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Oliver Tappe

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# Frontier friction: colonial infrastructures, Chinese (im-)mobility, and the attack on Sam Neua (NE Laos) in 1914

Oliver Tappe

Institute of Anthropology, University of Heidelberg, Heidelberg, Germany

**ABSTRACT**

The 1914 uprising of Sam Neua (Houaphan Province, NE Laos) laid bare complex processes of social and economic mobilization in the mountainous hinterlands of French Indochina. As a first prelude to the upcoming anticolonial struggles in the Lao-Vietnamese borderlands, this heterogeneous movement is only little understood in its sociopolitical and cultural dimensions. Though initiated by armed Chinese bands, the participation of different upland ethnic groups suggests that the uprising was also the result of socioeconomic discontent and disquiet among the local population. At the beginning of the twentieth century, colonial interventions in upland Laos unsettled economic and political configurations, and confronted local powerbrokers with both restrictions and new opportunities. Colonial infrastructure development negatively affected Chinese trade and mobility in northern Indochina – a key factor for the escalation in Sam Neua. By means of combining microhistory and historical anthropology, this paper aims to investigate forms of mobility, mimetic encounters, and shifting conceptions of sociopolitical hierarchies in colonial Indochina that have so far received only scant attention.

**KEYWORDS**

Laos; colonialism; mobility; historical anthropology; mimesis

## Introduction

In the night from 10 to 11 November 1914, a band of armed Chinese traders and local Tai and Lao peasants attacked the French post of Sam Neua, the *chef-lieu* of Houaphan province (NE Laos; see Figure 1). They killed the French commissar and robbed a large amount of opium and silver. One month later, they retreated to the mountains of northern Houaphan – the watershed between the Black River and the Song Ma – before starting another attack on the French post in Son La, further north in Tonkin (Vietnam today). This time, the French could defeat the band with the help of Vietnamese colonial infantry (Gunn 1989; Evans 2012; Le Failler 2014).

The Chinese ringleaders of the attack on Sam Neua relied heavily on the support of local Lao collaborators, for example Ba Phom, the former *chao meuang* (lord of the *meuang*/polity) of the small principality Xieng Kho. Ba Phom was dismissed by the French authorities only a few years before (charged with opium contraband), deprived

**CONTACT** Oliver Tappe tappe@uni-heidelberg.de Institute of Anthropology, University of Heidelberg, Voßstraße 2, 69115 Heidelberg, Germany

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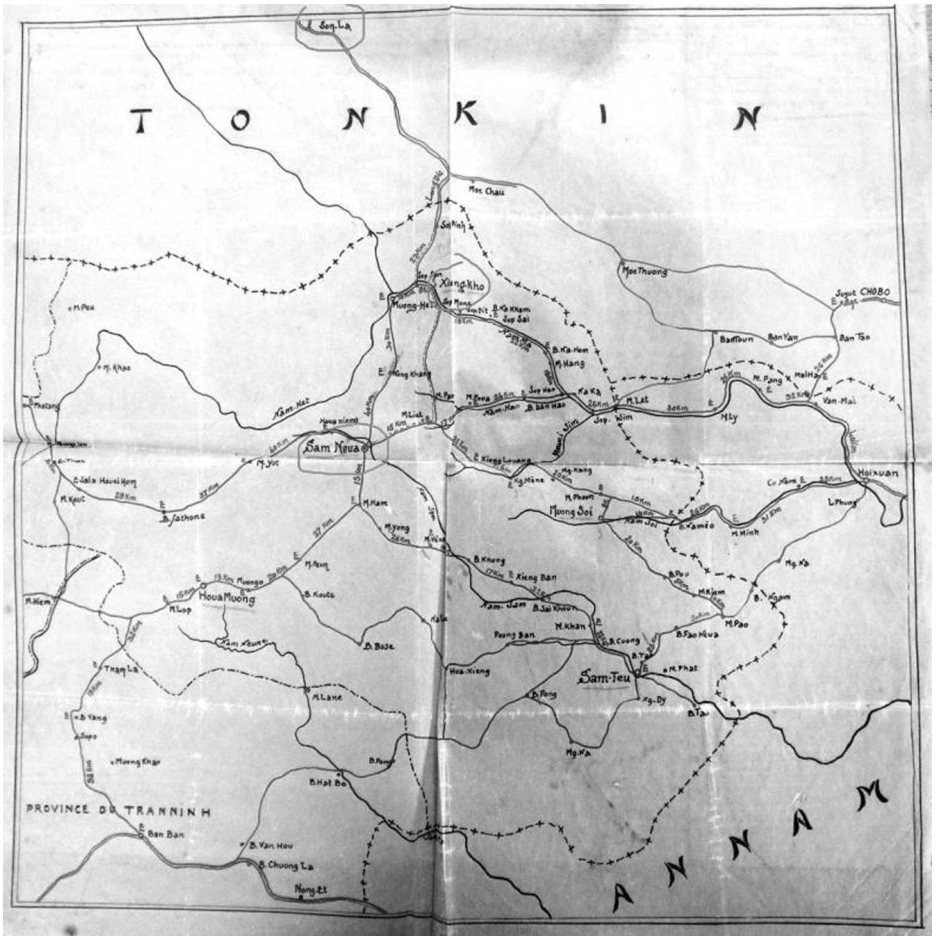


**Figure 1.** Province of Houaphan (NE Laos), key places marked: Sam Neua, Xieng Kho, and Son La/ Tonkin (Source: ANOM RSL/E4, 1925).

of privileges and economic opportunities, and filled with resentment. His story was an example of colonial administrative intervention and resulting sociopolitical tensions in the northern Lao-Vietnamese borderlands, an emerging nexus of opium cultivation and trade. Ba Phom and his son-in-law, Kham Ban, constitute key figures in the following actor-centered historical ethnography of encounters across cultural and economic power asymmetries (Faier and Rofel 2014).

The turmoil in Sam Neua occured at a time when the colonial administration had strengthened its grip on the Lao-Vietnamese uplands after decades of 'pacification' campaigns ( Fourniau 2002). Regions like Houaphan were targeted with new infrastructures in order to 'unblock' them, that is, to allow a profitable outflow of natural resources (Gunn 1990; Ivarsson 2008; Goscha 2012). What the French called the *débloquement* of upland Laos included a wide range of infrastructural initiatives including roads and telegraphs, as well as legal interventions such as the opium *régie* designed to maintain the colonial monopoly on opium trade – at the expense of Chinese trading networks (Le Failler 2014; Davis 2017; Sasges 2017).

The 1914 attack appears as a violent reaction by a heterogeneous assemblage of different actors against these colonial interventions. However, my discussion of the escalation offers more than just a tale of anticolonial resistance, namely fresh perspectives on the instable sociopolitical dynamics in the region (cf. Petit 2020; Lentz 2019). The dialectic of (im-)mobilization through colonial infrastructures forms a central frame of this study. As I will argue, the 1914 attack was a response to the constringent web of emerging infrastructures that consisted of roads and telegraphs, new border regimes, and the opium *régie*. While certainly pushing forward the *débloquement* of Houaphan, new colonial infrastructures also limited Chinese mobility and disrupted local sociopolitical configurations.

Following a review of different interpretations of the Sam Neua attack (including Lao ones), I investigate this historical event with a particular focus on local power configurations and interethnic networks – with the colonial intervention (and the international dimension of incipient WWI) as a contingent factor. Through a careful investigation of colonial documents, the attack and its aftermath will be discussed in a broader political context and further explored through the lens of mimetic encounters. The purpose of this article is to understand the Chinese factor in the early anticolonial struggle in Laos, and how it fits into the complex sociocultural fabric of the Lao-Vietnamese borderlands in the early twentieth century.

## Unblocking Houaphan: French economic and political strategies in upland Laos

The French, by the turn of the twentieth century, were aware that economic exploitation of their sparsely populated Lao domains was facing considerable topographic and demographic problems. Rapids prevented continuous navigation of the Mekong, and the Truong Son mountain chain formed a natural boundary between the Mekong basin and the Vietnamese coastline. Roads across those mountains, following old caravan routes, became key infrastructure projects of the French administration in Laos (Butault 1913; Brunhes 1923; Pholsena 2013).

Road construction was the only viable option to unblock the northeastern uplands of Laos, complementary to river passages suitable for pirogue navigation. Colonial administrators and entrepreneurs considered different ways to link Houaphan with the Vietnamese ports. One important route was supposed to connect Sam Neua with Thanh Hoa to transport valuable forest products like shellac and benzoin to the Vietnamese coast – 'to the detriment of the Siamese market and for the greatest profit of Annam and Tonkin'.[1]

Mountain roads were only the most visible colonial attempt to overcome the friction of terrain (Scott 2009), which inhibited effective lowland state encroachment of upland Indochina. Telegraph lines added another layer to the landscape, a new dimension of communication and control, contributing to the transformation of the local spatial-political order. However, Chinese powerbrokers learned to use the new telegraph lines to pursue their own ambitions, by strategically disseminating (dis-)information, as Bradley C. Davis (2017, 148–153) had shown in his insightful study of Chinese 'imperial bandits' in the northern Indochinese borderlands.

Roads and telegraphs are topologies of state-making that allow goods and people to move across large-distances, but also help to create bureaucracies and spatial-political

orders. As 'amalgam of technical, administrative, and financial techniques' (Larkin 2013, 330), such infrastructures were not just central to modern forms of governance or production regimes, but they also evoked desires and emotional attachments (Sneath et al. 2009). Infrastructures have both a material and an immaterial/ideological reality, whether they be physical structures (roads, factories, pipelines), texts (legal or bureaucratic documents) or border regimes.

Part and parcel of the French colonial economic development (called *mise en valeur*) was the creation of monopolies on key commodities such as rice, opium, and alcohol – the notorious 'beasts of burden' of Indochina's economy (Murray 1980; Brocheux and Hémery 2009; Sasges 2017). Opium was especially important for the uplands, where swidden cultivators like the Hmong and Khmu ethnic groups turned towards this profitable crop. By creating an opium monopoly, the colonial administration wanted to keep Yunnanese traders out of the profit (Le Failler 2014, 218–220; Descours-Gatin 1992; Sasges 2017). The new infrastructure affected the economic interests and mobilities of transregional traders and their local partners who had previously earned considerable margins, also in remote places like Xieng Kho in northern Houaphan (Petit 2020, 96–97; Foropon 1927).

The emerging colonial infrastructures were carrying disruptive energy in a region already shaped by conflict, contingent mobilities, and sociopolitical tension. When the French replaced Siamese garrisons in Houaphan after taking over the Lao territories east of the Mekong in 1893, they encountered a diverse, scattered population, unsettled by decades of warfare and displacement (including incursions by Chinese warlords and a large-scale Khmu rebellion; Lefèvre 1898; Petit 2020; Tappe 2015). The emerging colonial administration was puzzled by the complex local patterns of mobility shown by Chinese and different Tai-speaking people, as well as the Hmong and Khmu (see Figure 2; Schlemmer 2017 on the ethnolinguistic diversity in northern Laos).

Chinese merchants, some of them former warlords or remnants of the ill-famed 'Flag' armies operating in the region before (see Davis 2017; Le Failler 2014), remained a thorn in the side of the French colonialists, not least as contraband was growing (often via local Tai and Lao intermediaries). Different legal schemes were used to criminalize the Chinese opium trade, for example to classify Chinese traders as 'foreigners' with limited rights in Indochina, the imposition of high taxes, and the restrictive regulation of trade licenses (Brocheux and Hémery 2009; Sasges 2017).

In 1911, *Gouverneur Général* Luce announced the expulsion of foreigners 'without fixed residence in Indochina'.[2] The letter was clearly directed against the Chinese, as the placement of it in a folder overwritten with 'Circulation des Chinoise – Expulsion des Chinois' suggests. Other documents in this folder show how Chinese mobility changed in the following decade, through measures such as the obligation to carry documents, the grouping in congregations, and other technologies of power: '… an extremely rigorous surveillance of all foreigners, especially Chinese, who pass or establish themselves on our territory'.[3]

This was happening at a time when many Chinese traders and former warlords had become part of the social fabric in the borderlands of northern Indochina. Chinese resentment towards the *régie* and other legal interferences – indeed shared by a number of Tai and Lao notables – had certainly been growing, with the escalation of 1914 being a case in point.

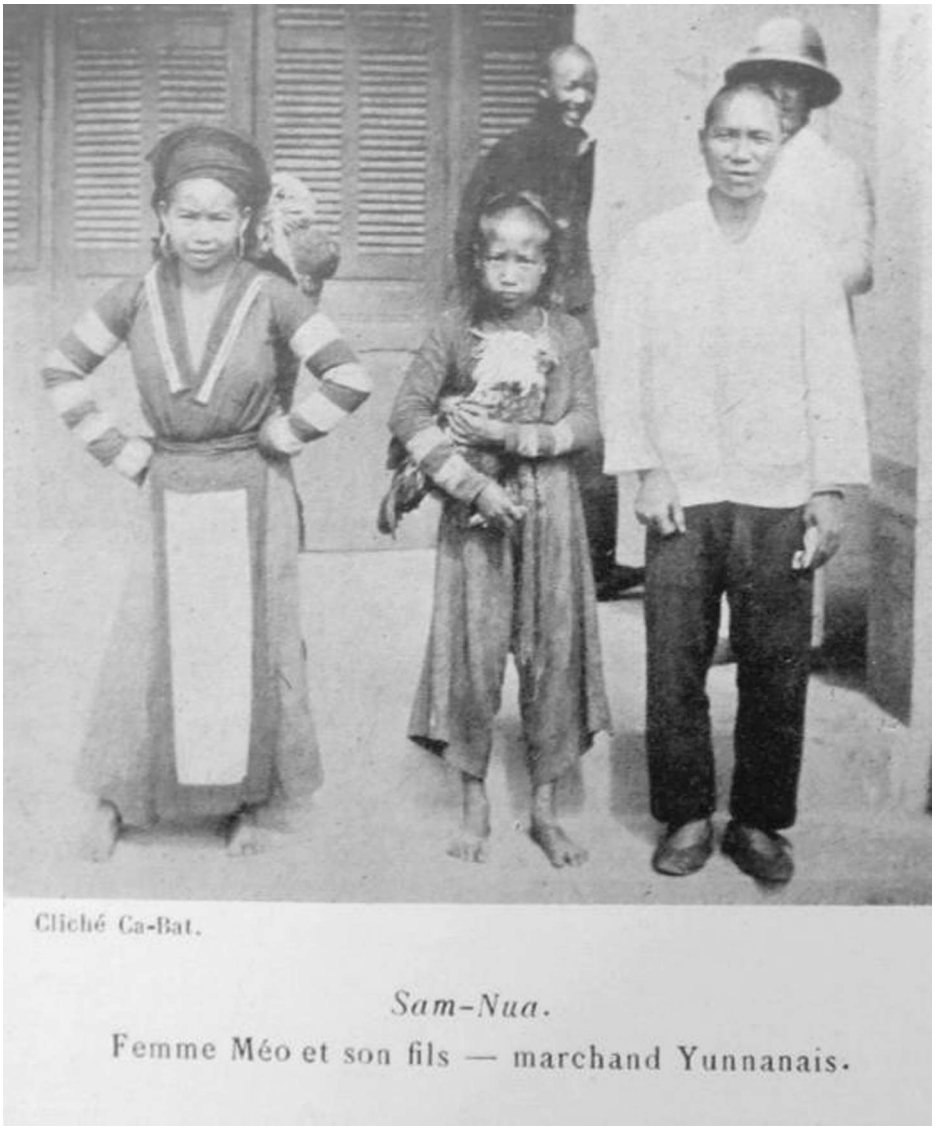


**Figure 2.** Chinese trader from Yunnan next to a Hmong ('Méo') woman and her son. (Source: Foropon 1927, 17)

## The 1914 attack on Sam Neua as seen from the archives

The attack on Sam Neua happened in a time of regional and global upheaval. Chinese communities throughout Indochina were affected by the political unrest in the southern regions of Yunnan and Guangxi after the Chinese nationalist revolution of 1911 (Gunn 1989). Moreover, the region was a refuge for Vietnamese rebels in the aftermath of the *cân vương* uprising (Fourniau 2002). Also, the First World War started in 1914. German delegates in China were eager to support anti-French activity in Indochina and gave firearms to Vietnamese and Chinese brigands operating in the borderlands (Le Failler 2014, 302).

The following details of the attack were told to the French authorities by three colonial collaborators: The Vietnamese telegraphers Vu Duc Vuong and Lê Van Truong, and Lambert's Lao servant Kham Pou (called 'boy' in the reports). They stand out among the few indigenous voices that are discernible in the numerous reports written about the incidence, being key informants for my archival 'fieldwork between folders' (Ladwig et al. 2012), who left fragmentary traces in the archives connecting past and present (Zeitlyn 2012).

The present study of historical anthropology aims at re-assessing events of the past that had been already (mis-)interpreted in the colonial documentation. A concern for security and control informed most of the documents, revealing a colonial idiom that described any rebellious act as 'banditry', thus '[hiding] the political significance of the act, buttressing the notion that the only politics are colonial politics' (Davis 2017, 142, referring to Guha's 1999 study of British India). The textual base of this re-assessment of the 1914 attack consists mainly of the exchange of letters and reports between different levels of the colonial administration in Indochina, compiled in the *Archives nationales d'outre-mer* (Aix-en-Province).

Random archival evidence, for example a telegram from a remote colonial post in the highlands or a letter to the bishop from a missionary proselytizing in a small upland Tai village, may provide disparate but connected fragments and traces that inform our understanding of past indigenous lifeworlds (see Tappe 2022). Such traces are, according to Paul Ricoeur (1990, 116), the epistemological presupposition of the archive and act as a link between different spatio-temporal sites. Re-assembling the different archival traces – 'collected either intentionally or haphazardly as "evidence"' (Burton 2005, 3) – creates fragmentary yet informative images of the past, as in the case of the 1914 attack on Sam Neua.[4]

According to numerous letters and reports, a band of 32 Chinese and about 40 upland Tai[5] succeeded in sacking Sam Neua, seizing 40 kg of opium and 100,000 *piastre*. Commissar Lambert was wounded by gunshots and brutally executed the following day. Before the attack, local conspirators told the Chinese ringleaders about the weak military defence of Sam Neua and the huge amount of opium and silver the colonial tax campaign had collected recently.[6]

The attackers burned the commissariat and killed five Lao soldiers, who by then had received only rudimentary military training. Lambert's deputy, Nivou, was able to escape with the help of the *lasavong* (a Lao notable) of Sam Neua and some Vietnamese soldiers. On 11 November 1914, Chinese demonstrations of power took place, including the execution of Lambert, the seizure of the opium harvest, and even public claims of the Lao territories in the name of the Chinese Republic.

The performance of political sovereignty included a public statement by Leang San, allegedly acting on behalf of the leaders of the republican revolution, declared the 'liberation of the province of Ai Lao' (old name for the Lao territories in Chinese and Vietnamese chronicles) and promised peace and good governance. He explicitly prohibited forced requisition of food and the taking women and girls. The Lao peasants – many of whom had fled into the forest – were invited to return to the fields.

Immediately after the attack, the Chinese organized the fortification of Sam Neua with the help of local 'coolies', including many Khmu, who received a decent payment of 0.20 *piastre* per day. Some opportunistic Lao notables appeared to arrange with Chinese rule

and received new *phanya* titles – their promotion topped with a generous salary taken from the French treasury. More Tai from Xieng Kho (northern Houaphan), several groups of Chinese under arms from different *müang* in Houaphan, and a few unarmed Chinese traders from Xieng Khouang province (south of Houaphan), arrived in Sam Neua to join the movement.

On 13 December, the Chinese told Lê Van Truong – who as a long-time resident of Sam Neua was indeed familiar with some of the Chinese traders – to operate the abandoned telegraph station and to disseminate the message of Chinese sovereignty (thus using colonial infrastructure against the French). He took the opportunity to give the numbers of the attackers but apparently ignored the more recent Chinese and Tai reinforcements. This may have led to the ambush where the first group of colonial troops were killed near Sam Neua.

When the Chinese leaders decided to evacuate Sam Neua – in fact to move on to attack Son La in Tonkin and thus bringing the whole campaign to a completely new level (see Le Failler 2014) – the group consisted of 208 Chinese, roughly the number of Chinese residents within a 60 km radius. The French, expecting a general uprising of the Chinese population in all of northern Laos and Tonkin, mobilized more Vietnamese infantry uphill – using the newly built roads and telegraph lines. On 29 December, two companies of *tirailleurs* (infantrymen) from Tonkin under French command occupied Sam Neua and found the town completely abandoned by the attackers.

By then the group had moved towards Xieng Kho and Meuang Et where the Chinese gave some of the silver to the former *chao meuang* mentioned above and his anti-French entourage, not least to pay for food and labour requisition needed for the planned march on Son La. Here they were finally defeated by colonial troops and gradually dispersed towards Dien Bien Phu and the Nam Ou valley before either escaping to Yunnan or submitting to the French. By 15 January 1915, according to *Gouverneur Général* Vollenhoven, the band as organized force did not exist anymore.[7]

## Previous interpretations of the events

Soon after the attack, the French commissar in Luang Prabang considered it as an act of revenge by the Chinese opium traders resenting Lambert's restrictive governance.[8] Indeed, most French contemporaries thought of the attack as an apolitical movement by criminal opium smugglers.[9] Only a few French voices admitted their own role, especially the 'excessive severity' of the opium smuggling repression.[10] Later interpretations by French colonial historiographers – while still blaming Chinese banditry for destabilizing the whole region – considered the international context of WWI, claiming that Chinese 'bands' were instigated by 'Annamese agitators in league with Germans' (Le Boulanger 1930, 356).

The historian Geoffrey Gunn (1989; see also Gunn 1990 and Stuart-Fox 1997, 38) also places greater emphasis on the broader international political-economic context. In his concise account of the events, Gunn describes this Chinese 'warlord' attack as a 'republican' one in the aftermath of the 1911 revolution.[11] He discusses the post-1911 unrest in China and the fuzzy boundary between traders and warlords, indicating that Republicanism was only a pretext for ambitious Chinese powerbrokers to gain political authority while challenging the French colonial system.

Gunn (1989, 64; Davis 2017) argues that the local Chinese never accepted the 1884 treaty of Tientsin and, therefore, resentedFrench authority. The ringleaders' claim to have acted on behalf of the republican leadership suggests a larger political dimension than a mere act of vengeance against Lambert.[12] The question of Tai and (to a lesser degree) Lao collaboration remains unclear, though, and Gunn's (1989, 64) observation of local 'social banditry' deserves closer scrutiny. As I will discuss later, the combination of opium, emerging colonial infrastructures, and a specific political context provided the ground for the escalation in Sam Neua.

Philippe Le Failler's (2014, 298–301) excellent historical study of the Black River region makes this connection, too, and highlights the complexity of the anticolonial uprisings of that time, including the global historical context of WWI and German-Vietnamese conspiracy. However, Le Failler notes that global conjuncture does not explain everything. He points to the contribution of 'Laotiens' (probably a mixed Lao-Tai force that exceeded the number of the Chinese) to the subsequent attack on Son La, as indicative of a more general weakness of French political authority. More than simply a banditry of disgruntled opium smugglers, the escalation revealed a more complex sociopolitical dynamic and diverse aspirations by a variety of local actors.

Le Failler (2014, 308) identifies the *attentisme* ('sitting something out') of local Tai and Lao notables, some of whom were careful to take sides. This was only surprising for French colonialists when contrasted with their ally Deo Van Tri who had died in 1908, perhaps fueling aspirations for would-be-powerbrokers (with the proximity to the Chinese frontier a catalyst of 'diverse aspirations'; Le Failler 2014, 298). According to Le Failler (2014, 303), the 48 culprits being court-martialed included 24 Chinese, 9 Tai, 5 Lao, 4 Muong, 2 Khmu, and 4 Kinh (apart from 9 being pardoned, they were sentenced to death, forced labour, or exile). Thus, Vietnamese state historiography concludes that the Chinese were only one factor of many, subordinated to the contribution by Tai leaders from present-day Vietnamese territory (Le Failler 2014). The next section illustrates that Lao PDR historiography follows this perspective.

## The 1914 attack in Lao PDR historiography

Following the example of their Vietnamese comrades, Lao historiographers downplay the Chinese element for the sake of the master narrative of the 'Lao multi-ethnic people' (*pasason lao banda phao*) fighting against foreign oppression (Vongvichit 1969; see Pholsena 2006). Perhaps due to the Chinese-Vietnamese antagonism in the late 1970s, Secretary-General Kaysone Phomvihane (himself Lao-Vietnamese and Hanoi's man in Laos) even described it as a pure 'movement of the Thais [*sic*]' in Houaphan province (Phomvihane 1981, 12).

Nonetheless, the standard Lao PDR history *Pavatsat Lao* (Ministry of Information and Culture 2000) does not ignore the Chinese element and includes it in the *longue durée* of the Lao 'national liberation struggle' (*kantosou kou xat),* not least to foster the image of Houaphan as cradle of the Lao revolution (Tappe 2017). Here, Lao PDR historiography explicitly refers to the 'Lao people, in particular Tai Dam and Ho ethnic groups' (Ministry of Information and Culture 2000, 606) fighting colonial exploitation. Thus, the Chinese element is recognized but reduced to one national minority through the 'Ho' ethnonym (which actually refers to a specific group of Chinese origin in Laos, see Schlemmer 2019;

this diverts the focus away from the transnational Chinese community in the borderlands of Laos, China and Vietnam).

The multi-ethnic character of the national liberation is likewise accentuated in the local historiography of Houaphan which focuses on Lao 'multi-ethnic' resistance against excessive tax collection and other forms of colonial oppression. One history book even mentions Kham Ban, the son-in-law of the ex-*chao meuang* of Xieng Kho, who had joined the *sek han* ('Han warfare'; note the Othering of the Chinese here) to retrieve the opium from Lambert (Provincial Government Houaphan 1999, 72). As already mentioned, Kham Ban appeared in the colonial sources as one of the main Lao supporters of the 1914 attack, along with Ba Phom (as discussed in more detail below).

In this strong focus on the anticolonial struggle (to the expense of the broader geopolitical context), Lao collaboration with the French is largely ignored, and the Chinese remain an ambiguous category, moving between foreignness and integration. I noticed this ambiguity when discussing local history with members of the Lao-Chinese community of Sam Neua, many of whom trace their origin to Chinese traders or soldiers or both. As a small business elite today, they express local pride and belonging to the Lao nation, while distancing themselves from more recent migrants from China.

Bounhom, a guesthouse manager of mixed Lao-Chinese descent, took me to the Chinese cemetery in the outskirts of Sam Neua town in 2019. It is perhaps the most visible reference to the local Chinese heritage. Himself married with a Tai Deng (Red Tai) women, Bounhom explained the long tradition of Chinese traders intermarrying locally, settling down and forming part of Houaphan's social fabric. Moreover, he insisted that the cemetery included graves of war heroes of the struggles against French and US-American 'imperialists'. Thus, former Chinese migrants had become legitimate members of the 'Lao multi-ethnic people' united in the struggle for national liberation, according to Lao PDR historiography.

A strong claim for 'history through the lens of anthropology' was recently made by the anthropologist Pierre Petit (2020, 6–7), who did research in Houaphan, too. He discussed how shifting narratives of the past shape present discourses of origins and identity, of morality and legitimacy. This is certainly true for the Sino-Lao community in Sam Neua who commemorates the 1914 uprising as an example of transethnic 'Lao' solidarity against colonial oppression. Bounhom stressed Chinese allegiance towards the 'people' (*pasason*) by contrasting it with the pro-French Lao *phanya* (notables) who sided with the colonialists – still a sensitive issue in Laos today. Arguably, the insistence shown by Bounhom and other Sam Neua citizens of Chinese origin regarding their contribution to the 'liberation struggle', indicates their permanent effort of demonstrating loyalty and belonging to the 'Lao multi-ethnic people'.

## The Chinese in Houaphan's social fabric

The 1914 attack was less a clear commitment to some kind of anticolonial struggle than a product of local disruptions of the specific frontier economy of northern Laos – in which Chinese mobility constituted a kind of adhesive. The French opium *régie* and Lambert's corresponding interventions into long-distance trade probably provoked this violent reaction. Lambert may have overlooked the complex sociopolitical web in Houaphan

that included Chinese traders with close ties to local Tai and Lao powerbrokers. These ties were later activated in the struggle against the French.

There was a long history of Chinese caravan networks along the mountain passes of Sipsong Panna and the northern Lao and Vietnamese territories. Yet at the beginning of the twentieth century, after the end of the Qing dynasty and the resulting warfare, a growing number of former Chinese soldiers and a lot of weapons added a new dynamic to the Chinese networks in the borderlands. Given the low military presence in Houaphan – the *garde indigène* in Sam Neua numbered only two Frenchmen and twenty Vietnamese and Lao soldiers – it was only a matter of time before Chinese armed traders (some them with military backgrounds) opposed the disruptions of the lucrative opium trade.

Incidents in the run-up to the attack reveal the increasing tensions between Chinese traders/smugglers and the colonial apparatus in the Lao-Vietnamese borderlands: On 3 June 1914, the Vietnamese militiaman Nguyen Van Cham arrested a Chinese hiding a charge of opium and, after selling part of the opium himself to a local notable, set him free. Three days later, he stopped another two Chinese opium traders, asking them to pay a 'fine' of 100 *piastre* each. The 50 *piastre* they offered were rejected by Nguyen Van Cham. He attempted to arrest the Chinese, but they shot him and escaped with the opium.[13]

One of them was Leang San who later became the ringleader of the Sam Neua attack. Leang San, like other Chinese involved in the attack, was a long-time resident of Houaphan and Son La, having settled along the main trade (or smuggler) routes.[14] Thus, he was not simply a 'foreigner' trying to trade opium in Laos, but a powerbroker enmeshed in the social configuration of northern Indochina – an ambiguous figure difficult to grasp for colonial categorizations.

Only rarely, the French sources reveal more nuances than the rhetoric about contraband would suggest. In the aftermath of the affair, some Chinese were taken before court, including deserters from the Chinese army, traders-turned-smugglers from Yunnan, and local traders. Among the latter were individuals like Luong Tai, 45 years old, resident of Sam Neua for a decade, and Chu Ba Nhi who had Tai wives in Sam Neua as well as in Thanh Hoa.[15] Such cases of long-term residence and even intermarriage with Lao or Tai families indicate a great degree of integration into the social fabric of Houaphan.

Indeed, most of the Chinese middlemen involved in the opium business were locally connected through marriage relations. In the court documents, the French also mentioned so-called métisses chinoises, indicating long-standing Lao/Tai-Chinese kinship networks. One 'métis' who was accused of having distributed arms among the Lao and Tai in Xieng Kho, who was married to Kham Ban's sister. It is not surprising that the Chinese attackers of Sam Neua addressed Lambert in Lao language (according to the testimony of his Lao 'boy').[16]

Among the Chinese attackers had been residents of Sam Neua who even took their local wives and children with them when evacuating the town. Chinese freeriders from Xieng Khouang province joined the movement. However, Chinese solidarity was not uniform. Some Chinese residing in Sam Tai refused the invitation to join the movement and even gave money to a Vietnamese militia to demonstrate their disassociation from their fellows in Sam Neua.[17]

The leaders of the campaign were killed or arrested during the campaign, sentenced to death, forced labour, or expatriation. Other Chinese were arrested due to their nationality, but were released soon after as the French authorities could not verify their active participation in the violence. One exceptional case mentioned in the documentation was a Chinese resident of Xieng Khouang who had warned his Hmong business partner Lo Blia Yao – prominent local powerbroker and ally of the French (Lee 2015) – about Chinese conspiracy.[18] Apparently, the Chinese in northern Laos were far from homogeneous.

## Colonial intervention and the Tai-Lao *meuang* sociopolitics

Although the attackers claimed not to harm the Lao villagers in the area, some of them fled into the forest, according to Lê Van Truong's and Vu Duc Vuong's eye witness accounts. Others appeared to be arranging with the Chinese occupation, even bringing gifts and agreeing to signal any French activities against the payment of 5 *piastre*.[19] This indicates the people's ability to assess shifts in transregional political configurations and to manoeuvre between the lines. Historical experience and sociopolitical uncertainties in the borderlands helped fuel this tactic.

Local Lao elites had an ambivalent role that complicated simplistic narratives of colonial collaboration and anti-colonial resistance. While a Lao notable from northern Houaphan appeared as an opportunist when selling horses to the Chinese in exchange for silver from the colonial treasury, the *lasavong* of Sam Neua helped deputy Nivou to escape towards Luang Prabang, although the Chinese offered a bounty of 5,000 *piastre* for the French functionary. The *chao meuang* of Sam Neua, clearly intimidated by the Chinese display of power, tried to avoid any interference but reported the *lasavong*'s collaboration to the Chinese.[20]

Like the *chao meuang* of Sam Neua, notables from other *meuang* in Houaphan played a more passive role during the events. The *chao meuang* of Sam Tai further south surrendered to the dozens of armed Chinese who came from neighbouring Xieng Khouang. He just let them go on, but not without sending messengers to the villages nearby with the advice to follow his example and avoid trouble with the Chinese. In contrast, the *chao meuang* of Meuang Son (Western Houaphan) ostensibly demonstrated his loyalty to the French, sending his *oupahat* (viceroy) to resist Chinese encroachment, and was even proposed by the Résident Supérieur to receive an honorary distinction.[21]

Remaining suspicious about the Chinese rebels (reminiscent of the nineteenth century incursions of the Flags), many Lao notables duly reported the movements of the band to French (or Vietnamese) authorities. The Lao elites in Sam Neua and Meuang Son, were especially eager to purport loyalty to the French in exchange for privileges regarding tax collection and *corvée* requisition. However, the French could never be certain about the co-optation of local Lao elites as privileging one notable often entailed the disenfranchisement and resentment of others. Xieng Kho was a case in point.

## Special focus: the ex-*chao meuang* of Xieng Kho

Ba Phom, the well-connected Lao ex-*chao meuang* of Xieng Kho, was specifically mentioned in the French correspondence following the events in Sam Neua as one of the

non-Chinese key figures of the revolt. In 1912, Lambert accused him of opium smuggling and breach of tax rules, and removed him from office. This was clearly a warning for other local notables.[22] Ba Phom had been a key powerbroker for eighteen years, which makes it very likely that he had forged powerful patron-client networks (as characteristic for Tai/Lao *meuang* politics; see the classic studies by Leach 1954 and Condominas 1980) with local notables and peasants, as well as with Chinese traders, that could be activated in times of conflict.

A few months later, Lambert wrote a brief but telling report to the *Gouverneur Général*. He emphasised the need for further changes in the high ranks of the notables ruling Xieng Kho at the border to Tonkin in order to improve local administration and control. Moreover, he suggested taking advantage of the already established structures of opium control along the Black River in Tonkin.[23] It is likely that this alienated more local notables in Xieng Kho who had previously enjoyed certain autonomy and economic opportunity due to the strategical location along Chinese caravan routes linking the Black River with the Lao territories (Le Failler 2014; Petit 2020).

Not surprisingly, the French already had those unreliable Xieng Kho notables on the radar before the attack on Sam Neua. One telegram from Tonkin cited the *délégué* of Dien Bien Phu who had warned a few months before:

> The Laotians are rallying more and more to the Chinese, to whom the indigenous chiefs appear to be committed, with the exception of Muong Son; especially the *phanya* of Xieng Kho and the former *phanya* Ha Kheo aka Cam Suc aka Bac Ly … (the latter an anti-French notable who, along with a nephew, had just returned from five years of forced exile).[24]

Some notables from Xieng Kho and neighbouring Meuang Et who sided with Ba Phom were equipped with weapons by the aforementioned 'métis chinois' who was married to a sister of Kham Ban – another example of Lao-Chinese networks in the borderlands. Ba Phom continued to harass the newly installed local functionaries with other disenfranchised notables and their 'old clients'. He provided intelligence, arms, provision, and 'coolies' for the Chinese band.[25]

In March 1915, at the age of 64, Ba Phom was executed along with Kham Ban and another son-in-law. According to Drouot, the new commissar of Sam Neua, 'The *indigènes* have been very impressed by the executions'.[26] Other notables like the sons of a former *chao meuang* of Meuang Et, who were considered part of Ba Phom's clientele, evaded punishment because their active participation could not be confirmed. The establishment of military posts in Xieng Kho and Meuang Et implied a de facto integration of the region into the Tonkinese military administration (see Michaud 2013), which meant more efficient surveillance.

## Political relations on the *meuang* fringes

Competing factions among the Lao elites in the different *meuang* of Houaphan were only one factor in the borderlands, and other groups added to the sociopolitical complexity in which the Sino-French antagonism unfolded. For the French, the mobility of borderlands people like the upland Tai posed similar administrative difficulties as the evasiveness of the Chinese traders was doing. The wording in the archival sources is telling here: A report by Lambert to the *Résident Supérieur* from December 1913 refers to a number of

arrested Tai Dam (Black Tai) from Son La as 'sanspapiers' and 'indésirables'.[27] They were also subject to the attempts at infrastructural immobilization that affected the Chinese.

Some Tai Dam from Xieng Kho and Meuang Et were used against the French by local (Tai and Lao) notables who resisted the opium *régie*.[28] One Tai headman from a village near Meuang Et was even sentenced to death for having sheltered and supplied the Chinese band for two months before the attack on Sam Neua. The Chinese had rewarded him with 3,000 *piastre*, of which he distributed 2,000 among his Tai kin. Numerous Tai Dam were recruited as porters (and were often pardoned by the French as mere 'voluntary coolies') and soon returned to their fields after the campaign.[29]

Interestingly, the Lao ex-*chao meuang* of Xieng Kho also had excellent relations with some Tai Dam functionaries from adjacent Son La province. Before the events unfolded, a local Tai notable announced his support for Ba Phom to claim his old privileges, and lobbied for the attachment of Xieng Kho to Son La. According to local informants, Ba Phom with his entourage was regularly visiting Tai Dam notables in Son La during 1913. Among those were 'dismissed Tai mandarins' who later collaborated with the Chinese (whereas the French could count on the ones who had replaced them by colonial decree).[30]

While the Tai Dam of Laos and Tonkin remained in an ambiguous position as an apparently incoherent borderlands people, the Tai Deng (Red Tai) of eastern Houaphan had for decades established a close relationship with the French, especially through the Missions Étrangers (Degeorge 1924; Mironneau 1968; Tappe 2022). Parts of the Tai Deng strongholds in Meuang Soi (eastern Houaphan) that were converted to Catholicism refrained from any interference in the uprising and remained loyal to the French. In Meuang Soi, the affair was an inconvenience for the missionary work as many villagers were reluctant to openly fraternize with the French, ready to hide in the forest if the situation required.[31]

## Beyond the Tai/Lao realm

According to French observers, the upland Khmu who in the 1870s/80s formed diverse armed movements against Lao domination – at times allied with Chinese bands – had by the turn of the century 'taken on the yoke again' (Boutin 1937, 96) and apparently accepted Lao/Tai dominance. Only a few of them seemed to be involved in the attacks on Sam Neua and Son La. At least one Khmu was sentenced to death for providing information to the Chinese in preparation for the Son La attack. Some were recruited as 'coolie'-porters. The convoys were probably just another opportunity to earn some silver and opium.[32]

Even though some reports indicate that there was at least one 'Meo' (pejorative term for Hmong) in the Chinese ranks, the Hmong remained largely indifferent towards the movement. Sometimes the Hmong reported Chinese presence to French authorities (as did some Khmu villages, for example in the mountains surrounding Dien Bien Phu). The influential clan leader Lo Blia Yao in Xieng Khouang informed the French about Chinese conspiracy as mentioned above. Other cases involved the Hmong taking economic advantage of the campaign, for example by selling horses for transport to the Chinese directly paid with the stolen silver.[33]

Consequently, the role of the Hmong remained ambivalent – an unpredictable factor for both Chinese rebels and French colonialists. The increasing French interest in opium

certainly implied economic opportunities for the Hmong who at the time could choose between Chinese and French buyers. However, the more rigid colonial tax regime and the ongoing inter-clan rivalries among the Hmong already foreshadowed the revolt of Pa Chay Vue – channelling resentment of certain Hmong factions in the region – that started in 1918 (see Lee 2015; Michaud 2021).

Finally, a number of Vietnamese complemented the set of actors in this complex sociopolitical configuration. In contrast to the Chinese, they can be considered latecomers in Houaphan society. Vietnamese soldiers constituted the backbone of the *garde indigène* in Houaphan and elsewhere in Laos. In addition, the French started to encourage Vietnamese traders to replace the Chinese ones.[34] Still, there are very few references to 'Annamese' in the court files, mostly referring to the ongoing 'rebel' activity along the China-Tonkin border. A certain Phan Van Hy was sentenced to death for selling arms taken from the stock of the colonial administration to the Chinese.[35]

Only gradually becoming part of Houaphan's diverse sociocultural fabric, the Vietnamese appeared as part of the newly established colonial infrastructure: as militias policing roads, borders and (opium) trade. The confrontation between Leang San and a Vietnamese militiaman was a telling example. The escalations in Sam Neua triggered further militarization of the Lao frontier with an expansion of the military infrastructure already established in Tonkin, including growing presence of Vietnamese soldiers.

In February 1915, *Gouverneur Général* Vollenhoven deplored the 'precarious existence of Laos as independent administrative unit', and called for the integration of Houaphan (along other Lao borderlands) into Tonkin's military administration.[36] This reminds of the 'Vietnamese solution' that many in the French colonial government had envisaged for long (see Ivarsson 2008; Goscha 2012), even if Houaphan was to remain under Lao administration. The seeds of anticolonialism were sown by this frontier militarization, which finally resulted in another attack on Sam Neua: in 1953 by the Vietminh and their local collaborators, just a few months before the much more famous battle of Dien Bien Phu (Mironneau 1968; Benson 2018; Lentz 2019).

## Collaboration and mimetic appropriation

The Sam Neua affair of 1914 is a tale of – friendly and violent – encounters across cultural difference. When the French came to the region, they added another element to this contingent sociopolitical borderlands configuration. In addition to multilingualism (see Badenoch 2011), the mimetic faculty of Houaphan's diverse people was a means of communication and, arguably, mutual appropriation (Jonsson 2010; Bouté 2018; Ladwig and Roque 2020; Tappe 2018). Mimesis provides a lens to investigate frontier friction on the ground.

After the successful seizure of the Sam Neua post, the Chinese used different tactics to demonstrate political authority. Among them were public announcements of good governance principles and the replacement of a number of *phanya* and lesser notables in different *meuang* of Houaphan.[37] Here they not only mimetically played a Tai/Lao (super) *chao meuang* role but copied a practice already adopted by the French before when they, for example, replaced the *chao meuang* of Xieng Kho and other Tai/Lao polities. They adapted to local political culture by forging alliances with local powerbrokers. Thus, both French and Chinese competed in playing the *meuang* game.

Adding a new twist to local sociopolitical conventions – similar to elements introduced by the French such as honouring the national flag – the Chinese ringleaders claimed Houaphan for the Chinese Republic through displaying the revolutionary banner (allegedly in the name of Li Yuanhong, then vice-president of the Chinese Republic; cf. Gunn 1989 for the idea of a republican rebellion).[38] However, French observers refused to see in the campaign more than 'ordinary banditry', and considered the whole display of power as 'grotesque parodies'.[39] Indeed, the trader-turned-warlord Leang San's attire as 'general' appeared as mimetic appropriation of Chinese military rank and file.

The French ridicule of the Chinese performances shows the inherent tension of mimetic appropriation and its sometimes unintended and even comical effects – with carnival perhaps the most explicit example (see Kohl 2018 for colonial West Africa). The French denied any legitimacy to efforts by Chinese 'bandits' to establish political authority. Some Tai and Lao notables' positive responses to the Chinese, however, indicated that those attempts rang a bell and that the Chinese were capable of adapting to local habits of governance.

It is clear that the Chinese who had lived in the region for a long time had gained practical knowledge about *meuang* politics and had identified the deficiencies of French authority. They adopted the principles of Lao/Tai kingship while combining an alleged mandate of heaven with elements of fledgling Chinese republicanism. This was probably why it appeared so 'grotesque' to the French, but less so to the local population who seemed to responded to the performance of two (intelligible) sources of political authority.

The Chinese acted similar to what Oscar Salemink (2003) observed in French indigenous politics. Some colonial administrators creatively linked French 'modern' statecraft to local political ritual such as ceremonial oaths of allegiance. In both cases, efficacy and legitimacy of power were the precarious gains of mimesis. Drouot, Lambert's successor as commissar in Sam Neua, presided over a merit making ceremony in the Buddhist temple of Sam Neua as one of his first official acts to reclaim political authority – colonial mimesis of Lao Buddhist statecraft.[40]

The collaboration between the Chinese and a number of Tai and Lao notables indicate an at least temporary efficacy of the Chinese performance of political power. Lambert's shameful death had certainly reaffirmed a crisis of French authority and opened new wiggle room for ambitious notables dissatisfied with previous French interference in local governance. That violent demonstration of sovereignty mirrored the strong 'impression' on the local population that French observers saw in the executions of the ringleaders. And yet, the French could still count on the loyalty of the Tai elite in Son La who had benefitted from previous reshuffling and thus prevented the movement from turning into a full-scale anticolonial uprising in the Black River valley.

Shortly after they had evacuated Sam Neua, the Chinese sent letters to the Tai authorities of Son La – many of whom had indeed been installed by the French – demanding surrender and the extradition of European functionaries. Such letters, signed with officially looking stamps, also contributed to the mimetic materiality of the Chinese claims to political authority. However, key figures from the Son La leadership informed the French *résident*, thus assisting to prepare for the ultimately successful defence of the town (not least facilitated via telegraph communication). It appears that the local

Tai elite in Son La had more to lose if the Chinese took over, possibly because they feared the ambitions of marginalized Tai notables more than the Chinese ones.

Local powerbrokers competed with each other in this complex web of transregional movements and global conflict. The microhistorical perspective reveals how unpredictable and volatile any political ties appear in the Lao-Vietnamese borderlands, shaped by memories of violence, shifting *meuang* networks, and (mis-)perceptions of emergent 'modern' statecraft, emblematized by colonial infrastructures and their inherent dialectic of (im-)mobility. The resulting uncertainties and aspirations imply an affective dimension of local sociopolitical dynamics (see Lentz 2019), which are difficult to assess but occasionally surfacing in the colonial accounts of jealous *phanya* and anxious peasants.

The fragmentary and contingent nature of mimetic appropriation correspond with the multilayered sociopolitical configurations in the borderlands. Creativity and bricolage characterize the different mimetic strategies, their efficacy being dependent on practical outcomes. Powerbrokers such as the ex-*chao meuang* of Xieng Kho appear as pioneers assessing the costs and benefits of emerging, perhaps competing sources of potency in this frontier context (see Stolz and Tappe 2021), here the French colonial administrators and the Chinese 'warlords'. Ba Phom's apparently premature turn towards the new Chinese force resulted in tragedy – but earned him a place in the revolutionary history of Houaphan.

Meanwhile, the Chinese remained an ambivalent element in frontier sociality and an economic 'necessary evil'[41] for the French authorities. In Houaphan, the Chinese showed a tendency of adaptation to the Lao/Tai cultural mainstream – yet not without keeping traditions of ancestor worship and other cultural practice, as exemplified by the Chinese cemetery in Sam Neua today. Bounhom's insistence on being part of the revolutionary 'Lao multi-ethnic people' indicates the ambiguous affects of belonging, and the long road of amalgamation into the Lao national society for the erstwhile Chinese 'foreigners'.

## Conclusion

This study has shown how colonial infrastructures such as roads, telegraph lines, and the opium *régie* helped to unsettle local sociopolitical configurations in upland Indochina. The 1914 attack on Sam Neua by an ethnically diverse band further exemplified the shifting allegiances and power asymmetries in the Lao-Vietnamese borderlands at a time when French political authority was challenged by factors such as incipient WWI. Moreover, the significance of the Chinese – as integral part of the social fabric of Houaphan province – for the history of northern Laos, has been highlighted.

The analysis of the Sam Neua attack was informed by a productive dialogue between anthropology, microhistory and global history. We can understand what happened in this remote colonial outpost in the Southeast Asian uplands only by linking the local sociopolitical dynamics with the global contexts of colonialism and WWI. At the same time, the attack laid bare processes that ultimately shaped the fate of Indochina and cemented the borderline – perhaps even contributing to shaping Southeast Asia as a geopolitical entity separate from China – with the Chinese remaining an ambiguous element in Laos until the present day.

The broader strategy of 'unblocking' Laos arguably led towards attempts to 'block' (and thus creating?) Indochina from Chinese (and Siamese) economic and political influence. New mobilities appeared to limit others. In particular, restrictions on the opium trade and corresponding interventions into local governance met with violent resistance from both Chinese traders and competing Tai and Lao powerbrokers, who aimed to manoeuver the new sociopolitical configurations on the colonial frontier.

This power struggle also played out as a mimetic battle. The Chinese countered French power with competing materialities of political authority, such as banners and stamps. Chinese mimetic tactics formed a – in the eyes of French observers – 'grotesque' assemblage of traditional Lao and Tai statecraft, references to the Chinese mandate of heaven, and republican emblems. The Chinese display of political authority was nevertheless intelligible and thus temporarily rendered efficacious to different degrees among different groups.

In colonial sources and historical accounts, the Sino-French antagonism overshadows the local sociopolitical dynamics that are critical to the understanding of the Sam Neua affair and its aftermath, but leave only fragmented traces in the archives. Ba Phom, the ex-*chao meuang* of Xieng Kho, constitutes an exemplary case, even if his motivations are difficult to reconstruct. His story offers rare glimpses into the ambiguous local political and economic relations in upland Laos. As such examples of indigenous ambition and agency are only seldom addressed by colonial history, a microhistorical approach has proven useful to unravel the complex sociopolitical entanglements shaping the Sam Neua attack.

As the conspiracy of Ba Phom and other local political actors demonstrated, French infrastructural interventions had yielded contingent results. Both the French administrators and the Chinese traders/warlords constituted new sources of potency for aspiring local powerbrokers – a precarious gamble that, in the case of the old Xieng Kho elite, took no good end. While Lao historiography introduces Ba Phom's family as example of anticolonial resistance on behalf of the 'Lao multi-ethnic people', colonial archival sources rather indicate humiliation and misguided opportunism.

The different actors in the social arena of 1914 Houaphan – Lao, Tai, Hmong, Khmu, Chinese, Vietnamese, or French – were positioned in a network of asymmetric power relations and economic entanglements. Colonial infrastructures appeared as catalysts of contingent sociopolitical processes that temporarily re-shuffled patterns of political authority and triggered unexpected alliances. As a historical ethnography of encounters across difference, this study is an attempt to create a picture more complex than simple narratives of anticolonialism would have it.

## Notes

1. Report from Sam Neua by administrator Paul Le Boulanger (later also *Résident Supérieur* of Laos), n.d. 1929 (ANOM RSL/E4).
2. Circulaire, 26 May 1911, *Gouverneur Général de l'Indochine* to the *Chefs d'Administration Locale* (ANOM RSL/E4).
3. Circulaire, 8 February 1916, *Résident Supérieur* of Laos to the local commissars (ANOM RSL/E4).
4. Antoinette Burton highlights that we have to take the history and context of the archive into account (this is particular true for colonial archives; see Dirks 2002) as archives 'all have dynamic relationships, not just to the past and the present, but to the fate of regimes, the

physical environment, the serendipity of bureaucrats, and the care and neglect of archivists as well' (Burton 2005, 6; see Zeitlyn 2012 and Ladwig et al. 2012 for further discussions on ethnographies in and of the archive).

5. To be more precise, Tai Dam (Black Tai), the dominant ethnic group on the northern Lao-Vietnamese frontier along the Nam Ma and the Black River (see Petit 2020), sometimes named 'Phouthai' ('Tai people') in the colonial sources ('Thaí' according to present-day ethnic classification in Vietnam).
6. These and other descriptions of the attack in this section are informed by following key archival sources, retrieved from the Archives nationales d'outre-mer (ANOM) in Aix-en-Provence: Report, 4 Jan 1915, by Rougier, *administrateur délégué* in Hoi Xuan/Annam (ANOM GGI 40708); Report, 12 Jan 1915, by commissar Drouot to the *Résident Supérieur* of Laos (ANOM GGI 40708); Telegram, 5 Dec 1914, by the commissar of Luang Prabang to the *Résident Supérieur* of Laos (ANOM RSL/Q1); Report, 20 Nov 1914, by Vu Duc Vuong to the direction of post and telegraph in Hanoi (ANOM GGI 40709); Report, 5 Feb 1915, by the *Gouverneur Général de l'Indochine*, Vollenhoven, to the Minister of Colonies (ANOM GGI 40706). The latter report, also a key source for Gunn (1989), is perhaps the most comprehensive account of the attack and its aftermath (written shortly after the rebel bands were finally dispersed by colonial troops on Dien Bien Phu territory).
7. Report, 5 Feb 1915, by Vollenhoven to the Minister of Colonies (ANOM GGI 40706). The chaotic aftermath of the 1914 attack is beyond the scope of this paper (for more details see Le Failler 2014 and Gay 1982).
8. As the Chinese ringleaders announced after Lambert's execution: 'You will not steal our opium anymore!' Report, 20 Nov 1914, by the *commissaire du gouvernement* of Luang Prabang (ANOM GGI 40708).
9. Lambert's successor in Houaphan, Drouot, commented: 'Is the Sam Neua affair a political movement? I don't think so. It is an act of banditry committed by opium smugglers … ' Letter, 12 Jan 1915, by commissar Drouot to the *résident supérieur* of Laos (ANOM GGI 40708).
10. Report, 4 Jan 1915, by Rougier, *administrateur délégué* in Hoi Xuan/Annam (ANOM GGI 40708).
11. Gunn (1989) contrasts the attack on Sam Neua with the coinciding 'feudal' revolt of the Tai Lue in Meuang Sing (NW Laos) who harassed the French authorities in the Sino-Lao borderlands, even though there were certainly 'feudal' aspects in the Sam Neua attack as well (discussed below).
12. Indeed, the link to the Chinese political unrest following the revolution was made by French contemporaries as well. In a telegram following a tour to Hanoi, Lambert's deputy Nivou reported that he had observed Chinese distributing images of Sun Yat Sen with inscriptions 'hardly cajoling us French'. Telegram, 20 June 1913, by administrator Nivou (ANOM RSL/E4).
13. Report, 4 Jan 1915, by Rougier, *administrateur délégué* in Hoi Xuan/Annam (ANOM GGI 40708).
14. Report, 5 Feb 1915, by Vollenhoven to the Minister of Colonies (ANOM GGI 40706); Report, 12 Jan 1915, by commissar Drouot to the *Résident Supérieur* of Laos (ANOM GGI 40708).
15. Ibid.
16. Telegram, 5 Dec 1914, by the commissar of Luang Prabang to the *Résident Supérieur* of Laos (ANOM RSL/Q1).
17. Telegram, 20 Dec 1914, by the *Garde Principal* to the *Délégué* of Hoi Xuan (ANOM GGI 40708).
18. Report, 29 May 1915, by *Résident Supérieur* Garnier to the *Gouverneur Général* (ANOM GGI 40708).
19. Report, 20 Nov 1914, by Vu Duc Vuong to the direction of post and telegraph in Hanoi (ANOM GGI 40709); Telegram, 23 Dec 1914, by the commissar of Luang Prabang to the *chef de détachement* of Sam Neua in Chobo/Tonkin (ANOM RSL/Q1).
20. Report, 12 Jan 1915, by commissar Drouot to the *Résident Supérieur* of Laos (ANOM GGI 40708).
21. Report, 15 July 1915, by the *Résident Supérieur* of Laos to the *Gouverneur Général* (ANOM GGI 40708).

22. Report, Jun/Jul/Aug 1913, by commissar Lambert to the *Résident Supérieur* of Laos (ANOM RSL/E12). Interestingly, still in 1911, the French administration considered Xieng Kho as a prosperous and 'very well directed' principality under Ba Phom's rule (*Annuaire général de l'Indo-Chine*, January 2011, 918–919). Ba Phom may had been an example of a well-connected powerbroker who was potentially useful for colonial governance (see Davis 2017).
23. Report, Dec 1912/Jan/Feb 1913, by commissar Lambert to the *Gouverneur Général de l'Indochine* (ANOM RSL/E12).
24. Telegram, 18 Dec 1914, by the *Résident* of Laichau to the *Résident Supérieur* of Tonkin (ANOM RSL/Q1).
25. Telegram, 27 Dec 1914, by the commissar of Luang Prabang to the Résident Supérieur of Laos (ANOM RSL/E12). Reports, 12 Jan and 2 Feb 1915, by commissar Drouot to the *Résident Supérieur* of Laos (ANOM GGI 40708).
26. Report, 2 April 1915, by commissar Drouot (ANOM GGI 40708). Also executed was a certain Kham Pham Khem who had actively joined the march on Son La, perhaps inspired by the success of the Sam Neua attack. Almost twenty years ago, in 1895, he had been already convicted for participating in a violent attack on a missionary station in eastern Houaphan that resulted in the death of the missionary Père Verbier (*Avenir du Tonkin*, 25 March 1915; Tappe 2022). Kham Pham Khem was condemned to many years of prison on the notorious island of Poulo Condore, and possibly bore a grudge against colonial authorities afterwards.
27. Report, 1 Dec 1913, by commissar Lambert (ANOM RSL/E12).
28. See Baird (2013) for a related case of the mobilization of ethnic minorities against French rule, here by the Lao royal house of Champasak playing out Siamese and French political interests, and Grabowsky and Wichasin (2008) for the example of a Tai Lue principality manoeuvring between Chinese, Siamese, French, and British political ambitions.
29. Report, 23 March 1915, by commissar Collet (ANOM GGI 40707).
30. Report, 21 May 1915, commissar Collet to the *Général Commandant Supérieur des Troupes* in Hanoi (ANOM RSL/Q1).
31. Missions Étrangères de Paris, Compte rendu des travaux de 1915, 101.
32. According to the French commissar in Xieng Khouang Province, Barthelemy, the Chinese declared that the coolie salaries would be doubled and that each would get a daily ration of opium; report, 4th trimester 1914, by Barthelemy to the *Résident Supérieur* of Laos (ANOM RSL/E12).
33. Telegram, 22 Dec 1914, *Commandant Principal* Larquetout to the *Administrateur délégué* of Hoi Xuan (ANOM GGI 40708); Report, 29 May 1915, by *Résident Supérieur* Garnier to the *Gouverneur Général* (ANOM GGI 40708). See Lee (2015) for the ambiguous relationship between Hmong powerbrokers and the colonial authorities.
34. Report, 2 Feb 1915, by commissar Drouot (ANOM GGI 40708).
35. Report, 23 April 1915, by commissar Collet (ANOM GGI 40712).
36. Report, 5 Feb 1915, by Vollenhoven to the Minister of Colonies (ANOM GGI 40706).
37. Report, 4th trimester 1914, by commissar Barthelemy (ANOM RSL/E12).
38. Report, 5 Feb 1915, by Vollenhoven to the Minister of Colonies (ANOM GGI 40706).
39. Ibid.
40. Report, 2 April 1915, by commissar Drouot (ANOM GGI 40708).
41. Report, 22 March 1930, by *Résident Supérieur* Le Boulanger (ANOM RSL/E4). In this document, the French resident again refers to the ongoing challenges of controlling the 'extreme mobility' of the Chinese in the Lao-Vietnamese borderlands.

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