June 1866 to 29 June 1868. Osborne's book also covers the subsequent period up to Garnier's death in 1873 during which attention shifted from the Mekong to the Red river as the 'river road to China'. Garnier's own account has recently been re-issued. Francis Garnier, *Voyage d'exploration en Indochine* (Paris: Editions La Découverte, 1985).

[6] Garnier, *Voyage d'exploration en Indochine*, p. 57.

[7] *Ibid.*, p. 104.

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was not navigable, it appeared the Red river might be. In 1873 Garnier led an expedition to Tonkin to seize the lower Red river delta for France. He was killed in the attempt and not until nine years later did another French military expedition succeed in gaining control of northern Vietnam. In doing so the French chose to 'faire le Tonkin' rather than 'faire le Siam'[8]—extend their territorial acquisitions north towards China rather than west towards Siam.

One last attempt was made to keep alive the possibility of using the Mekong valley as a trade artery into the interior of southern China. In 1880 the Colonial Council of Cochinchina voted to begin construction of a rail link between Saigon and Phnom Penh, via My Tho and Vinh Long.[9] In the debate on this project on 22 November, the President of the Council, M. Blancsubé, argued that the line, rather than being constructed south into the Mekong delta where it would require expensive bridge works, should go via Tay Ninh, then on to Kratie in Cambodia where one line would branch southeast to Phnom Penh and another north up the valley of the Mekong eventually as far as Yunnan and the headwaters of the Red river.[10] This, it was claimed, not only would have the benefit of opening up new territory for colonization and exploitation in the Tay Ninh area (later Indochina's principal rubber producing region) but also of directing all the commerce of the Lao principalities of the Mekong valley, 'this country of gold and precious metals', towards Saigon. Construction of such a line would reinforce French claims to all the eastern part of the Indo-Chinese peninsula, and eventually give access to the vast markets of Yunnan. 'The first power that penetrates these regions', M. Blancsubé told the Council, 'will have freight without equal for its ships and an immense outlet for its products.'[11] When his proposition was put to the vote, Blancsubé was defeated by cost and distance. The Council voted for a line to My Tho, the only section of the projected Saigon to Phnom Penh railway ever built.

The Blancsubé plan was the last attempt to argue for the importance of Laos as a means of communication with southern China. Thereafter two other strategic considerations tended to dominate

[8] Cf. Pierre Grossin, *Notes sur l'histoire de la province de Cammon (Laos)* (Hanoi: Imprimerie d'Extrême-Orient, 1933), p. 38.

[9] Georges Taboulet, 'Les Origines du chemin de fer de Saigon à My-Tho: Projet Blancsubé d'un chemin de fer de pénétration au Laos et au Yunnan (1880)', *Bulletin de la Société des Etudes Indochinoises [BSEI]*, Nouvelle Série, Tome XVI, no. 3 (1941), p. 4.

[10] *Ibid.*, pp. 10–14.

[11] *Ibid.*, p. 12.

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French thinking. One was the need, as the French saw it, to expand the narrow coastal band of French territory, especially in central Vietnam to a more defensible depth. As the Secretary of the Society of Commercial Geography of Paris, Professor E. Guillot, put it, annexation of Laos was necessary for France in order to 'bring together in a compact whole the diverse parts of her Indochina possessions'.[12] The second was the need to gain a strategic initiative in what many saw as an inevitable showdown with Britain to bring Siam under the imperial domination of one power or the other.[13]

The first priority for the French in Vietnam was the pacification and security of the country. The Tu-Duc emperor had died in 1883. The following year the court at Hue was forced to accept establishment of a French protectorate over central and northern Vietnam (Annam and Tonkin). An appeal to China by the Vietnamese court, then under control of the Regent Ton That Thuyet, to exercise its rights of suzerainty to prevent French domination of Vietnam led to the brief Sino–French war of June 1884 to April 1885. Defeat of China and her renunciation of all residual rights over Vietnam led Ton That Thuyet in July 1885 to make a last desperate appeal for resistance in the name of the boy emperor, Ham-Nghi.

The 'can-vuong' ('aid the emperor') movement was the most serious challenge the French faced to their authority. Among those who answered the emperor's call was the mandarin Phan Dinh Phung who led resistance forces in the Ha Tinh area of north-central Vietnam. Other centres of resistance were in the mountainous north and northwest where opposition to the French was bolstered by Chinese 'Black Flag' irregular forces. In southern Annam, Vietnamese resistance forces withdrew into the ill-defined mountainous border regions or took refuge in Laos.[14] For the French, the security of Vietnam depended on denying the rebels use of these sanctuaries. As Colonel

[12] E. Guillot, *La France au Laos et la question du Siam* (Lille: L. Daniel, 1894), p. 82. Laos, Guillot argued, should be annexed so that the Mekong could complete 'a vast commercial circuit' linking Tonkin with Cochinchina (p. 71).

[13] E. Etienne merely voiced a widespread belief when he told his readers in *L'Echo de Paris* that Siam would inevitably fall to either France or England, so it had better be France. John Meyer *et al.*, *Histoire de la France coloniale: dès origines à 1914*, vol. I (Paris: Armand Colin, 1990), p. 673.

[14] In 1888 reports reached the French that Ham Nghi and his partisans were at Sepone, west of the Ai Lao pass. Gerald Cannon Hickey, *Kingdom in the Morning Mist: Mayréna in the Highlands of Vietnam* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1988), p. 61. Phan Dinh Phung's followers were still active in the mountainous east of Khammouane province in Laos as late as 1897–98. Grossin, *Notes sur l'histoire*, pp. 49–50.

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Tournier, first Résident-Général of Laos, argued, taking possession of Laos had become a political necessity to ensure the security of Vietnam and Cambodia.[15]

2. *France and Siam*

The Siamese took advantage of the internal unrest in Vietnam to consolidate their own tributary empire. Siamese expeditionary forces were dispatched to drive Chinese maurauders out of the Sip Song Chau Tai area of what is now northwestern Laos and northeastern Vietnam. Siamese garrisons were established in central Laos to control the major border passes into Vietnam. This Siamese 'forward movement' (1883–87) occurred just as the French recognized the danger posed to their new protectorates of Annam and Tonkin by the presence of a potentially hostile power along the crests of the Annam cordillera.

The French response was twofold: urgently to search the imperial records in Hue for evidence of Vietnamese claims to suzerainty over parts of Laos;[16] and to increase the French presence in the southern Vietnamese highlands and in Laos itself. Both were designed to create a French interest where none had previously existed. By acting on behalf of Vietnam, France was effectively reinforcing dubious Vietnamese claims to territories west of the Annam cordillera as far as the Mekong. That these claims were essentially spurious was recognized by the French jurist François Iché. What justified French intervention in his view was not the need to safeguard supposed sovereign rights of Vietnam over parts of Laos, but the incapacity of Siam to assure law and order in the Lao territories.[17] As Iché pointed out, Vietnam did not have rights over all of central and southern Laos, only over certain *muang* (minor principalities) adjoining the Lao–Vietnamese border. The Mekong valley proper was dependent on Siam, which surrendered its rights over territories east of the Mekong to France

[15] Victor Demontes, 'Le Laos Français', *Excursions et reconnaissances* (1907), p. 601. This article summarizes two lectures given by Colonel Tournier to the Geographical Society in Algiers on 17 and 22 March the previous year.

[16] A. Massie to the Governor-General of Indochina, dated Luang Prabang, 28 July 1889, argued strongly for establishment of a French protectorate over Laos based on Vietnamese tributary rights. AOM Aix, Fonds des Amiraux, 14405.

[17] François Iché, *Le statut politique et international du Laos français* (Toulouse: Imprimerie Moderne, 1935), p. 138.

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by treaty in 1893.[18] By emphasizing Vietnamese claims to suzerainty over parts of Laos, however, the French came more easily to place Vietnamese interests before Lao, and to view Laos from the perspective of Vietnam.

If in Vietnam missionaries and merchants provided the impetus for French colonization, in Laos that honour fell to explorers and officials. Explorations were undertaken by Dr Paul Neis in 1882 and by Etienne Aymonnier in 1883–84 traversing the Khorat plateau and the Attopeu–Saravane area of southern Laos. The most important expeditions, however, were those carried out by Auguste Pavie and his numerous colleagues between 1887 and 1891. For these men, annexation of the depressed and underpopulated east bank of the Mekong was only a first step towards seizure of the more populated west bank territories. West again lay central Siam comprising the broad, rich plains of the Menam, an area the French had had an eye on for some time.[19]

Pavie was the first French official to be based in Laos. He arrived as vice-consul in Luang Prabang with the reluctant agreement of the Siamese in February 1887. While waiting in Bangkok for official clearance from the Siamese court, Pavie outlined to his friend Charles Lemire the method by which he believed it possible for France to gain control of Laos. 'Let us gently extend our influence in Laos by placing agents there, by letting explorers and merchants travel throughout it, and its limits will become large.'[20] Pavie put actions to words in carrying out his own three 'missions'. Little time was spent in Luang Prabang where a French 'commercial agent', M. Macey of the Syndicat Français du Haut-Laos was appointed to look after non-existent French interests. More than thirty French naturalists, surveyors, scientists and, above all, military officers joined Pavie's 'second mission' of 1889–91 exploring, mapping and collecting intelligence in separate groups throughout the Lao territories east of the Mekong.[21]

By 1890, with the pacification of Tonkin virtually complete, interest in expansion westward became more acute and the riches and com-

[18] *Ibid.*, p. 155.

[19] Cf. Grossin, *Notes sur l'histoire*, p. 38, referring to the debate of 1881 over whether to 'faire le Siam' or 'faire le Tonkin', i.e. whether to concentrate on extending French influence west over Siam, or north over Tonkin.

[20] Louis Maleret, 'Trois lettres inédites d'Auguste Pavie', *BSEI*, Nouvelle Série, Tome IX (1934), p. 59.

[21] See *Mission Pavie*. A full list of participants is also given in Le Boulanger, *Histoire du Laos français*. pp. 335–7.

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mercial opportunities of Laos began to be actively promoted. Despite Siamese efforts to the contrary,[22] the myth of the fabulous wealth of Laos was assiduously cultivated in order to justify and promote colonial expansion. 'Laos is now the order of the day', proclaimed M. Courtet in 1890. The commercial conquest of upper Laos had already begun, and a 'new source of riches' discovered. France should immediately move into lower Laos, he urged, and establish trading posts at Bassac and Ubon, both west of Mekong, in order to funnel the trade of the region downstream to Saigon[23]—the falls of Khone notwithstanding.

In July 1892 a report was submitted to the Governor-General by the Résident-Supérieur for Annam at Hue on 'The Territories of Annamite Laos occupied by the Siamese'.[24] The report made a strong case based on Vietnamese tributary rights to Lao teritories east of the Mekong for immediate and decisive action to seize these territories back from Siam. France had inherited rights to *Vietnamese* Laos which she was in duty bound to protect. As Dr Harmand, who had himself explored parts of Laos in 1877, told the Quai d'Orsay, Vietnam was 'a nation of conquerors and colonists which we stopped in mid-career ... we have no right to keep it back for ever from its path of Destiny ... It is to the Vietnamese, shut in and stifled as they are between the sea and the mountains ... that we must open the Mekong valley.'[25] In Bangkok, Pavie, by then French Consul-General to the Court of Siam, was also pressing for action.[26] In September 1892 two French commercial agents were expelled from Uthen, opposite Pak Hin Boun, to central Vietnam. At about the same time the French vice-consul, M. Massie, who had succeeded Pavie at Luang Prabang, committed suicide on his way to Saigon in a fit of depression over his failure to get the better of the Siamese. These incidents were seized upon by the colonial party in the Chambre des Deputés to bring on an acrimonious debate over French policy towards Siam.[27] Pavie was instructed to obtain reparations, and when these were not forthcom-

[22] Anonymous pamphlet, 'The Truth about the Mekong Valley' (Bangkok: *Bangkok Times*, 1891).

[23] M. Courtet, 'Esquisse commerciale du Laos inférieur', *BSEI* Série I (1890), pp. 43–5.

[24] AOM Aix, Fonds des Amiraux, 14476.

[25] In a report to the Quai d'Orsay dated November 1892, quoted in Hugh Toye, *Laos: Buffer State or Battleground* (London: Oxford University Press, 1968), p. 39.

[26] Pavie to French Foreign Minister, 29 December 1892, AOM Aix, Fonds des Amiraux 14479.

[27] Débats du Chambre des Deputés, 4 February 1893.

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ing three French military columns marched into central and southern Laos. Siamese resistance provided an excuse for fresh French demands, leading eventually to the French ultimatum of July 1893 demanding all Lao territories east of the Mekong be ceded to France.

The treaty of October 1893 extended French Indochina to the Mekong, and created a demilitarized zone 25 kilometres wide the length of the west bank.[28] A further stage in the expansion of French Indochina had been accomplished, at the expense of Siam and in the name of Vietnam, and another was about to begin. The territory added was not, however, thought of as constituting a political entity, or even the core of one as Cambodia had. The king of Luang Prabang had jurisdiction only over parts of northern Laos. Central and southern Laos was divided into a number of semi-independent tributary *muang*, which the French administered directly.

The acquisitions of 1893 had but one purpose, to ensure French control of the Mekong, to 'round out' French Indochina. That for the Lao the Mekong was the central artery of their political space was immaterial as far as the French were concerned. For the French Lao territory east of the Mekong was a mere extension of Vietnam. That is what they argued, and that is what they believed.[29]

3. *Laos divided*

The Lao territories were divided by the treaty of 1893 into French Laos east of the Mekong and Siamese Laos to the west, though many assumed the division would only be temporary. Under the terms of the treaty France had obtained the right to establish commercial posts on the west bank while Siam was forbidden to station military forces within 25 kilometres of the river. The belief was that it would not be long before, by incorporating the plateau west to Khorat, France 'would assure itself of all ancient Laos'.[30] After all, argued the Marquis de Barthélemy, Laos was 'impossible to govern as long as the

[28] 'Conventions et traités entre la France et le Siam rélatifs au Laos (1893–1947)', *Péninsule*. nos 16–17 (1988), pp. 11–14.

[29] This is implicit, for example, in J.-L. de Lanessan, *La colonisation française en Indochine* (Paris: Félex Alean, 1895). Wherever Laos is mentioned, it is in relation to Annam, in the population of which the Lao population is included (p. 211).

[30] P. de Barthélemy, 'Le Laos', *Bibliothèque Illustrée des Voyages Autour du Monde par Terre et par Mer*, no. 44 (1898), p. 2. Those who argued that the Mekong constituted a natural frontier for French Indochina did so in the name of Vietnam. Cf. Charles Lemire, *Le Laos annamite* (Paris: A. Challamel, 1894), pp. 76–7.

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Mekong forms the limit of our possessions'. The situation was intolerable, not least for 'poor Laos', and would be overcome only when France took control of the full sphere of interest to which she had the right under the terms of the 1896 agreement with Britain.[31]

In the decade after the treaty of 1893 France had the opportunity further to extend her Indochinese empire, potentially to include all the Khorat plateau. That she did not do so was due to declining French interest and British opposition. Britain wanted to retain Siam as a viable independent buffer state between British India and French Indochina and the Quai d'Orsay was increasingly reluctant after 1896 to seek unnecessary confrontation with Whitehall.[32] In part, however, French failure to press for a protectorate over all the Lao territories was because, despite all the information provided by the *Mission Pavie*, few French officials conceived of Laos as an historic political entity in its own right. Apart from the kingdom of Luang Prabang, the Lao territories belonged either to Vietnam or to Siam.

Laos was not, like Cambodia, thought of by the French as an ancient kingdom to be preserved under the protection of France. It was a mere collection of localized *muang*, the largest being Luang Prabang, any of which could be parcelled out between competing powers. Restitution of territories west of the Mekong to Luang Prabang under the terms of the 1904 Franco–Siamese treaty[33] (the present province of Sayaboury) could conceivably, under different circumstances, have led to progressive reconstruction of the former Lao Kingdom of Lan Xang incorporating all Lao populations and territories. This was a policy actively urged by French administrators in Laos,[34] and supported by Lao 'chiefs' east of the Mekong.[35] By 1904, however, Britain and France had signed the Entente Cordiale and the political will for further expansion of French Indochina no longer existed.

French failure to pursue with respect to the former kingdom of Lan Xang the policy successfully pursued with respect to Luang Prabang,

[31] P. de Barthélemy, *En Indochine 1894–1895: Cambodge, Cochinchine, Laos, Siam méridional* (Paris: Plon, 1899), pp. 203–4. Under the terms of the 1896 agreement, the independence of Siam in the Menam basin was to be preserved while French interests in the Mekong basin were recognized.

[32] Cf. Minton F. Goldman, 'Franco–British Rivalry over Siam, 1896–1904', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 3 (1972), pp. 210–28.

[33] 'Conventions et traités', pp. 19–28. Dansai, too, was ceded to Laos, only to be sacrificed for Western Cambodia in the treaty of 1907.

[34] Demontes, 'Le Laos français', p. 225.

[35] Conseil Supérieur de l'Indochine, Note sur la situation du Laos, 1903. AOM Aix, Fonds de la Résidence Supérieur au Laos, D3.

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meant that France held only an underpopulated fragment of the former Lao kingdom, hardly viable as an independent entity without the Khorat plateau. The portion of Laos France possessed was not an historicaly constituted state; nor was it even a legally constituted unified territory. French Laos was divided into a protected kingdom in the north and a directly administered territory in the south designated respectively Upper and Lower Laos. The legal status of Laos as a whole remained unclear. Luang Prabang was a protectorate, the rest of Laos directly administered as a colony. The two parts had minimal political contact which made it that much easier to consider central and southern Laos as a mere adjunct to Vietnam, a region for future Vietnamese expansion.

In retrospect it is easy to see that French failure to press for inclusion of the Khorat plateau in French Laos had 'deplorable consequences' for the future Lao state,[36] but this was hardly a consideration at the time. Luang Prabang never laid claim to the Isan *muang*. In the treaties of 1893, 1904 and 1907[37] the French had what they wanted: reconstitution of Cambodia, a strategic hinterland in Laos 'rounding out' their Indochinese empire, control of the Mekong river and relatively well-defined frontiers. With Siam out of reach, there seemed little point in pressing for more. The effect of the French decision, however, was permanently to divide the Lao territories, and to relegate French Laos to the status of a remote colonial backwater, landlocked, underpopulated and underdeveloped.

The *mise en valeur* of Laos

The French viewed Laos first from the perspective of France. Roland Meyer looked forward to the economic development of Laos so that it could enter 'into the concert of "Frances-Mineures" called upon to join together for the prosperity of the Mother Country'.[38] Secondly, they looked upon Laos in relation to Vietnam. Laos would provide a 'hinterand' for Vietnam: its resources would be developed by means of Vietnamese labour. The benefits of productive enterprise, if benefits there were, would flow to French owners and the Vietnamese

[36] Paul Lévy, *Histoire du Laos* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1974), p. 68.

[37] The 1907 treaty gained the western Cambodian provinces of Battambang and Siem Reap for the loss for Laos of a small area around Dansai, south of Pak Lay. 'Conventions et traités', pp. 29–34.

[38] Meyer, *Le Laos*, p. 111.

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workforce, rather than to the Lao. For the French, Laos was seen as a 'colony of settlement', not for Frenchmen so much as for Vietnamese upon whose labour the economic future of the country would depend.

For a decade after 1894, however, the immediate goal of French administrators was to make Laos pay for itself. As Résident-Général Tournier stated in his 1901 report: 'The central idea of the organisation [of the administration of Laos] has been as follows: to administer this country with the least possible expense [to France].'[39] To this end taxes were imposed at a level which provoked considerable discontent, contributing in southern Laos to a widespread popular uprising (1901–07).[40] Even more burdensome and resented was the onerous corvée labour demanded of every male between the ages of 18 and 60 to construct administrative posts, barracks and roads—the infrastructure of colonial control. Despite these measures, however, the low population and large distances made it impossible to cover costs of administration entirely from local revenue. The Lao budget continued to require an annual subsidy from the general budget for Indochina. For French officials in Laos, a perpetual concern was how to keep expenditure down and revenues up. How to achieve the *mise en valeur* of the country became an obsession.

It did not take long for the French to realize that trade was not going to provide their salvation. Exaggerated hopes of generating a substantial trade flow down the Mekong to Saigon did not materialize.[41] The pattern of trade from the larger Mekong river towns, most of them west of the river, whether on the west bank (Khemmarat, Mukdahan, Nakon Phanom, Nong Khai) or at some remove further west (Ubon, Sakon, Nakhon) was too well established and too economical to disrupt. Trade flowed via Khorat to Bangkok. Most commerce was in the hands of Chinese merchants on both sides of the river, dealing with Chinese business houses in Bangkok exporting such items as cardamom, sticklac and benzoin, hides and skins, ivory and antlers and importing cheap British- and German-made con-

[39] A. Tournier, 'Note sur les progrès accomplis au Laos de 1897 à 1901', in Paul Doumer, *Situation de l'Indo-Chine (1897–1901)* (Hanoi: Schneider, 1902), p. 450.

[40] These are Le Boulanger's dates (*Histoire du Laos français*. p. 343). The uprising was not finally quelled, however, until 1936. Cf. François Moppert, 'Mouvement de résistance au pouvoir colonial français de la minorité protoindochinoise du plateau des Bolovens dans le sud Laos: 1901–1936', Doctoral Thesis, University of Paris VII, 1978.

[41] Cf. J. Lambert to Résident-Supérieur, 26 January 1909. AOM Aix, Fonds de la Résidence Supérieur au Laos, F10.

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sumer goods.[42] Local trade was in rice and buffaloes. Even the slow trip by buffalo cart across the Khorat plateau or by boat down the Mun river was more convenient and less expensive than to use the heavily subsidized river shipping service up the Mekong with its inconvenient transhipment around the falls at Khone.

In terms of trade, therefore, the value of Laos to Indochina and to France was derisory. Nevertheless, the belief existed that exploitation of the country's natural resources would solve all financial problems. All that was needed were improved means of communication, sufficient capital and a docile and disciplined labour force. All three were inter-connected but each posed its own problems. Capital investment would only be profitable provided labour was available to work mines, plantations or factories, and provided the means existed to export products at economic rates to world markets. Landlocked Laos had to be 'unblocked' in the sense of being provided with access to the sea, by river, by rail or by road, and via Vietnam, not Thailand. This for a succession of French administrators became the first priority in effecting the *mise en valeur* of the territory.

1. *Unblocking access*

Prior to the arrival of the French, access to the east bank of the Mekong was almost exclusively via the Khorat plateau. Overland communications by this route to or from Bangkok encounter no natural obstacles. For the French, however, this route was always excluded. Laos was a part of Indochina and had to be integrated into the Indochinese economy. Whatever economic benefits might be derived from the exploitation of Lao resources had to flow to Indochina and France, not to Siam. In practice this meant linking Laos with Vietnam.

Access to Laos from the east is far more difficult than access to the west across the Khorat plateau. Tortuous routes have throughout history linked northeastern Laos to the Tai highlands and the upper reaches of the Black river in northwestern Vietnam, and run from

[42] In the period from 1908 to 1912, merchandise to the value of 2,119,060 francs entered Laos from the rest of French Indochina as against 9,166,366 francs worth from Siam. Geoffrey C. Gunn, *Rebellion in Laos: Peasant and Politics in a Colonial Backwater* (Boulder: Westview, 1990), p. 22.

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Sam Neua east to Hanoi.[43] The principal route from Xieng Khouang and the Plain of Jars crossed the Barthélemy pass and followed the valley of the Ca river southeast to reach the coast at Vinh. Two passes, the Nape and Mu Gia, linked Thakhek on the middle Mekong with Vinh; while a sixth route ran from Savannakhet through the Ai Lao pass to Quang Tri, Hue and Danang. While the northern passes are at over 1,000 metres and the Nape pass is over 700 metres, the Mu Gia pass rises only just over 400 metres. The only other access between Laos and Vietnam is to the south, down the Mekong valley via Stung Treng and Kratie in Cambodia to An Loc in Vietnam and so to Saigon.[44] All these routes eventually formed part of the French colonial road network, the connection between them being the continuation of the road from Saigon following the Mekong to Vientiane and thence due north to Luang Prabang (Colonial route 13).

These routes, constructed at great cost in time and labour, especially to those forced to work on them year after year to fulfil their corvée requirements, were of variable quality. Some were not much more than tracks. Others were more substantial but not until the advent of motor transport in the 1930s did roads offer an alternative mode of communication to river shipping or rail as a means of 'unblocking' Laos. Even the stepped-up road construction programme of the late 1930s produced few all-weather stretches, and most roads remained impassable during the monsoon season. The first road open for regular truck transport ran from Savannakhet via the Mu Gia pass a distance of 328 kilometres to Dong-Ha. This enabled goods to reach Savannakhet from Saigon in three days, compared to twelve by boat up the Mekong, and undercut the price per tonne of goods transported.[45] Even so, transportation of bulk produce, whether mineral or agricultural, by road was never really a possibility.

The only hope for Laos, it was all but universally concluded, was to construct a railway from the coast of Vietnam to the Mekong. River shipping on the central navigable reaches of the Mekong could bring produce to a river port where it would be loaded into wagons

[43] Christian Taillard, *Le Laos: stratégies d'un état-tampon* (Montpellier: Groupement d'Intérêt Public RECLUS, 1989), pp. 16–18.

[44] Charles Robequain, *The Economic Development of French Indo-China.* Translated by Isabel A. Ward (London: Oxford University Press, 1944), pp. 101–2. See also Thomas Frank Barton, 'Outlets to the Sea for Land-locked Laos' *The Journal of Geography*, 59 (1960), pp. 206–20.

[45] Georges Auvray, 'Les voies de pénétration au Laos', *Bulletin des Amis du Laos*, 1 (1937), p. 54.

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to be transported to one or other of the Vietnamese ports such as Haiphong, Vinh or Da Nang. The 'unblocking' of Laos thus became synonymous with construction of a rail line, On this one project the economic future of Laos was believed to depend. Until it became a reality, the country would remain an economic backwater.

Apart from the visionary Blancsubé plan for a railway from Saigon to Yunnan via the Mekong valley, the first serious study of the possibility of constructing a railway into Laos was undertaken during the Governor-Generalship of Paul Doumer. Doumer was a great believer in the value of rail and road construction as providing the essential infrastructure for French capitalist development of Indochina. He conceived of a vast network of railroads linking Saigon with Hanoi and Hanoi to Kunming in Yunnan. Branch lines would run from Saigon to Phnom Penh, and Battambang, and from central Annam to the Mekong. Doumer gave instructions for surveys to be carried out to determine the best routes to follow and estimate costs involved.[46]

The Résident-Supérieur in Laos, Colonel Armand Tournier, shared Doumer's enthusiasm. The first route surveyed in 1898[47] ran from Attopeu to Qui Nhon via Kontum. Another joined Savannakhet via the Ai Lao pass with Quang Tri, just north of Hue (also surveyed in 1898). Both these projected routes were abandoned in view of the costs involved. An alternative examined was to construct a line north from the projected Saigon–Phnom Penh line to Stung Treng and thence to Attopeu and other centres in southern Laos (surveyed 1899). This version of the Blancsubé plan was also abandoned and attention shifted back to the middle Mekong. A line running from Pak Hin Boun upstream from Savannakhet through the Nape pass to Vinh was surveyed, and though no decision was taken it remained the preferred option. Tournier himself, however, favoured yet another route from Vinh northwest to the plateau of Xieng Khouang (the Plain of Jars) where the line would branch, south to Vientiane and west to Luang Prabang (surveyed 1900–01). Such a line, in Tournier's view, would open up the richest part of the country, the sole area where he believed European colonization to be possible from a cli-

[46] Doumer outlined his plans in *L'Indo-Chine française (souvenirs)* (Paris: Viubert et Nouy, 1905). The map of the railways he wanted to construct is on p. 354. Total length was estimated at 3,200 km, costing 400 million francs. On the advice of the Commission du Conseil Supérieur, construction was begun on lines totalling 600–700 km, requiring capital investment of 75 million francs (p. 355).

[47] Tournier, 'Note sur les progrès accomplis au Laos de 1897 à 1901', p. 452.

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matic point of view, and where he believed occupation troops could conveniently be stationed for the defence of northern Indochina.[48]

A similar argument was advanced by the Commissioner at Luang Prabang in a report to the new French Résident-Supérieur in Vientiane, George Mahé, successor to Tournier. Roads, the Commissioner argued, were too impractical and costly for the service they provided, and a shipping service between Luang Prabang and Vientiane was only possible during the four months of the rainy season. The money should instead be spent on construction of a railway, not an elaborate one, but a small and economical one similar to those built in Siam. Such a line, the Commissioner believed, 'would revolutionize the country and completely alter the economic future of Upper Laos. From this day it would live, take off, update its products. Its resources once discovered, production would find an outlet and would draw travellers and merchandise from neighbouring countries, and these exchanges would see established here one of the finest of markets.'[49] Europeans, Chinese and Vietnamese would swell the population. The economy would flourish. Rubber, teak and gold in particular would be exploited.

In the wake of the Sino–Japanese war and in view of what the French believed would be the imminent break-up of China, priority was given to the extremely costly Yunnan railway in order to ensure that Southern China remained a French sphere of influence.[50] The line was not finally completed until 1910, and its maintenance continued to make heavy demands on the general budget. Plans for a railway connecting the Mekong valley to the coast of Vietnam had to be temporarily abandoned. As it was, the Siamese northeastern railway did not reach Ubon until 1928. Another branch planned to reach Nongkhai on the Mekong just downstream from Vientiane caused much alarm to French officials in Vientiane,[51] but was not completed until 1953.

During the period of the First World War and immediately afterwards, from 1910 to 1926, railway construction slowed considerably. In 1921 a new programme was drawn up with the aim of unifying

[48] Demontes, 'Le Laos français', p. 595. Doumer included the projected route of this line in the frontispiece map in *L'Indo-Chine française*.

[49] Commissaire du Gouvernement à Luang Prabang au Résident Supérieur au Laos, 25 April 1904. AOM Aix, Fonds des Amiraux, 21758.

[50] The line cost 165 million francs, or nearly 354,000 francs per kilometre. Martin J. Murray, *The Development of Capitalism in Colonial Indochina (1870–1940)* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), p. 173.

[51] Lucien de Reinach, *Le Laos* (Paris: E. Guilmoto, 1911), p. 52.

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both the road and rail networks throughout Indochina. Funds were short, however, and construction was again curtailed. Despite the depression, in 1931 a new grand plan foreshadowed construction of four lines: a 550-kilometre section from Nha Trang to Danang to complete the Trans-Indochinese Railway; a line from Saigon to Phnom Penh and on to the Thai–Cambodian border; a line extending the Saigon–My Tho link south into the Mekong delta, terminating at Bac Lieu; and a 185-kilometre line from Tan-Ap, south of Vinh, to Thakhek on the Mekong.[52] Of these the Nha Trang–Danang section was eventually constructed, along with a section from Phnom Penh to the Thai–Cambodian border at Poipet. None of the others were completed.

The railway from Tan-Ap to Thakhek was fully surveyed and work begun in 1933 from the Vietnamese side.[53] A tunnel was to be dug under the Mu Gia pass, and the whole project, due for completion by 1936, was to be funded by a national loan floated in France.[54] The economic crisis of the early 1920s put paid to such grandiose plans, and only 18 kilometres of line were ever constructed, from Tan-Ap to Xom-Cuc. From Xom-Cuc a 40-kilometre-long aerial cable line was built over the Mu Gia pass to Naphao on the Lao side of the range. This cable had a maximum load capacity of 400 kilograms for each 8-by-2 metre 'car'. It carried merchandise from Vietnam to Laos, and tin concentrates on the return leg.[55] Built to supply construction gangs working on the railway, a use to which it was never put, it ceased operating when the Japanese seized control of Indochina in March 1945.

Construction of a railway from Laos to Vietnam was a sort of *deus ex machina* for French colonial officials. All the economic problems of the country were expected to be solved by this single means, though some did recognize that this might take time.[56] Despite the cost and numerous delays, it was an article of faith that the railway would be built, and would have the desired economic impact.[57] Roland Meyer

[52] Thomas E. Ennis, *French Policy and Development in Indochina* (New York: Russell and Russell, 1973), p. 124, note 35.

[53] Barton, 'Outlets to the Sea', p. 207. For a description of the proposed route, together with technical construction details, see Pierre Deloncle, 'La mise en valeur du Laos', in Jean Renaud, *Laos: dieux, bronzes et montagnes* (Paris: Alexis Redier, 1930), pp. 146–7, 156.

[54] Roland Meyer, *Le Laos* (Hanoi: Imprimerie d'Extrême-Orient, 1931), pp. 55, 61.

[55] Auvray, 'Les voies de pénétration au Laos', pp. 54–5.

[56] Charles Lemire thought it would take forty years or more. C. Lemire, *Les cinq pays de l'Indo-Chine française* (Paris: A. Challamel, 1900), p. 87.

[57] Cf. Deloncle, 'La mise en valeur du Laos', p. 142.

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writing in 1931 was convinced that 'the year 1936 will see the arrival of the locomotive on the bank of the Mekong, an event which will announce the economic awakening of Laos'.[58] The Tan-Ap–Thakhek line continued to fascinate planners but after 1945 insecurity made construction impossible. The only railway ever built in Laos was 7 kilometres long to enable transhipment of goods and people around the falls of Khone.[59]

Two things should be noted about French plans to build railways to and from Laos. The first is that the exploitation of Lao resources that it was hoped any of the possible lines would stimulate was for the benefit of French Indochina as a whole, including notably the Vietnamese terminus ports. The second is that apart from the economic aspect, a primary purpose in constructing any line was to link Laos more firmly with the rest of Indochina, which meant with Vietnam. The natural geographical and cultural links with Siam were thereby to be, if not broken, then at least attenuated, though not for the political reason of creating some distance between Siam and Laos so that the latter could develop its own national identity. No such consideration ever entered French minds.

2. *Labour requirements*

Even after Laos was 'completely unblocked', French officials believed that 'its intensive exploitation' would require a considerable increase in population.[60] From their earliest contacts with Laos, population was a problem that worried the French. In an area just on half that of France lived fewer than a million people, half of them relatively primitive tribal minorities.[61] The French were well aware that following the sack of Vientiane in 1828, the Siamese had pursued a policy of forced depopulation of Lao territories east of the Mekong. Article four of the convention attached to the Franco–Siamese treaty of 1893 stipulated that the Siamese would 'put no obstacle in the way of the return to the left [east] bank of former inhabitants of this region'.[62]

[58] Meyer, *Le Laos*, p. 61.

[59] The first section of 4.5 kilometres was completed in 1897, but was extended in 1893. Auvray, 'Les voies de pénétration au Laos', p. 47; Barton, 'Outlets to the Sea', p. 211.

[60] Meyer, *Le Laos*, p. 62.

[61] The estimate frequently given was 800,000. Cf. Deloncle, 'La mise en valeur du Laos', p. 138.

[62] 'Conventions et traités', p. 16.

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The French anticipated that the superiority of European administration and widespread dissatisfaction among the Lao of the west bank over Siamese arrogance and heavy-handedness would together lead to a steady flow of population back across the Mekong. For a number of reasons, not least the physical effort and difficulties involved, this movement never materialized. Few Lao returned and French Laos remained underpopulated.

The attitude of the French to their new subjects varied between affection and exasperation. No one who spent much time in Laos, however, could avoid being attracted by the Lao and their way of life. Virginia Thompson, an acute observer of Indochina in the late 1930s, remarked of Laos that it was the country where the French were happiest: 'For the rare Frenchman who sees in the Laotians a silly, lazy, and naïve people, there are hundreds who are charmed by their gentle affability and their aesthetic appearance.'[63]

More than seventy years earlier Henri Mouhout believed the Lao to be 'more industrious than the Siamese, possessed of a more adventurous and commercial spirit'. Other characteristics that Mouhout discerned crop up time and again in later French assessments: 'peaceful, submissive, patient, sober, confiding, credulous, superstitious, faithful, simple and naïve',[64] though increasingly they were seen in a more negative light.

Taupin sent on a mission to Laos in 1887 reported to the Governor-General of Indochina that the Lao were 'simple, naïve, credulous, ignorant, incapable of sustained concentration, insolent and apathetic, uncaring for the morrow, curious, mendicant; hospitable, gentle, charitable, and complaisant; submissive, patient, and respectful; [the Lao] has all the qualities of a good subject of whom one should not ask too much'. They were also 'pusillanimous and fearful', without martial qualities.[65] Taupin was clearly influenced by 'Social Darwinist' ideas about superior and inferior races. The Lao, he believed, along with the reverend fathers of the Ubon mission, were 'marching rapidly towards decadence'.[66] Like the Khmer, they had succumbed before the vitality of more aggressive peoples, the Siamese and Vietnamese. It was a commonly held view.

[63] Virginia Thompson, *French Indochina* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1937), p. 380. One such was Charles Rochet, *Pays Lao: Le Laos dans la tourmente, 1939–1945* (Paris: Vigneau, 1946).

[64] Quoted in Le Boulanger, *Histoire du Laos français*, p. 225.

[65] J. Taupin, 'Rapport à M le Gouverneur Général', *BSEI*, Série I (1888), p. 54.

[66] *Ibid.*

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The French view of the Lao as charming but insouciant and lazy was a significant factor underlying French readiness to use Vietnamese in the administration of Laos. In the 1890s the French drew upon resources available to them. Interpreters and clerks were for the most part Vietnamese, trained in Saigon over the previous three decades. The French were remarkably slow in building up a body of Lao public servants to replace the Vietnamese. Partly this was due to sheer inertia, partly because of the cost involved and partly because it was French policy to divide and rule. But two other attitudes were also present. Even though the presence of the Vietnamese was deeply resented, the French believed they had a right to be in Laos for Laos was but an extension of Vietnam. Also they believed the Vietnamese to be more hard-working, less lethargic than the Lao. They should be given the opportunity to prove their worth.

From the point of view of the *mise en valeur* of Laos, the French were most interested in whether the Lao would make good workers. Here the almost universal conclusion was that they would not. Not only were there not enough of them, but the Lao were 'naturally lazy, morally as well as physically slothful, working only when constrained and forced to do so...'.[67] 'The ignorance and insolent apathy of the Lao nation in general are the reason why they leave unexploited the natural riches and products of which they do not even suspect the existence', Taupin wrote in disgust.[68]

Those administrators who knew them better and had spent years in the country were more understanding, but hardly more hopeful when it came to getting the Lao to participate in the economic development of their country. De Reinach felt 'it would be as excessive as it would be unjust to maintain that the inhabitants [of Laos] in general were incapable of initiative and hard work'.[69] On the other hand, he conceded that if a labour force were needed to develop the country 'it seems difficult to be able to count on the Lao'.[70] Two decades and very little economic progress later, the Lao were being blamed for being 'indolent and set in their ways'.[71]

So what was the answer? Obviously if the Lao themselves could not provide the workforce needed for the economic exploitation of the

[67] de Barthélemy, *En Indochine*, p. 199.
[68] Taupin, 'Rapport à M le Gouverneur Général', p. 50.
[69] de Reinach, *Le Laos*, p. 386.
[70] *Ibid.*, p. 387. The possibility of using Lao Theung (*Kha*) labour (suggested in Conseil Supérieur de l'Indo-China, Note sur la situation en Laos, 1903, AOM Aix, Fonds de la Résidence Supérieur du Laos, D3) was soon dropped.
[71] Meyer, *Le Laos*, p. 102.

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colony, then it would have to come from outside. But where from? European colonization in any numbers was early ruled out. Tournier was hopeful that European settlement would be possible in the Xieng Khouang region (Plain of Jars), though he discounted the southern Bolovens plateau.[72] De Reinach was convinced that although some regions at higher altitudes had a climate similar to Algeria, Laos was not a colony for European migration. 'The European cannot work with his hands in a continuous way; he must take upon himself the role of direction and supervision, leaving heavy manual work to the Asiatics.'[73] Others agreed.[74] But although Laos held little appeal as a colony for settlement by 'petits colons',[75] there did remain a possibility for those with wealth to establish plantations or raise herds and flocks on large concessions.[76] The actual work would be performed by imported labour, which might even have an effect on 'our brave Laotians' who 'seeing the benefits and well-being that work can procure, will shake off little by little the state of indolence and laziness that characterises them'.[77]

The choice, where it came to imported labour, clearly lay between China and Vietnam. Tournier, for one, did not like the idea of introducing Chinese coolies who in his estimation were 'very prolific but very encroaching (envahissant)'.[78] The Marquis de Barthélemy admitted that a lot of people considered it 'artificial and dangerous' to introduce a Chinese labour force, but felt in the case of Laos it might regrettably be necessary.[79] De Reinach was prepared to accept Chinese as a temporary measure.[80]

[72] Demontes, 'Le Laos français', p. 227. Général Leturc, writing in *Annales politiques et littéraires*, no. 2181, May 1925, foresaw a time when European farmers would be growing 100,000 head of cattle, not to mention 'the flowers, fruit and vegetables of our country' on the plateau of Xieng Khouang (p. 513).

[73] de Reinach, *Le Laos*, p. 387.

[74] For example, A. Maurel, 'La mise en valeur du Laos', *Revue scientifique*, 4th series, 1 (1894), p. 432.

[75] Very few French colonists ever settled in Laos, where the total European population numbered only about 600 by the late 1930s. In 1914 there were thirty *colons* in all of Laos. Moppert, 'Mouvement de résistance au pouvoir colonial français', p. 32.

[76] G. Gosselin, *Le Laos et le protectorat français* (Paris: Perrin, 1900), p. 309.

[77] *Ibid.*, p. 310. Earlier the French administrator at Savannakhet, P. Odend'hal, had said much the same thing in a report to his superior. 'The day the Lao see their land pass into the hands of new-comers, the day they see them expand and multiply, perhaps then they will shed their torpor and decide to work.' Cited in Moppert, 'Mouvement de résistance au pouvoir colonial français', p. 106.

[78] Tournier, 'Note sur les progrès accomplis au Laos de 1897 à 1901', p. 599.

[79] de Barthélemy, *En Indochine*, p. 198, note 1.

[80] de Reinach, *Le Laos*, p. 388.

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The prevailing choice, however, was for Vietnamese to be brought in, not just as contract labourers, but as a permanent population to grow rice in the Mekong lowlands.

> The Annamites are remarkable cultivators possessing superb rice paddies; they make artificial ones by irrigating land that the Lao leave unused; they know, by directing the streams, how to grow two crops a year from soil that would only furnish one for the Lao ... Their primary quality is to have an instinct for commerce, and a desire for money, two things absolutely unknown, until now, by the great mass of Laotians.[81]

From the beginning, Governor-General Paul Beau looked forward to 'an Annamite Laos nourished by Vietnamese and European colonization'.[82] Vietnamese were actively recruited into both the French administration of Laos and the militia, the Garde Indigène.[83] Not that large-scale migrations would be easy to achieve, however, because of the poor image Laos had for Vietnam as an unhealthy country of savages and slave traders. A considerable effort of propaganda would be necessary to convince large numbers of Vietnamese to migrate.[84] Those who argued against 'systematic colonization of Laos by the Annamites', did so on the grounds of France's 'evident interest in maintaining a precious equilibrium among her subject races'—the need to divide and rule.[85]

It was calculated that the population of Laos would need to be approximately tripled if its natural resources were to be exploited to the extent of producing sufficient revenues to cover the cost of administration without relying upon a subsidy from the general budget.[86] Massive Vietnamese migration would therefore be required. Roads and railways from the coast to the Mekong would eliminate the ancient barrier of the Annam cordillera, opening the way for such an 'inevitable immigration'. The role of France would be to encourage

[81] Gosselin, *Le Laos*, pp. 95–6.

[82] Quoted by Bernard Gay, 'La frontière Vietnam–Lao de 1893 à nos jours', in Centre d'Histoire et Civilisations de la Péninsule Indochinoise, *Les frontières du Vietnam* (Paris: Editions L'Harmattan, 1989), p. 210.

[83] *Ibid.*, p. 99. In 1904 the Garde Indigène in Laos comprised 723 Vietnamese as against 591 Lao, who were said not to make good soldiers. Officers had to count on the Vietnamese. Conseil Supérieur de l'Indo-Chine, Situation politique et économique du Laos, July 1904. AOM, Aix, Fonds de la Résidence Supérieur au Laos, D3.

[84] de Reinach, *Le Laos*, p. 388. Cf. the discussion of preferences of Vietnamese migrants in Robequain, *The Economic Development of French Indo-China*, pp. 59–73.

[85] Mission Etienne Aymonier, *Voyage dans le Laos* vol. 1 (Paris: Ernest Leroux, 1895), p. 182.

[86] *Ibid.*, pp. 7, 64.

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'a profitable collaboration' between the two antagonistic races of Vietnamese and Lao, while at the same time protecting the latter against the former: 'the hardy, enterprising, combative Annamite would make a mouthful to the timid and resigned Lao'.[87] It would be necessary to set aside 'rural reserves' and 'ethnic quarters in the towns' specially for the Lao. The Vietnamese would be permitted to settle everywhere else, eventually becoming the majority race, for 'the peopling of Laos must be able to go ahead by means of rational and selected immigration in relation to the demands of the economic development of the country'.[88] Thus would Laos come to fulfil its ordained role as the 'common hinterland of the coastal colonies', the 'frontier march-land and unifying territorial element in the Indochinese Union', 'the Indochinese Fart-West [*sic*]'.[89]

Such an heroic vision for the Vietnamese future of Laos never eventuated—though not for want of French encouragement. The Vietnamese population in Laos grew steadily but slowly until 1935 when it numbered 20,500. Then in the next four years it almost doubled to 39,000.[90] In part this may have been due to the effects of the depression in Vietnam, but it was French policy to promote migration. As late as early 1945, a plan was formulated to increase Vietnamese migration to three priority areas: the Vientiane plain, the region of Savannakhet and the Bolovens plateau. A hundred thousand Vietnamese were to be settled in three successive groups near Savannakhet, with another fifty thousand on the Bolovens.[91] Vientiane and Thakhek were already preferred areas of Vietnamese settlement: in both towns, Vietnamese comprised the majority of the population.[92] The plan was discarded after the French reoccupation of Laos in 1946 when the Japanese interregnum had irrevocably changed the political destiny of French Indochina.[93]

[87] *Ibid.*, p. 63.
[88] *Ibid.*, p. 64.
[89] Meyer, *Le Laos*, p. 62.
[90] Eric Pietrantoni, 'La population du Laos de 1912 à 1945', *BSEI*, Nouvelle Série, Tome XXVIII (1953), p. 34.
[91] Eric Pietrantoni, 'La population du Laos en 1943 dans son milieu géographique', *BSEI*, Nouvelle Série, Tome XXXII (1957), p. 243.
[92] In Vientiane 53%; in Thakhek 85%. By 1943 Vietnamese constituted 60% of the population of the six principal towns in Laos. Only in Luang Prabang did they number less than half (28%). *Ibid.*, p. 230.
[93] As many as 80% of the Vietnamese population of Laos left either to return to Vietnam or to settle in northeastern Thailand in the face of the French reconquest of Laos. MacAlister Brown and Joseph J. Zasloff, *Apprentice Revolutionaries: The Communist Movement in Laos, 1930–1985* (Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 1986), p. 34.

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French population policy in Laos was the product of several reinforcing beliefs. Primary among them was the conviction that the Lao themselves were far too uninterested to bring about the economic development of their country, at least in a time frame of interest to the French. The matter was urgent because Laos was a steady drain on the Federal budget. It was believed that only the massive migration of Vietnamese could ensure rapid economic progress. It did not matter that this would reduce the Lao to second-class status in their own country because Laos was never thought of as a political entity that one day would be independent of Vietnam. The British imported indentured Indian labour into Sri Lanka, Burma and Malaya, but they did so, however heedlessly of the longer term effect, for economic reasons alone, not to create a new, dominant component of the population. By contrast, French migration policy for Laos, had it been effective, would have led to its integration into Vietnam.

3. *Capital and development*

The third element necessary for the economic development of Laos, once roads and a railway were constructed and a workforce encouraged to migrate, was capital. This, the French contribution, was believed to be the key to European colonization.[94] Once access was assured and a workforce available, French capital would flow into Laos to exploit its abundant natural resources, under French direction and to the profit of France. Or so it was assumed.

Every French account of Laos listed the colony's natural resources, almost as a prospectus for potential investors. Apart from limited opportunities for commerce these broadly fell into three categories: agriculture of one kind or another; timber and forest products; and minerals. Early companies formed in the 1890s in the first enthusiasm of possession of a new colony quickly foundered, as trade proved minimal.[95] Plantation agriculture never developed in Laos, with the partial exception of coffee in Haut-Mékong and on the Bolovens.[96]

[94] So argued Jules Ferry. Cf. Roberts, *History of French Colonial Policy*, p. 16, where Ferry is quoted as saying: 'there is no need to have surplus population in order to colonize: an excess of capital will suffice'. Jean de Lanessan, Governor-General in 1893 when French forces marched into Laos, was another who stressed the role of capital in colonization. Cf. Stuart Michael Persell, *The French Colonial Lobby (1899–1938)* Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 1983), p. 42.

[95] These included the *Société français de Haut Laos* and the *Société d'Attopeu.*

[96] Grown by the Commerciale du Laos, founded in 1922 with a capital of one million francs. Gunn, *Rebellion in Laos*, p. 23.

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Thirty tons of coffee were exported in 1935.[97] Cardamom, tobacco, cotton and jute were also grown in small quantities. Rubber was tried, but only experimentally, despite its success in Vietnam and Cambodia.

In forestry the *Compagnie de l'Est-Asiatique Française* cut teak in northern Laos and floated some 12,000 to 15,000 trunks down the Mekong to Saigon when the river was high.[98] More profitable were forest products such as wax, resin, medicinal plants, perfumed woods and particularly sticklac and benzoin with production by 1936 of 100 and 40 tonnes, respectively.[99] As all were collected by the mountain-dwelling ethnic minorities, the only profitable opportunity for French capital was to gain control of commerce in these products. In fact they remained largely in the hands of local Chinese merchants and British export companies in Bangkok.

Only in mining was French capital in any considerable amounts invested in Laos. A first attempt to exploit tin deposits at Nam Patène foundered. Not until 1923 was any tin extracted, by the newly formed *Société d'études et d'explorations minières en Indochine* with a capital investment eventually reaching 12.6 million francs.[100] Within four years production of tin concentrate had increased to 331 tonnes. Mining was by the open-cut method, employing fifteen Europeans and between 700 and 800 workers. By 1927 the company was making an annual profit of over two million francs. Its shares when listed on the Paris Bourse reached a face value of 323 million francs.[101] In October 1926 a new company, the *Société des Etains de l'Indochine* was formed and actively promoted, followed in February 1927 by the *Société des Etains du Cammon.* A sudden boom in mining shares took their capitalization by March 1929 to 46 million and 315 million francs, respectively.[102] Total paper value in Lao tin shares eventually amounted to an extraordinary 1,106 million francs. Companies proliferated as new and totally unproved concessions were taken up. Some were entirely

[97] 'Situation actuelle des principales exportations de la colonie (du Laos) avec indication des quantités absorbés par la métropole'. Rapports faits à la conférence des gouverneurs généraux, Paris, 3 November 1936. AOM Aix, Fonds de la Résidence Supérieur au Laos', D2.

[98] Deloncle, 'La mise en valeur du Laos', p. 157.

[99] 'Situation actuelle...'.

[100] Deloncle, 'La mise en valeur du Laos', p. 150.

[101] *Ibid.*, p. 151.

[102] This account of the Lao mining boom and bust is taken from Deloncle, 'La mise en valeur du Laos', pp. 150–4, and Robequain, *The Economic Development of French Indo-China*, p. 265.

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fraudulent. Huge profits were made by French speculators, but relatively little was actually invested in Laos. When the bubble burst only two mines continued production, with total annual output of around 1,000 tonnes per annum. By the mid-1930s these mines were worked by some 2,000 'coolies', almost all of them Vietnamese—the only substantial industrial labour force in Laos.[103]

The French never did achieve their desired *mise en valeur* of Laos. Economic development was minimal, despite all the plans to 'unblock' Laos and fill the country with industrious Vietnamese. French investment was limited to tin and coffee, with a little timber extraction and exploitation of forest products. The Vietnamese who did migrate to Laos tended to concentrate in the major Mekong towns where they mostly outnumbered the Lao, but were still not present in sufficient numbers by 1940 to constitute a new dominant ethnic component in the population as a whole. In 1940 Laos still remained a charming backwater of inconsequential economic importance, still requiring to be subsidized from the revenues of Vietnam. Paradoxically, however, in failing to develop Laos for the benefit of either France or Vietnam, the French by chance preserved Laos for the Lao. Not, however, until the 1940s were the Lao in a position to take political advantage of the gift the French had inadvertently given them.

Political Implications

The French view of the Lao as lovely people, but lazy and ineffectual, predisposed them to see the Lao as eventually making way in their own country for the more aggressive, active, hard-working Vietnamese. Competition would ensure the triumph of the Vietnamese, actively assisted by French migration policy. The future for Laos, therefore, would be absorption into a greater Vietnam, under the guise of French Indochina—with some protection provided for 'the natives'.[104]

Given these demeaning attitudes and assumptions, it was not surprising that the French found it difficult to conceive of Laos as a

[103] Pietrantoni, 'La population du Laos en 1943', p. 241.

[104] Some have argued that French Indochina was indeed 'a fulfilment of long-standing goals of Vietnamese expansionism'. J. T. McAlister Jr, 'The Possibilities for Diplomacy in Southeast-Asia', *World Politics*, 19 (1967), p. 265. This certainly looked like happening. Only the independence of Laos and Cambodia prevented it.

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single national entity. Luang Prabang had its own separate status which it jealously guarded. In 1930, the French Conseil de Législation ruled that all of Laos was a colony,[105] a conclusion the jurist François Iché disagreed with.[106] Protests by the King of Luang Prabang led to an exchange of letters reinstating the kingdom's status as a protectorate, but leaving that of the rest of the country unresolved. And there the matter rested until 1941 when, in order to compensate the king for loss of the province of Sayaboury to Thailand,[107] the provinces of Haut-Mékong, Xieng Khouang and Vientiane were included in the kingdom of Luang Prabang.[108] The south was still excluded.

At the opening session of the Indigenous Consultative Assembly for Laos meeting in Vientiane on 30 August 1923 Résident-Supérieur Jules Bosc reminded delegates that the occasion was the first time since division of the kingdom of Lan Xang in the early eighteenth century that representatives from throughout Laos had met together to deliberate on the future of the country. He implied this was thanks to France, and in this he was strictly correct.[109] Yet the French did nothing more to encourage development of political institutions in Laos. The Assembly was not a democratically elected body and its role was purely advisory. It did nothing to promote representative government or mass political interest, and contributed little to a sense of Lao national identity. Even French encouragement of the 'renovation' of Lao culture and identity in the early 1940s was primarily in order to counter the appeal of the pan-Thaiïsm emanating from Bangkok. It was never intended to give rise to a nationalist movement for Lao independence.[110]

French authorities seemed unaware of the growth of national sentiment following the proclamation of Lao independence under Japanese

[105] *Journal Officiel de la République Française*, 5 June 1930, p. 459.

[106] Iché, *Le statut politique et international du Laos français*, p. 153.

[107] This exchange took place on 29 December 1931 and 25 February 1932. Cf. Martin Stuart-Fox and Mary Kooyman, *Historical Dictionary of Laos* (Metchuen, N.J. and London: Scarecrow Press, 1992): Chronology, p. xxxi.

[108] Under the terms of the Franco–Lao agreement of 21 August 1941 between King Sisavang Vong and the Vichy government of Marshal Pétain. This was replaced by the Franco–Lao *modus vivendi* of 27 April 1946 which formally created a unified Kingdom of Laos. Roger Levy, *Indochine et ses traités: 1946* (Paris: Hartmann, 1947), pp. 55–69.

[109] Discours prononcé par Monsieur le Résident Supérieur au Laos, 30 Août 1923, AOM Aix, Fonds de la Résidence Supérieur au Laos, F5.

[110] Rochet, *Pays Lao*. Rochet himself was far more sympathetic to Lao nationalist aspirations than were most of his fellow officials.

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duress; or the urgency felt by many Lao in reclaiming their country from what they saw as the collusion of French and Vietnamese.[111] The Japanese had set a precedent: Laos was a separate state in its own right. While the King in Luang Prabang, out of touch with political developments in the administrative capital of Vientiane, was prepared to return his kingdom to France, Prince Phetsarath took advantage of the political vacuum created by the Japanese surrender not only to reiterate Lao independence, but also to proclaim the unity of the Lao state. Only then were the provinces of southern Laos formally incorporated into the kingdom. Not since 1707 had northern and southern *muang* formed part of a unitary state. Phetsarath's proclamation of 15 September 1945, not the cobbling together of Lao territories as part of Indochina in 1893, marks the reconstitution of the modern Lao state.

Lao nationalists were forced to fight both French and Vietnamese for their vision of a Lao state and control of their own cities. In this they were at first surprisingly successful, but the odds were too great. The Lao Issara were forced temporarily to make common cause with the Vietnamese in Laos, most of whom supported the Viet Minh.[112] Their combined opposition ensured that the reconquest of Laos by French forces in 1946 required a military operation that contrasted strikingly with the 'conquest of hearts' conducted by Auguste Pavie half a century before. One effect was to force the flight across the Mekong to Thailand, not only of the entire leadership of the Lao Issara, but also the greater part of the Vietnamese population of the Lao Mekong towns which had not already returned to Vietnam.[113] What could easily have become a large minority difficult to assimilate

[111] Général de Crèvecœur, commander of French forces in the reconquest of Laos, quotes a letter from the pro-French Minister of Finance and National Education, Outhong Souvannavong, to Prince Phetsarath admitting three justified Lao criticisms of the French administration: 'having sometimes badly chosen her representatives to govern our country; not having trained indispensable Lao civil servants; having considered Laos as an Annamite colony'—all of which he believed would be redressed. Jean Boucher de Crèvecœur, *La libération du Laos 1945–1946* (Château de Vincennes: Service Historique de l'Armée de Terre, 1985), p. 54. Cf. also *Lao Issara: The Memoirs of Oun Sananikone*, translated by J. B. Murdoch. Data Paper No. 110, Southeast Asia Program, Cornell University, 1975.

[112] Geoffrey C. Gunn, *Political Struggles in Laos (1930–1954)* (Bangkok: Editions Duang Kamol, 1988), pp. 133–62.

[113] The exodus of Vietnamese is referred to in David K. Wyatt (ed.), *Lao Issara: The Memoires of Oun Sananikone*. Data Paper 100, Southeast Asia Program (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press), pp. 41, 43–4, 56. For additional references and numbers involved, see Hugh Toye, *Laos: Buffer State or Battleground?* (London: Oxford University Press, 1968), pp. 73, note 54.

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was reduced to a small politically insignificant one. The 'Vietnamese problem' that might have been thus solved itself. A positive effect of the Vietnamese exodus was to open up the Lao public service for Lao recruitment. Another was to stimulate Lao migration into urban areas. Apart from the Chinese, the Lao Mekong towns became predominantly Lao.

When moderate Lao Issara nationalists broke with the Viet Minh, their return to Laos in 1949 did not constitute a surrender to the French. They returned with strong political credentials to work for the full independence of their country. They were able to do so because the events of 1945–46, in Laos and more particularly in Vietnam with the rise of the Viet Minh, had broken the nexus between Vietnam and France that had had such a damaging effect on Laos. Only after 1946 did the French begin to regard Laos other than from the perspective of Vietnam, as an area relatively free of Viet Minh. It was France's commitment to the defence of newly independent Laos that led to establishment of the French base at Dien Bien Phu: Laos was no longer a hinterland to be used for the benefit of Vietnam, but a state to be protected against aggression by its neighbour. By regarding Laos as part of a single Indochinese field of operations, the Viet Minh invasions of 1953 and 1954 in effect carried over French attitudes towards the relationship between Laos and Vietnam. Ironically it took the Vietnamese rather longer than the French to realize that Laos was a national entity in its own right.[114]

[114] After 1975, Vietnam denied any intention of creating a Vietnamese dominated federation of states in Indochina. None the less, in 1977, Laos and Vietnam signed a Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation endorsing what the Vietnamese in particular referred to as the 'special relationship' between the two countries. After the overthrow of the Khmer Rouge regime in Cambodia, the People's Republic of Kampuchea became similarly dependent on Vietnam. It has taken both states the best part of a decade in the context of a rapidly changing international environment to disengage themselves from the close embrace of Vietnam and return to something approaching their traditional 'buffer' status between Thailand and Vietnam.

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