

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

Soren Ivarsson (2008: 48) has pointed out, provide a convenient justification for ongoing French intervention in the region.

Almost a century and a half later, it is anachronistic – quaint even – to think of a time when European influence in northern Laos was on the rise, and Chinese on the wane. The American “pivot” to Asia notwithstanding, China’s political and economic influence in mainland Southeast Asia, and in Laos in particular, is today on the upswing; from agribusiness to energy to urban infrastructure, Chinese capital sits consistently atop lists of foreign investors, and Chinese development projects are widely portrayed by their boosters as “model units” that will lift Laos from Least Developed Country (LDC) status through a mix of macroeconomic growth and localized improvement (Nyíri 2009). Yet it is not just the geopolitics that have changed today, but also the variety of political economy that is envisaged to underlie them. Garnier’s emphasis on regulation, enhanced production, and the “vital energies” of northern Laos’s “subject populations” was typical of the Physiocrats, a group of eighteenth-century French philosophers who thought that value originated in nature, and believed government should therefore be a process of allowing natural wealth to circulate through the social milieu like blood through the body (Heilbroner 1953: 49; Foucault 2007). Despite being largely left behind by mainstream economists who adopted Adam Smith’s labor theory of value, the vitalism of the Physiocrats inspired a generation of colonial explorers (like Garnier) and, after him, colonial administrators who sought to “rule with nature” (*physio-cracy*). Yet today it is not the vital energies of agrarian producers that are widely seen, as they were by the European Sino-philic of Garnier’s day – including Garnier himself, as well as Adam Smith and Physiocrats like François Quesnay (Arrighi 2007) – as forming the economic motor of national development. Today it is the land itself, and more specifically, it is natural resources. The agrarian population is today more likely to be seen in the way.

Today’s rhetoric, exemplified by the Lao government policy of “turning land into capital”, sounds much like the French colonial rhetoric that emerged almost a half century *after* Garnier registered his impressions about Luang Prabang. These came in the early decades of the twentieth century, when the challenge of how to acquire Lao territory had given way the challenge of how to govern it; as Martin Stuart-Fox notes, there had been a re-scaling to Indochina as a whole: “what most exercised French colonial administrators was how Laos’s resources could be best developed, not for the benefit of the Lao, but in order to balance the [Indochinese] colonial budget” (Stuart-Fox 1995: 111). Hand in hand with colonial officials’ tendency to treat Laos’s land, timber, forest products and minerals “almost as a prospectus for potential investors” (*ibid.*, 134), came what Soren Ivarsson has called the stereotypical dichotomy of French Indochina: the racialized distinction “between the dynamic and industrious Vietnamese [and] the decadent and lazy Lao” (2008: 104). This was a far cry from the agrarian vitalism noted by Garnier, and it set a focus on physical-natural (as opposed to human) resources that endures to this day. Almost a century later, this construction of Laos as a resource-rich landscape to be exploited by more industrious outsiders remains both powerful and uncomfortable.

The relationship between the political economy of production and wider geopolitical dynamics is not merely a matter of subjective (and politically interested) interpretation, however, but also a matter of serious intellectual inquiry. This is a topic that was of great interest to Grant Evans, and that forms the heart of this article’s

engagement. Grant's intellectual entry into Southeast Asia began along lines that were essentially geopolitical (Evans/Rehbein 2009: 98), but even while co-writing *Red Brotherhood at War* (Evans and Rowley 1990), Grant began the trips to Laos that would lead to the foundational work on the Lao PDR's collectivization efforts for which he is even more widely remembered (Evans 1990). Collectivization, Grant noted, was never just about productivity, but rather about that ever-elusive nexus of productivity and control that is often called security:

As the smallest state in the region [Laos] had the greatest interest in stability, and Kampuchea's [1977] attacks on Vietnam threatened the security not only of the latter, but ultimately of Laos as well. With an eye to this, the Lao People's Revolutionary Party saw collectivization not only as a means of economic security, but of political security as well. "In coordination with the national defense and peacekeeping task," the party leader said [in early 1978], "it is necessary to build a strong administration at the grassroots level by grasping the central task – to reorganize production along collective lines." The ever-tighter interlocking of international developments with domestic decisions finally dictated the precise timing of Laos's collectivization campaign. (Evans 1990: 49)

While collectivization was eventually abandoned and smallholder farming widely recognized by state authorities as the more economically (and thus more politically) viable mode of lowland agricultural production (Evans 2002), the concern with security-oriented management of production persisted. But its locus became more remote. Nowhere did the tight interlocking of international developments and domestic policy decisions that Grant noted manifest more clearly during the 1980s and 1990s than in Lao government efforts to manage the farm-forest interface that is now known widely as the uplands. This was the territory where swidden cultivation and the industrial forestry efforts of the early postwar period came into conflict with one another at the same moment that they collided with earlier histories of upland population discontent and resistance (Persson 1983; Trankell 1999); these been exploited and stoked by first French and then American intervention strategies (McCoy 2003), and they remained at the heart of anti-government resistance in Laos through the mid-1980s (Gunn 1983). The Lao uplands thus became a space of political-meets-economic security *par excellence*, and it is of little surprise that the technologies of contemporary upland territoriality and population management – focal sites, village relocation, land zoning and concessions – were forged under such adverse political and economic conditions (Dwyer 2011).

The tensions between interpreting the Southeast Asian uplands as a distinctly modern political space versus as a pre-modern historical terrain have been brought to the fore by the debates over the last few years about James Scott's *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia* (2009). As Leif Jonsson has argued, the book's central dichotomy between subjugation and freedom – and particularly its mapping of the state and the stateless space of "Zomia" onto these two categories, respectively – echoes the all-too-simple perspective that justified US intervention in Southeast Asia (and elsewhere) during the height of the Cold War:

The case for Zomia appears to reflect the same binary in a post-Cold War setting. The state stands in the same monster-slot as did communism then, as Freedom's nemesis. Now the prospecting for Asian freedom (for American realization) is done by academics who warn against the evils of entanglement – in the form of social life and political negotiation. Zomians are no equal to US military intervention in the highlands of Laos or Vietnam or to the masculine recklessness of Rambo. But these share many shades of the American Frontier. Zomia is very much a post-Cold War image for America's Southeast Asia; "we" can still side with freedom and against oppression and find inspiration in them [sic] hills ... (Jonsson 2012)

Debates about Zomia have been lively and serious (also see e.g. Aung-Thwin and Aung-Thwin 2012). For me, they have emphasized the need to consider the uplands of Laos (and elsewhere) in a continuous historical frame – one that is capable of capturing both the pre-modern dynamics that surround what Scott calls "the friction of terrain" and the ways in which those dynamics articulated with and informed modern Southeast Asian history. The subject of this paper is one such early set of articulations, centered on the events of the 1870s which followed the Mekong Exploration Commission's visit to northern Laos, and ensured that when the next round of French explorers-cum-colonialists came back just a few decades later, everything was different. These events center on an uprising that occurred among upland peoples in approximately 1875, and that in turn altered the political geography that scholars have theorized under the label of *sakdina*. My reading draws heavily on Grant Evans' remarks on *sakdina* in his *Politics of Ritual and Remembrance* (1998), and it is partly for this that I offer this essay to the issue of the *Journal of Lao Studies* commemorating his memory. But an additional reason is to reflect on Grant's significance to the larger project of which this analysis is only a piece; this concerns the way that the Southeast Asian uplands, conceived as a continuously historical space in the sense described above, have shaped – and indeed participated actively in – the processes and debates surrounding the intersection of political security and economic development in contemporary Laos. The dynamics on display here, in other words, highlight a dynamism that would resurface in a later era when the political-economic problem of the uplands – a problem that begins to emerge here, and that blossomed in the early years of the twentieth century under French colonial rule – was evaluated critically and employed tactically by the designers of American Cold War strategy. While that moment is the topic of another work, the connection between the uplands' role in France's entry into Laos and the American upland strategy almost a century later sits squarely and menacingly on the horizon of the history recounted below.

My account focuses on events that befell the area surrounding Luang Prabang in the early 1870s; these produced the uprising mentioned above, as well as widespread famine, mortality and emigration to the west (Siam) by a large portion of the upland population. This event is bracketed by, and articulates with, two key moments in the French conquest of Laos: first, the moment of arrival and investigation, exemplified by the Mekong Exploration Commission's journey mentioned above but also including other visits as well; and second, the moment almost two decades later when the sovereign of Luang Prabang famously sought (and was granted) French protection in a series of events

famously memorialized by Auguste Pavie, the French consul involved, as the “conquest of hearts” (Stuart-Fox 1997; Larcher-Goscha 2003). The role of upland catastrophe – and the glimpse of Zomia that emerges in the breakdown of the *sakdina* system – serve as a corrective of sorts to the implied lack of violence in the French conquest of Laos. As they had in what is now southern Vietnam and then in Cambodia, the French stepped into a landscape of political fracturing and capitalized significantly. Re-centering the uplands in this drama – as not simply a physical space but a social and thus relational place – highlights the fact that if the conquest of northern Laos was bloodless in one sense, this was in part because the upheavals that preceded it had been so completely catastrophic. A note on methods and names: This paper draws entirely on published material, and relies centrally on my reading of the travel accounts of Francis Garnier (in the 1860s) and James McCarthy (in the 1880s). I have tried to balance the diversity of place names and spellings that appear in the historical record against the need for clarity and comparability (both with one another and with current locations). I have not standardized everything: the multiple namings and the diversity of transliterations and spellings are sometimes important parts of the data itself, and it is essential not to create too much artificial clarity in hindsight, given that confusion over geography is a theme in much of the historiography (e.g., McCarthy 1900; Thongchai 1994). I have also retained many of the original names for various ethnic groups, even though many of these terms are now out of date, and even offensive. I do this deliberately and critically: terms like *kha* and “tribe” capture important valences of belonging and otherness, and figure centrally in the events being discussed. The politics of identity are inevitably and closely tied to those of place, and thus to geopolitics as well.

1. Encountering the Region of Rapids

Luang Prabang emerged on France’s geopolitical horizon in the middle of the nineteenth century, sitting at the heart of what the French called Upper Laos, just below the confluence of the Mekong and one of its major tributaries, the Nam Ou (Figure 1). Prior to this, the French (along with the Dutch and the Portuguese) had been attempting to make inroads into (or defend their earlier points of access in) an East Asian landscape that was increasingly being locked up by the British. Britain’s advances were motivated by, among other things, the desire to secure its prize colony of India in both the economic and the political sense. The colonization of Burma and Britain’s diplomatic friendship with Siam grew from the need to secure India’s eastern frontier, while its gunboat diplomacy in China was aimed at prying open a string of treaty port concessions where Indian opium, among other products, could be reliably sold. All of this was in motion by the mid nineteenth century. By comparison, France’s colonial achievements in Asia at the time were minimal. French missionaries had an expanding presence in coastal Annam, but nothing that amounted to either territory or reliable commercial access to the “riches” of the Chinese interior. As late as 1863, three years after the Second Opium War brought the British and the French together to force the issue of “free” trade with China, the British remained the “masters of the Asian silk trade” (Brocheux & Hémery 2009: 23). France’s Minister of the Navy and Colonies, by contrast, was at that time still complaining that what France needed was “a real empire” in the Far East (ibid.: 24).

This complaint came just as France was beginning to capitalize on existing

fractures in the Vietnamese empire. France's first territorial foothold in Southeast Asia came in the south, where Hué's expansion in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries had produced a popular backlash of national proportions. The multi-decade Tay Son rebellion/civil war (1778-1802) was, in fact, what had given French missionaries their initial entry point into the region: in return for sheltering the Nguyen prince who would eventually defeat the Tay Son in 1802, French Catholics were given official approval to ply their trade in coastal Annam (ibid.: 17-18). The mid-nineteenth century provided a



Figure 1: Luang Prabang and surroundings. Current boundaries and place names are shown for reference along with key place names referenced below.

further opening, as subsequent Nguyen emperors proved less tolerant of Catholic missionizing and, contending with their own wave of post-Tay Son rebellions, became increasingly unable to maintain order in the south. Historians Pierre Brocheux and Daniel Hémery note the particular “heterogeneity” of the south, and use the mix of diversity, remoteness and imperial overreach there to explain the “more than four hundred uprisings” that took place between 1802 and 1883 (ibid.: 9).

This turbulent landscape made Saigon, Phnom Penh and finally Luang Prabang successive geographic nodes in the quest for a “French Hong Kong,” a coastal port from where Chinese trade could be controlled. In 1858, Paris had sent a diplomatic mission to coastal Vietnam, aimed at establishing a protectorate or a treaty port somewhere in the region. As Brocheux and Hémery explain, somewhat by chance, the admiral in charge of the mission ended up capturing Saigon after a blunder at Danang, and ended up signing a treaty in 1862 that was catastrophic for the Vietnamese: Huế ceded a sizable chunk of southern territory to France and agreed to abide by the principle of religious freedom, thus opening the door for northward colonial expansion in the decades that followed (ibid.: 24-26). On the heels of this, France added to its control over the lower Mekong by signing a treaty of protection in 1863 with Cambodia, which faced looming threats from both Vietnam and especially Siam. With this acquisition, Luang Prabang emerged solidly on the horizon as the key to a French “river policy” that might compete with the “open door” that the British had in Shanghai and its other coastal treaty ports (ibid.: 9).

An 1872 account, written and published in Paris, both captures the geographical logic of the Mekong strategy and illustrates the conflation of particular and “general” interest that colonial rhetoric often relied upon:

The Governor of Cochin-China believed that he could attract to Saigon, a city laid out for half a million inhabitants, the important commerce which is carried on by caravans between Laos, Burmah, Thibet, and the western provinces of the Chinese Empire, thinking it by no means impossible to secure for its chief artery the Mekong, which diverts into the Indian Ocean the waters of the Himalayan plateaux. To secure for Europe, in its trade with the Celestial Empire, a vast entrepôt, of easy access, and at the same time free the route from China, shortened by twelve hundred miles, from that part of the voyage in which the periodical monsoons are to be especially dreaded, would have been no inconsiderable services to the general commerce of the world, as well as to our own colony, which must, as the result, have become one of its principal centers. (Prefatory note in De Carné 1872: xiii)

This passage comes from the introduction to one of the published reports of the Mekong Exploration Commission, which covered more than 9,000 kilometers between the time it left central Cambodia in 1866 and its arrival (after descending much of the Yangtze) in Shanghai in 1868. The Mekong turned out to be un-navigable for French purposes, cut by rapids that precluded direct river traffic between Saigon and the Yunnanese port of Jinghong. The mission thus failed at its initial objective, but it generated nonetheless a French desire for a protectorate over the upper Mekong region. This “region of rapids,” as Garnier (1885: 269) called it in the Commission’s official report, sat

at the as-yet un-demarcated intersection of mainland Southeast Asia's major political centers: Siam, Burma, China and Vietnam. The passages that Garnier wrote during the Commission's extended stay in Luang Prabang are worth examining for two reasons. First, in foregrounding the productivity of the local population, Garnier's writings give a window onto the workings of the economy at the time; despite their strategic bent, upland commerce emerges as a key theme, and contrasts markedly to the situation, described below, just a few decades later. The second reason is the historical context: Garnier's argument for French protection is less important than the fact that Garnier himself never got to make it. His superiors thought it "a little premature" (*ibid.*: 295), believing that Luang Prabang was in fact so secure that it did not actually need assistance, and would thus be inclined to turn it down if offered. The contrast is again apparent between the 1860s (when Garnier was writing) and the events of the 1880s described below.

Garnier's account of Luang Prabang is notable for the way it wove together observations about the economy, the population, and the geopolitics of the region. His description of Luang Prabang focused on its commercial center, and emphasized its extent compared to anything else the Commission had seen:

A very lively daily market is held under special roofs, situated close to the confluence of the Nam Kan and [the] Cambodia [i.e. Mekong] river. But all these merchants are quite unable to find space under [the roofs] and the open air vendors extend for more than one kilometer along a wide street parallel to the river, to which the pagoda that we had as our lodgings was connected. (Garnier 1885: 292)

Garnier's attempt to explain what he saw contained a strong dose of historical and geographical analysis. If the latter is unsurprising (Garnier, like many explorers, saw himself as a geographer), the former is notable for its contrast to the racial essentialism that followed only a few decades later. As Ivarsson notes, historical and essentialist forms of reason each had their own particular political agendas in French Indochina, the former being a way to discursively wrest Lao territory from Siam, the latter rationalizing the Vietnamese-centric mode of rule that followed (Ivarsson 2008). It is the first of these that Garnier deployed to explain the frenetic market activity he witnessed in 1867.

This unexpected activity in Luang Prabang, this commerce that had become relatively important, if one could judge by the many and diverse types of people, representing all the nations of Indo-China and of the Indies, evidently testified less to a change of race or an increase in the production of the soil than to a radical difference in the political regime. (Garnier 1885: 292)

Garnier contrasted Luang Prabang to the Siamese "oppression and monopoly" that the Commission had witnessed in southern Laos. Anticipating the French/Chinese analogy mentioned above, he characterized Siamese rule as a system that, "giving too large a part of the profits to the conquerors, had made the conquered disgusted with work that had become sterile and trade that was found to be ruinous" (*ibid.*). In contrast,

“In Luang Prabang, if life was reborn, it was because Siamese subjection imposed only light taxes and one felt in Bangkok that rightful consideration was due to this powerful province” (ibid.).

Garnier attributed some of Luang Prabang’s independence to a system of three-way tribute that it retained with Siam, Annam and China (from the latter it received “nominal protection” in return for a token gift of elephants every eight years) (293). But he places greater explanatory weight on what Scott (2009) terms the “friction of terrain,” a mixture of physical and human- geographic factors that made the mountains of pre-modern Southeast Asia difficult to conquer for any length of time:

The distance of Luang Prabang from the theater of the wars which tore Indo-China apart in the eighteenth century contributed greatly to assuring its prosperity, no doubt after having been one of the determining causes of its foundation. ... The mountainous region one has to traverse to reach Luang Prabang, the greater energy which its population owes to its mixing with the many martial wild tribes which inhabit the borders of Tong King [Tonkin] and Laos, provide excellent conditions for this province to resist the demands of Siam. ... Today, the kingdom of Luang Prabang is the most important Laotian center in all Indo-China, the place of refuge and the natural focus of support for all the peoples from the interior who want to escape from the despotism of the Siamese. (Garnier 1885: 293, 294).

It was no accident that Garnier focused on Siamese “despotism.” Not only was Siam the power to which Luang Prabang was most closely allied, despite its apparent prosperity and independence. (As discussed below, it was to Siam that the king of Luang Prabang would first appeal when threatened fifteen years later – his request for French protection came only when this failed.) Equally important, Siam stood in France’s way regarding the Lao territories of the central Mekong, the area south of Luang Prabang and north of Cambodia. In the early 1800s, efforts at self-rule there had been quashed by Bangkok, leading to the resettlement of Champasak to the west bank of the Mekong and the destruction of Vieng Chan (Vientiane) together with the forced relocation of its inhabitants to what is now northeastern Thailand.¹ If Luang Prabang seemed like it might be at the edge of Bangkok’s control, central and southern Laos were areas of substantial concern for the Commission as well.

The second part of Garnier’s argument thus turned to this larger question of regional geopolitics, contrasting Siamese and Burmese “despotism” with the gentler hand of the Chinese, as noted above. Garnier dwelled on the virtues of earlier Chinese “domination,” the waning of which, he claimed, had left the region “without counterbalance” (294). His account reflects the Sinophilia that was typical of his day, and of Physiocracy in particular. As Giovanni Arrighi notes, “the remarkable peace, prosperity and demographic growth that China experienced for much of the eighteenth century was a source of inspiration for leading figures of the European Enlightenment. Leibniz,

¹ Similar things happened to the south of Vientiane as well, leading to the population of what is now northeastern Thailand by ethnic Lao. As a result, Lao historian Houmphanh Rathanavong once quipped that it was not Laos that has an ethnic minority problem today, but Thailand (Evans 1999).

Voltaire and Quesnay, among others, 'looked to China for moral instruction, guidance in institutional development, and supporting evidence for their advocacy of causes as varied as benevolent absolutism, meritocracy and an agriculturally based national economy'" (Arrighi 2007: 3, quoting Michael Adas). Garnier's approving reference to China (294) was part of this intellectual legacy, melding the history of "nominal protection" by China to the liberal lexicon of regulation.

Garnier then got down to business. While allowing that Britain's conquest of Burma had led "the populations [there], who are prey to the unending wars, [and who] ardently hope for a more regular and more stable state of things," to receive "European tutelage ... with a deep satisfaction" (294), Garnier insisted that Luang Prabang was where "the progress of English influence has to stop" (ibid.). In laying out the case for French rule, Garnier grafted rhetoric about liberal government onto his earlier analysis of Luang Prabang's unique geography:

Thus it was important to make the king of Luang Prabang feel that, one day, we could ourselves take on the rights exerted over his principality by the court of Huế, now our vassal. That from now on he should resort to French influence to resist the claims of neighboring countries and stop this tiring search for equilibrium which he tried to maintain among them. ... Too far away from us ever to fear a direct subjection, which moreover was not necessary to realize our interests, he could be said to reflect our power and replace so many bothersome tutelages by an efficient protection without demands. Indeed, we would only ask him to favor the development of commerce toward the southern part of the peninsula, to help us do away with the fiscal hindrances, and to improve the roads in this direction (295).

This plea for "an efficient protection without demands" is the culmination of Garnier's argument, and it notably ends with a plea for infrastructure of both the physical and social variety. In it, the exploration of the Mekong comes full circle: unable to plan for a French Hong Kong in Saigon via a river monopoly, Garnier had begun to look for territorial opportunities instead. With the switch, the task of "unblocking" the region grew substantially. The apparently simple proposition with which Garnier ended – "only" to direct commerce toward Saigon, clear out "fiscal hindrances" along the way, and connect the Lao interior to the lower Mekong by a network of roads – turned out to be an enormous undertaking, far greater than the establishment of commercial infrastructure along the Mekong could have ever been.

Half a century later, road building, and specifically the experience of *corvée* labor, would come to dominate how Laos's upland population experienced the French colonial state (Gunn 1990: 55-60). As debates about imperial expansion became mired in the domestic politics of France's Third Republic, Garnier's promise of a "protection without demands" became subsumed by a political economy of outsourced colonial development, in which Paris demanded wealth from its Indochinese colonies but relied heavily on the private sector to finance infrastructure and resource development. In Laos in particular, the burden of infrastructure-building would fall largely on upland peoples, the high cost of infrastructure confining profitable investment largely to the Vietnamese highlands and deltas (ibid.; Brocheux & Hémy 2009: 119-120). By the early twentieth century, road-

building epitomized “unmitigated colonial oppression,” and *corvée* labor (which in Gunn’s estimate “probably never embraced less than twenty percent of the population” (1990: 59)), was implicated in a string of upland revolts throughout the Indochinese Union (Stuart-Fox 1997; Evans 2002).

But all of this was in the future. At the time of Garnier’s visit, only one thing was certain. When the French traded the Mekong strategy for the dream of a Lao territory, the task of “unblocking” Laos gained a new and far more complex target: the uplands of upper Laos.

2. The Breakdown of the *Sakdina* Frontier

In 1887, more than a decade after Francis Garnier’s death in Tonkin helped propel France into northern Vietnam, another Frenchman got the opportunity to press the case for French protection to the king of Luang Prabang. His success testified less to the logic of the proposal than to the fact that much had changed in the two decades since Garnier had first articulated it.

The intervening years had brought a group known collectively as “the Haw” into northern Laos. The story of the Haw helps bring into focus the changes in socio-political space that occurred in the upland heart of mainland Southeast Asia during the latter half of the nineteenth century. These changes formed the backdrop for portions of Thongchai Winichakul’s *Siam Mapped* (1994), which chronicles the emergence and consolidation of the “geo-body” of Siam – the cartographic polygon that came to define the territory of Siam during the nineteenth century, as the Siamese state made the transition to the Westphalian paradigm of singular hierarchical sovereignty and well-defined national boundaries. The mapping of the Siamese northeast is in many ways the climax of *Siam Mapped*; after learning “modern” geography along the Burma frontier, the Siamese administration was called to put its skills into practice along its eastern edge, especially in the mountainous areas northeast of Nan and Vieng Chan (Figure 1). Although this ultimately brought them into conflict with the French, what originally drew the Siamese to the northeast was geographical confusion over the precise location of what the British surveyor James McCarthy called “the Haw disturbances.” Following the British-Siamese friendship that developed earlier in the century (see Winichakul 1994), McCarthy was seconded to the Siamese government in 1881. He was thus well-placed to contribute when the Haw issue drew the attention of the king. As he reported:

Contradictory reports frequently reached Bangkok concerning ravages by Haw on the north-east frontier of Siam; and as villages were now reported to be plundered and destroyed, the whereabouts of which puzzled the heads of those who ought to have known, the king was graciously pleased to appoint me to the command of an expedition to the region of disturbance. ... For geographical research, especially, the frontier region provided a wide and interesting field; for the greater part of it still remained unvisited by Europeans, and on the maps the country was a blank. (McCarthy 1900: 18)

Thongchai’s account is written to problematize the nationalist historiography of

Siam's "lost territories," and his perspective is therefore centered on the Thai geo-body itself: it is national in its scale of inquiry, and its focus is largely cartographic. Looking more closely at the politics of population in the particular vicinity of Luang Prabang, we can see the dynamism of the uplands come into view in a way that complements Winichakul's genealogical account of the more static geo-bodies. My focus is instead the uplands themselves as a socially and politically dynamic space. The "Haw marauders" provide a point of entry here, and show that the uplands were far more than a backdrop, whether conceived as a blank spot on the map or a technical problem to be overcome. They were a historical subject in themselves – a dynamic assemblage of the social, the political and the geographical that would, to borrow Stuart-Fox's term quoted above, "exercise" colonial (not to mention contemporary) administrators for decades to come.

The subtitle to McCarthy's book *Surveying and Exploring in Siam* is "with Descriptions of Lao Dependencies and of Battles against the Chinese Haws"; this is doubly telling, testifying not only to the central role that the Haw played in his experiences, but also to how the area he was surveying was viewed from Bangkok. McCarthy arrived in what is now northern Laos in 1884, part of a second Siamese mission to fortify its north-east frontier, and to help sort out the confusion over precisely where the "ravages" by the Haw were taking place.

Who and what were these Haw that brought so much misery on large tracts of country, and established such a name for cruelty as to terrorize a whole population? They were, in a word, Chinese brigands. At one time, Chinese traders, known in Luang Prabang as Haw, came down from the north in great numbers to traffic with the inhabitants, and when the peaceful traders gave place to brigands of the same nationality, the name of Haw was naturally transferred to these. Since the appearance of these marauders, communications and trade had ceased, and the whole district had been thrown into confusion. (McCarthy 1900: 44)

McCarthy wrote that it was "about the year 1870 that the depredations began, the plunderers rapidly overspreading the country near the Tonkin borderland" (ibid.: 44). This tracks well with Garnier's account from twenty years earlier. In 1868, the Mekong Exploration Commission had encountered the question of how to head north from Luang Prabang. The Haw, still beyond the frontier at that time, had nonetheless crept into Luang Prabang's interstate relations. Despite the apparent prosperity in Luang Prabang, turmoil to the north was already a substantial concern. Garnier had written that:

The situation in the surrounding countries was such that it engendered the greatest hesitation as to the [choice of] route to adopt when leaving Luang Prabang. The Muslim rebellion in Yunnan against the emperor of China had been the signal for disorder and endless wars in the various Laotian principalities lying between China, Burma and the Siamese territories. Banditry became a chronic nuisance and some parts of this area had been complexly depopulated. The king of Luang Prabang had seized this opportunity to break off relations with China, to which it had stopped sending the usual tribute about ten years ago. (Garnier 1885: 304)

Two waves of Chinese (Qing) repression made the advance of the Haw seem to sweep not only southward, but westward as well. The first wave came, as McCarthy noted, from the borderlands of Tonkin, to the northeast of Luang Prabang (Figure 1). These were largely the “Flag gangs” formed in the wake of Qing efforts to put down the Tai Ping revolt (1850-64); the most famous Flag gang, the Black Flags, was subsequently recruited by the Annamese and the Qing to fight the French on the Chinese frontier, and was responsible for the death of Francis Garnier in 1873 outside Hanoi (Garnier 1885: xviii-xx; Brocheux & Hémery 2009: 40-44). A second wave came from the suppression of Muslim revolts mentioned by Garnier in Yunnan in the 1870s; together, these waves of “Haw brigands” wreaked havoc on northern Laos (ibid.), and in particular on the stability and isolation that had made Luang Prabang a relatively peaceful and prosperous refuge (cf. Scott 2009).² One of the reasons these intrusions caused so much political calamity was that they inspired local uprisings as well, including an important upland revolt near Luang Prabang in 1875 (Evans 2002: 35). The Haw raids, in other words, caused the *sakdina* system, a political-geographical system described below, to break down along one of its key fault lines: social class.

In *The Politics of Ritual and Remembrance*, Grant Evans describes pre-colonial social relations between the king, local *chao muang*, lowland peasants and upland minority groups as orderly, if profoundly unequal. “The *sakdina* system (glossed as ‘feudalism’) in Laos prior to the French was one where the king theoretically had absolute rights, and his subjects had discrete and subordinate rights” (Evans 1998: 143). Under *sakdina* rule, both “the Lao peasantry and the *kha*” – a term to be elaborated shortly – “were obliged to render to the king and his *chao muang* goods in kind or labor.” Evans was providing context for a court ritual that was conducted in Luang Prabang in the second half of the twentieth century, and that had its roots in the political geography of the Haw period and before. The ritual involved the king and representatives of the Khmu, one of the most widespread ethnic minority groups in the uplands around Luang Prabang (and indeed throughout the north). Evans relates how the ritual – in which the king acknowledged the Khmu as the former owners of his territory, while the Khmu acknowledged the king’s ultimate political authority – symbolized reciprocity without equality. In contrast to the view of upland minorities as beyond the pale of the lowland state (Scott 2009), the Khmu under the *sakdina* system, were “not despised heathens but loyal, and respected, subjects” (Evans 1998: 145). Evans was precise about language, however:

I use the term ‘respected’ advisedly, and mean by it that in a context where there is no assumption of universal equality, and where if people act according to their ‘station in life,’ then one can have a system of mutual respect and reciprocity even though inequality is intrinsic to the system. (ibid.)

² This refuge was of course relative; I thank a reviewer for the reminder that an earlier monarch had moved the capital of Lan Xang to Vientiane when Luang Prabang was threatened by the Burmese in the sixteenth century. The capital was moved back to Luang Prabang in the early nineteenth century following the Siamese destruction of Vientiane, almost half a century before Garnier’s visit.

This system of unequal reciprocity is inherent in the term *kha*, a Tai (Lao and Thai language) term for particular (generally Mon-Khmer speaking) upland minorities that is sometimes translated as “slave” but that, as Evans’ description implies, was far more complex than familiar Western notions of chattel slavery. As Andrew Turton and others elaborate, the opposition between Tai and *kha*, while rooted in linguistic and religious difference, is analogous to the geographic opposition between *muang* – the lowland rice plain where Tai state-making was centered – and *pa* – the wild, uncivilized forest where the *kha* traditionally resided (Turton 1999; Winichakul 1999). The *kha* appear frequently in the accounts of Garnier, McCarthy and other travelers of the era. Henri Mouhot, a French explorer who preceded Garnier in Luang Prabang by half a decade, described the *kha* in terms that, while clearly lumping together a number of upland groups and using language of the day, clearly gestured to the tension between the subjectivity of the *muang* and the freedom of the forest that, as noted in the introduction, has strong echoes in Scott’s (2009) work. Mouhot, in other words, was describing something like the forested edge of the *muang*, or the upland frontier of *sakdina*:

The whole chain of mountains which extends from the north of Tonquin to the south of Cochin China, about 100 miles north of Saigon, is inhabited by this primitive people, divided into tribes speaking different dialects, but whose manner and customs are the same. All the villages in the immediate neighborhood are tributary; those nearest to the town supply workmen for buildings erected for the king and princes, and these are heavily taxed. Others pay their tribute in rice. Their habitations are in the thickest part of the forests, where only they can find a path. Their cultivated grounds are to be seen on the tops and sides of the mountains; in fact, they employ the same means as wild animals to escape their enemies, and to preserve that liberty and independence which are to them, as to all God’s creatures, their supreme good. (Mouhot 1862: 362)

Later accounts pulled this aggregate apart in a few ways, gesturing to the complex geography at the edges of *sakdina* rule. Garnier’s and McCarthy’s accounts in particular form a striking pair for analyzing the changes in northern Laos’s political geography just prior to French colonization. As they had in Cochin China, the French would soon carve out a new territorial niche at the fault lines of two existing empires (China and Siam). For Garnier, the “many martial wild tribes which inhabit[ed] the borders of Tong King [Tonkin] and Laos” were a key reason for Luang Prabang’s uniqueness, providing a combination of protection and industriousness that contrasted markedly with what he saw further south. If this was hinted at above, it was more explicit in another part of his report. Describing a village along the Mekong just south of Luang Prabang, Garnier had noted that “[t]he population of Ban Cocsay is Laotian but a great number of savages from the neighboring mountains come to the village to trade their products” (1885: 288):

Those that we saw belonged for the greater part to the tribe of the Khmous. They are very numerous in the vicinity of Luang Prabang. Their physiognomy no longer had the submissive and timid expression which

the savages of the south show in their daily relations with the inhabitants of the river valley. They were treated as the equals of the conquering race. In the bosom of this mountainous region, their own cradle, they showed the better part of their native energy and their most virile qualities. Their numbers and the need to use them to defend the mountain passes against enterprising neighbors made them auxiliaries that were managed and not, as is the case in [southern Laos], [treated as] a taxable resource, productive in gold dust and in providing slaves. (ibid.)

Evans' account above provides an important corrective to Garnier's assertions of equality, and suggests that Khmu willingness to "defend the mountain passes against enterprising neighbors" may not have been absolute. Still, between Evans and Garnier, we can see the outlines of an upland political geography that seemed to work well – at least for Luang Prabang – when times were good, but that broke down in the 1870s with the arrival of "the Haw."

In 1884, McCarthy visited a village northeast of Luang Prabang that, based on his description, clearly lay outside the system of *sakdina* relations. A highland village of "Meo", it also contained a number of representatives from the "*kha*" tribes that had been involved in the uprising of 1875:

We halted for some days at a large settlement of Meo, between whom and the Haw of Tung Chieng Kam there was a close connection. There were upwards of 200 representative men of the Ka Che tribes. These tribes had been goaded into revolt some years before, when *more than half of them were killed or died from starvation*. They are usually called Ka Che (meaning slaves), and their homes are on the slopes of the mountains all over the Luang Prabang division. ... At one time they were associated only with Luang Prabang, but after the rebellion upwards of 20,000 settled in the Nan division [of Siam, see Figure 1]. The teak trade of Siam is carried on chiefly by their means, as they are sturdy and hard-working foresters, content with very small remuneration. (McCarthy 1900: 92, emphasis added)

In McCarthy's account we glimpse an upland landscape around Luang Prabang that was significantly depopulated by the arrival of the Haw, first by attacks, then starvation, and then migration westward to safer parts of the Siamese empire. A decade earlier, Garnier had estimated the population "for the whole province" of Luang Prabang at 50,000 (Garnier 1885: 293). Although the numbers are highly uncertain – Garnier himself qualified his estimate with the caveat that "the population can barely be assessed in a precise way" (ibid.) – a loss of the magnitude described by McCarthy is nonetheless staggering. If the two sets of numbers can be even roughly believed and compared, they imply an almost complete decimation of the upland population during the latter 1870s and early 1880s. Garnier also estimated the city of Luang Prabang to have around 15,000 people (ibid.), leaving roughly 35,000 or more (his estimate was a minimum) in the countryside. Some of these would have been residents of lowland villages: while Luang Prabang's lowlands are small, they are not nonexistent. Garnier's estimate of the upland population was thus in the range of somewhere under 35,000. McCarthy's description

above implies an upland population of over 40,000. More than half of these, according to the stories he heard, died from war or starvation; the other half survived and migrated to Nan, with only a scattered few sticking around in villages like the one he visited. McCarthy, in short, suggests that *all and then some* of the upland population estimated by Garnier either died or left.

At the very least, the two estimates suggest a major disintegration of the social fabric of the upland landscape. This had profound implications for Luang Prabang. As noted above, the kingdom had far less lowland space than comparable or even smaller *muang* like Nan, Vieng Chan, Sing or Chiang Mai. A French surveyor quipped around the turn of the century that “[w]ithout the agriculture of the *Khas*, the Lao [of Luang Prabang] would not have a grain of rice to put between their teeth” (Lefèvre-Pontalis, in Walker 1999: 37). Writing around 1900, this reflected the fact that uplands along the Nam Tha River (Figure 1) had once again become “the granary of Luang Prabang” (*ibid.*). But by then Laos was almost a decade into becoming part of French Indochina. In the 1870s and 1880s, in contrast, the upland periphery of Luang Prabang’s *sakdina* geography had all but disappeared.

3. Rereading the “Conquest of Hearts”

It was in this context of upland political rupture that a well-placed French representative was able to press the case, in 1887, for French protection to the king of Luang Prabang. Auguste Pavie, the French vice-consul and first French official posted in Laos, had written earlier to an acquaintance, “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” (in Stuart-Fox 1995: 117). Pavie himself was perhaps the most important of these agents in the expansion of French influence in Laos. His feats in Luang Prabang have, as Stuart-Fox aptly notes, become the stuff of legend (Stuart-Fox 1997: 22). But despite being remembered as a “conquest of hearts” (Pavie’s phrase), the events that led to French protection were both violent and contingent. The events of 1887 show how the destruction of the *sakdina* frontier allowed the French to capitalize on the geopolitical fracturing of mainland Southeast Asia yet again.

The title of McCarthy’s (1900) book reflects his intent to survey the “Lao dependencies” *within* the kingdom of Siam, not create a boundary *between* Siam and Laos; it also testifies to the fact that his mission was not only scientific, but military (also see Winichakul 1994: 109-112, 121-124). Ironically, it was a conflict generated by this larger securitization effort that ultimately led the king of Luang Prabang to seek protection from the French. McCarthy related the story of how a *chao muang* on the Tonkin frontier had allied himself with the local Haw in order to secure the area against Vietnamese encroachment, which authorities in Luang Prabang had allegedly ordered him to do. The account turned on a tale of intrigue, in which the lord had been deceived by a former apprentice, and was forced to take extreme measures – an alliance with the Haw – in order to defend the area (McCarthy 1900: 100-101). McCarthy thought this account “very satisfactory” and recounted it without any hint of doubt (*ibid.*: 100). Nonetheless, it apparently failed to convince the Siamese commander, who doubted the

chao muang's profession of loyalty and demanded to speak to him in person.³ As a means of leverage, he placed two of the man's sons "in close confinement" (ibid.: 106).

McCarthy, writing with the benefit of hindsight, described the lord as "the man who, above all others, influenced the whole of these countries" (see M. Lai in Figure 1). "[U]nless he were appeased, there would be no end of complications" (ibid.: 105-106). Complications, as predicted, ensued; after sending McCarthy off to survey further to the south and east, the Siamese military commander returned to Luang Prabang and then set off for Bangkok, "denud[ing]" Luang Prabang "of such means of defense as it had possessed" (ibid.: 108). Meanwhile, the Haw with whom the *chao muang* of Lai had allied himself headed for Luang Prabang, "these marauders having been brought down by the eldest son of Chao Lai, who intended with their help to avenge the arrest of his brothers" (ibid.).

McCarthy's account of Haw's descent from *Muang* Lai to Luang Prabang belies the distance involved, which was over 150 kilometers as the crow flies (see Figure 1). In his description of their passage through the Nam Ou gorge, the destruction of the *sakdina* geography is the subtext, inverting the "friction of terrain" with which the region was typically described:

The Haw continued their advance down the Nam U and reached M. Ngoi. There a narrow river-gorge, over a mile long, is commanded by a hill, whose limestone cliffs rise perpendicularly from the water. In the gorge the river is very deep, but the current is imperceptible, and boats descending can make no progress against a head wind. No hostile band anticipating opposition would attempt to force a passage, but the Haw evidently knew the men they were dealing with. They ascended the hill, and, seizing the excellent mountain howitzers, which had been provided for the defence of the position [presumably by the British to the Siamese military], rolled them over the cliffs into the river. They then pushed on to Luang Prabang. (ibid.)

The rest is almost predictable:

The Haw now acted in accordance with their usual barbarity. Beginning at the [temple], where they had chosen their quarters, they extended their murderous work throughout the town. The Chao Uparaj [vice-chief] was put to death, and the old chief⁴ was compelled by his sons and Burman guard to go on board a boat, where one of his sons was shot before his eyes.

³ Evans (2002: 36) implies McCarthy's naïvete, relating how "local elites" like this *chao muang* played both sides, using Lao titles in their relations with Luang Prabang and Siam, and Vietnamese ones in their dealings with Annam and the French.

⁴ Following McCarthy's English ("the old chief"), I have translated *Chao Uparaj* as "vice chief," although it could be also be translated "viceroy." Where McCarthy uses the term "chief," Garnier, also reflecting the geopolitics of his mission, referred to the head of Luang Prabang as a king. Mouhot (quoted above), a Frenchman by birth who was nonetheless more closely tied to English zoological and geographical circles, split the difference, calling the two leaders of Luang Prabang "the princes who govern this little state, and who bear the title of kings" (Mouhot 1862: 362).

Luang Prabang was fired and looted. (ibid.: 109)

The Haw's descent through the Nam Ou River Gorge was thus a symbolic and fateful ending to a process that began almost two decades earlier. When McCarthy tells his audience that the Haw "evidently knew the men they were dealing with," his ambiguity is palpable. On the one hand, he seems to be chastising his Siamese superiors, whose efforts he saw as bungling and tactless (ibid.: 105-108). But we can also read in his account a clear reference to the *kha*, who were for all intents and purposes gone. Much of this disappearance was physical, the result of death, starvation and flight. But even among the Khmu who remained, McCarthy's account suggests that few could be described as *kha*: they had left the social relations of the *sakdina* system, and *kha* is, above all, a relational term (Turton 1999; Evans 1998). The Haw, McCarthy suggests, knew that the *kha* had disappeared in this social sense as well as the physical one; the upland subjects described by Garnier and Mouhot were no longer there.

This is the light in which the decision of the Lao king to seek French protection in 1887 must be viewed. Luang Prabang's pre-colonial security sat at the intersection of interstate tributary relations, the *sakdina* system and physical distance. When the upland political geography of *sakdina* broke down, distance became irrelevant, and Luang Prabang succumbed to a tactical misstep within its relations of Siamese tribute. With the coming of the Haw, the uplands of Luang Prabang became, to use Scott's terminology, frictionless. And with the loss of this traditional form of security, Luang Prabang's turn to the French – "the symbol of a new form of overarching order and protection", as Evans put it (2002: 36) – was perhaps understandable, if difficult nonetheless. This historical moment is important, and emphasizes the need to see upland friction as contingent and dynamic: If the problem that exercised men like Francis Garnier was the need to unblock the Chinese frontier, it was precisely the opposite problem – the all-too-radical *opening* of the uplands in the 1870s and 1880s – that created the opportunity for France's colonization of Luang Prabang. This dynamic of friction and flow would remain pivotal for years, first challenging French efforts to exploit the uplands' riches, and then providing the Americans with a strategic opportunity to exploit the France's failure.

Conclusion: Legacies of Upland Underdevelopment

French efforts to "unblock" the Lao portions of colonial Indochina were slow to materialize, and highly partial at best (Gunn 1990; Stuart-Fox 1995; Ivarsson 2008). Given the prioritization of Vietnam and, subsequently, Cambodia by colonial administrators (ibid.), much of what was built in the way of public works in Laos was based on *corvée* labor provided by local, and specifically upland, populations (Gunn 1990). In contrast, concession-based development efforts, despite a speculative burst during the 1920s, crashed hard in the Great Depression, and left only the tin mines on the Paten River and the plantations of the Bolaven plateau. These were the exceptions that proved the rule that "for colonial capitalism, the 'profitable' Indochina centered on the Vietnamese highlands and deltas" (Brocheux and Hémerly 2009: 120), not on Laos and its uplands.

This had profound implications. As noted in the introduction, the question of whether "the Lao" could govern themselves as a nation had been posed by the French

during the colonial period (Ivarsson 2008). If this had ramifications then, it was elevated to a whole new level after the Second World War, as Laos became enrolled in American efforts to contain communism to China and northern Vietnam; as American strategists attempted to theorize the practicalities of containment, they became increasingly exercised with the question of precisely what Laos *was*. Whether Laos was a “real” country or not has provided much critical fodder for scholars (e.g. Evans 1999; Ivarsson 2008). But it had even starker – and decidedly un-academic – implications when it was posed by American policymakers, strategists and their associated “expert” advisors. In these deliberations, the legacies of failed French *débloquement* figured centrally; as U.S. advisors reevaluated whether Laos could provide an effective buffer against communist expansion, they turned to problems of infrastructure, ethnic diversity and the culture of national civil service. Their answer, in 1961, was to try and push the pendulum of upland friction to a point similar to where it had been in the wake of the Haw disturbances almost a century earlier: they took the state’s absence in the uplands as a problem to be exploited – and indeed, a condition to be actively created – and put their efforts behind doing so (Blaufarb 1972; Dwyer 2011).

Today, as upland resources and populations occupy center stage in debates about development’s costs and beneficiaries, this history weighs heavily. But it also weighs ambiguously. Perhaps the central take-home message of the events described above, when Zomia reared its head – briefly but in ways that would echo loudly almost a century later – is the reminder that the uplands need to be understood as a social, rather than merely a biophysical, category. Laos may be “a mountainous landlocked country in Southeast Asia”, as so many development reports are fond of reminding their readers, but there is a lot more to this statement than is often understood. As the uplands continue to manifest the historical and sociopolitical dynamics described above, they are ever the *problematique* of government that Grant Evans described in his writings on the social geography of *sakdina*. This dynamic social nature means that the geopolitical and economic questions of upland development are unlikely to be settled anytime soon, and that socio-historical analysis of the sort Grant pioneered will remain relevant far beyond the academic realm.

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