

Upland Geopolitics: Finding Zomia in Northern Laos c. 1875

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Abstract

In the 1870s, the borderlands of what became Laos, China and Vietnam were violently disrupted by the so-called “Haw disturbances” and associated local uprisings and population movements. These events upended the relative calm of the earlier French encounter with Luang Prabang, weakening the links between the lowland state and upland populations, and culminating two decades later in the sacking of Luang Prabang and the agreement of French protection. Read more than a century later, in the aftermath of subsequent French and American intervention, these events highlight the importance of the Southeast Asian uplands to lowland political stability, and the intimately social nature of what James Scott has called the friction of terrain. Drawing on Grant Evans’ analysis of the lowland-upland interface of pre-colonial *sakdina* rule, this article speaks to recent responses to Scott’s “Zomia” hypothesis, as well as larger questions, central to Evans’ work, about the relationship between economic processes and regional geopolitics.

Introduction

Arriving in Luang Prabang in 1867, Francis Garnier was highly impressed. A geographer and military man, Garnier was second in command of the French Mekong Exploration Commission, which had made its way over the previous months from Phnom Penh, under often arduous conditions, in search of a river route to China. Luang Prabang, for Garnier, marked “the first time since our departure ... that we had found a market in the sense this term has in Europe”, and he pronounced the city “the most important Laotian center in all Indo-China” (Garnier 1885: 292, 294). This was understandable; Luang Prabang was prospering at the time, and it was the main commercial hub in a vast mountainous interior that, as the Commission advanced upriver, was becoming increasingly pivotal to their efforts to turn Phnom Penh into a “French Hong Kong” and, in the process, rebalance a colonial race for European access to Chinese trade wealth that was being decidedly won by the British.

More surprising was Garnier’s description of the local population’s relationship to its neighbors to the north. The Chinese, he wrote, had until recently been “the regulator in this whole region”, and had exercised “a domination benevolent and wise, which stimulated production instead of enervating it,” and “increased the welfare and vital energies of the subject populations by elevating them on the ladder of civilization” (Garnier 1885: 294). In the wake of political turmoil in China, however – in part caused by European interference, although Garnier neglected to mention this – he saw the Chinese as “no longer capable of filling” this regulatory role, and he hoped that the French would take over in their place. Such an arrangement, he argued, would “counter-balance” the despotic rule imposed by the Siamese and Burmese sovereigns on their subject populations, and allow Luang Prabang to continue flourishing (*ibid.*). It would also, as