

BORDERS IN MOTION ON THE UPPER MEKONG: SIAM AND FRANCE IN THE 1890s¹

Andrew Walker

In 1893, a treaty was signed in Bangkok establishing the Mekong River as the border between Siam and French Indochina². This was a cartographically bold and simple statement that selected the dominant feature of the landscape – the Mekong River – as the limit of French colonial territory. In its dramatic simplicity this act of colonial map-making marked out, in unambiguous terms, the new spatial realities of the Mekong region. Longstanding attempts by the Siamese to expand and consolidate their influence in the Lao territories were thwarted as French gunboat diplomacy forced the ceding of the left bank to colonial control. The French ultimatum that preceded the treaty gave the Siamese authorities in Bangkok only one month to withdraw their forces from the towns they administered on the far side of the Mekong (Suwit, 1975), an administration they had been expanding and consolidating over much of the past century. For the French this new territorial regime had numerous anticipated benefits: it opened up the markets and resources of the left bank to French entrepreneurs; it thwarted the expansion of the British (who had already occupied the neighbouring Shan States) on the upper-Mekong; and it provided access to a “river road to China” (Osborne, 1975) along the Mekong itself. The treaty signalled the birth of a new military, economic and political geography for the region.

But there were other subtler, but perhaps more fundamental, changes. As Thongchai (1994) has pointed out in his influential work, *Siam Mapped: a History of a Geo-Body of a Nation*, the neat boundary line of colonial demarcation signalled an

¹ This paper is based on research undertaken at the *Centre des Archives d’Outre-Mer* (CAOM), in Aix-en-Provence, France. Documents were obtained from two main sources: the files of the *Résident supérieur du Laos* (RSL) and the files of the *Gouverneur général d’Indochine* (GGI). The RSL files focus on the day-to-day administration of the Lao territories and are organised by box in terms of broad themes. I have drawn on the boxes dealing with general administration (D), provincial administration (E) and political affairs (F). The GGI files mainly contain correspondence relating to matters that were referred to the Governor General in Hanoi. These are issue specific files covering a wide range of matters. One file (GGI 20714) was particularly important for my research as it contained copies of a large number of the reports submitted (to the Resident Superior and forwarded to the Governor General) by the Commercial Agents in Chiang Khong and Chiang Saen. In the footnotes that follow, documents are referred to by their file or box number and by their specific title. The names and numbers of the files (or boxes in the case of RSL sources) are listed in the bibliography. Thanks to Craig Reynolds for valuable advices on this chapter.

² Article 1 of the treaty read: “The Siamese Government renounces all claims on the territories of the left bank of the Mekong and on the islands of the river” (Prescott, 1975: 440).

important change in the territorial worldview prevailing in the region. The new border-which created the bounded “geo-body” of modern Siam-cartographically obliterated long histories of contested, changing and sometimes overlapping sovereignties. This colonially inspired geography, Thongchai (1994: 129) argues, displaced the “indigenous knowledge of political space” traditionally held by communities in the Mekong borderlands, substituting rigid demarcation for the territorial fluidity and ambiguity of the past:

“It was this triumph of modern geography that eliminated the possibility, let alone opportunity, of those tiny chiefdoms being allowed to exist as they had done for centuries. In other words, the modern discourse of mapping was the ultimate conqueror. Its power was exercised through the actions of major agents representing the contending countries. The new geographical knowledge was the force behind every stage of conceiving, projecting, and creating the new entity.”

Thongchai’s important observations about the new system of spatial knowledge that was encapsulated in the treaty of 1893 pose a number of challenges. Chief among these, I suggest, is the question of how this new understanding of spatial organization developed in those peripheral border regions that lay at the furthest extent of the newly defined geo-bodies of French Indochina and Siam. Thongchai’s metaphors of conquest and elimination are, I suggest, somewhat unsatisfactory and too readily dismiss the possibility of ongoing dialogue and negotiation about the nature of spatial organization in peripheral districts. Indeed, if the texts of modern treaties and the maps they generated were available in these borderland places, the arbitrary and artificial character of the demarcations they proposed would have been all too evident. The Mekong River, in particular, was a site of passage and exchange –commerce, politics and kinship readily spanned its watery width. Creation of a new spatial order clearly had to *contend with* –rather than simply conquer– local practices and perceptions that had quite different frames of reference. What needs to be explored, then, is how the Mekong River came to be imbued with new sets of meaning. How did a place of connection come to be seen, in some important contexts, as a site of demarcation between Siam and the French colonial territory of Laos? How did the Mekong River come to be *lived* –rather than just cartographically represented– *as a border* through the localised day-to-day realities of interaction and crossing?

In answering these questions I want to focus on the upper-Mekong border between Laos and Siam (see map) and on the borderland interactions between French colonial officials, local chiefly elites and Siamese bureaucrats that took place in the early years (1893-1900) of colonial rule. Following White (1991), I treat this time and place as a middle ground of *dialogue and misunderstanding* –between diverse, and unequal, parties– about the nature of the newly demarcated border. What is important is that on this colonial periphery, French officials could “neither dictate to... nor ignore” (White, 1991) indigenous authority but had to enter into dialogue with local systems of social and spatial organization. These local dealings generated forms of colonial administration and territorial discourse that were, in many cases, quite different to those promoted by the centres of colonial power. My aim, then, is to examine the ways in which particular understandings of the border *emerged* out of these pragmatic interactions. Sympathetic to attempts to “decentre” the historical accounts of southeast Asia (Sunait & Baker, 2002) I want to shift attention away from state-focussed processes of treaty making and border delineation and towards the local processes of negotiation through which understandings of the border emerged. From this perspective, the formal demarcation and mapping of the border can be seen as the beginning of a process of dialogue rather than its endpoint.

THE INCIDENT OF 30 DECEMBER 1900

The records of the early French administration along the upper-Mekong border between Laos and Siam, on which this paper is largely based, have little to say about the classic concerns of boundary consolidation. There are, of course, notes about numbers of passports issued – and occasionally refused – and data about trade and travellers passing in and out of colonial territories. But, by and large these are minor concerns tacked onto the end of monthly reports. What does figure prominently, however, in these early colonial accounts is what may best be called the machinations of cross-border politics. To provide an insight into this frontier zone of dispute, negotiation and dialogue, I provide here a detailed account of an incident that took place in late December 1900, in the Siamese border town of Chiang Saen³. The author is Laurant Léon, the French Commercial Agent in Chiang Saen appointed there in July of that year⁴.

“At around 5 pm, I received at the agency the notables of Xieng Sen accompanied by some indignant inhabitants. The ancient temples had been profaned, pits had been dug up at the bases of the Chats in order to take out from them the money placed there by believers since far back times and lastly, a hole was made on the pedestal and behind the big Buddha of the [central] pagoda. They had recovered some in the pagoda itself in the cell of the chief of the monks, who has since then ran away to the left shore [of the Mekong], leaving behind him... the proofs of the committed theft. This man had made himself noticed, for a while now, because of his inappropriate conduct and his daily habits for games. The population... demanded justice in such a threatening way that the Siamese officers, terribly frightened, had to do so.”

Given that the suspect had fled to French territory, the Siamese officials asked that Léon hand him over.

“I declared to the notables that I was going to give them satisfaction, if it were proven to me that this inhabitant was in fact guilty of these crimes... The next morning, these officers... showed me as proof of the crime committed a stock of vulgar small glassware, in which one could notice in between other trifling things the top of a jug, two worthless rings and three children’s marbles, made of glass... [T]hey asked me to listen to the indicter, a novice of the name of Pha Pane. We all made our way to the pagoda, where this person carried, indeed, a firm charge against his ex-chief. But, as this accusation could be fueled by a inferior/superior resentment, I let the notables know that this testimony alone was not enough for me to place the guilt and that even more so, following the hypothesis of a revenge taken against [the chief of the monks] by his subordinate... the exhibits that were brought to me could well have been intentionally placed by the latter in the fugitive’s cell. And finally, as the arrest of a French “protégé” was a big case, for which I was not prepared to take responsibility on the basis of these unconvincing facts, I wanted to see things more clearly before taking a decision.”

Léon sent for the suspect who crossed the river and arrived at his house in the middle of the night. Léon immediately summoned the local officials. The local chiefs of Chiang Saen came, but the Siamese “were out playing”. The monk confessed.

“He told me of the excavations he undertook several times in the destroyed temples and in the new ones too, in order to find money, and that being done under the orders of the two Siamese officers, his managers of games, and

³ CAOM GGI 20839/Léon to Governor General, Chiang Saen, 24 January 1901.

⁴ CAOM GGI 20693/Resident Superior to Governor General, Khong, 2 February 1901.

because of continuous important losses, he was made their debtor... Thefts had been committed in a number of different places but with accomplices... and under the commands of the Siamese officials. Under these circumstances, I could not ask for the arrest of the abbot, before having heard from all of these accomplices..."

"They all agreed to all the facts that were held against them and were unanimous in declaring that they were only acting following the ideas and under the orders of the representatives of Siam, who usually tempted them into coming to their places every night to play "Chinese Swivel" with dice and cards, thereby making them lose considerable sums of money, and that incited them to forget their duties. It was only in order to reimburse these people that they allowed themselves to be pushed into digging in the pagodas to steal sacred deposits."

Later the principle culprit was questioned again and provided more information on the role of the Siamese. Given the mounting evidence against them, one of the key Siamese officials was forced to respond.

"[H]e admitted that he, indeed, gave out orders to dig, but only in order to find a source of water. But, I had seen the holes made everywhere; the deepest one is not even a meter deep. In this country, everywhere water can be found at ten meters at least underground, bringing this politely to his attention, expressing my astonishment at the symmetry of the diggings made exactly on the angles of the Chats, and under the sacred tree, where it is an ancestral custom to hide the donations of believers. Taken by surprise, he laughed as an answer. Before closing the interrogation, I asked everybody if they were satisfied by my correction of this case and of the polite rightfulness of my procedures. In a unanimous way, they answered affirmatively. The notables and the population surrounded us, their spirits and ears open, waiting for the solution. I, then, took aside one of the leaders of the Siamese officials, in the presence of the interpreter and of the notable Noi Sane, telling him how childish was his defense and what influence it could have on the local people. Then, I pushed him to tell me the truth, assuring him of my indulgence. He, then, lowered his head, and let out a confession telling me that he would never dare tell the truth to his chiefs, that his situation was on the line! This man, not very smart looking, must be the least malicious of the bunch, and they must have taken advantage of his simple-mind and his weakness for wrong-doing... but, as he holds in his hands the power, he remains the main responsible. The first act demonstrating the state of mind in which the population is at the present moment is the protest that is attached to this report; and, through which, under the signatures of their most respected chiefs, [the population] demands instantly for the liberty, that was promised in the... treaty. The convincing testimonies, that accompany the folder of this case well signed by them, establish in an irrefutable way the culpability of the Siamese officers before anybody else's... The Siamese officials must sit with all the others on the bench of the accused! Today, thanks to the power that I was able to acquire over the country's nobility... everything is back in order..."

THE COMMERCIAL AGENCIES

Léon's account raises numerous intriguing questions about the nature of borderline administration in this early period of colonial rule. In particular, why was a French official taking such an active role in politics and litigation in Siamese territory? Why was there a French Agency in the Siamese town of Chiang Saen? And, more

fundamentally, what was the nature of the relationship between the local notables, the Siamese officials and this self-confident French administrator? In the following pages I seek to cast light on these various questions, suggesting that an understanding of this local political frontier can provide valuable insights into the various local understandings about the nature of the newly-established Mekong river border.

Under Article 3 of the Franco-Siamese treaty of 1893, the Siamese were forbidden from having any military presence within 25 kilometres of the Mekong River border and, under Article 4, policing activities within this reserved zone were to be provided by local – rather than central Siamese – authorities⁵. There was no specific provision for the establishment of Commercial Agencies, though the French were allowed to set up naval depots on the Siamese bank and French citizens were granted freedom to move and trade within the reserved zone. Both of the major Siamese towns on the upper Mekong – Chiang Saen and Chiang Khong – fell within this reserved zone (see map). In his proposals for monitoring the provisions of the treaty along the border, Auguste Pavie – the architect of the Franco-Siamese treaty and the first Commissioner General of Laos – proposed that agencies be established in both towns⁶. Pavie argued that a French supervisory presence was essential given a situation where “the acceptance of the smallest infraction may possibly have the consequence of serving as an excuse for audacious abuse” (Pavie, 1906: 266). An Agency in Chiang Saen was considered to be particularly urgent given the proximity of British forces in the Shan states while an Agency in Chiang Khong was also recommended as a link between the French Consulate in Siamese Nan and the upper Mekong, and also due to the presence of the regionally important sapphire mines on the opposite bank of the river. With budgetary considerations in mind, Pavie proposed that a single Commercial Agent manage both Agencies and, after some consideration, it was decided that the *résidence habituelle et principale* be established in the more substantial town of Chiang Khong⁷. The Governor General appointed Dupuy as the first Agent to Chiang Khong, to be supported by the Cambodian translator Ngin in Chiang Saen⁸. However the delay in Dupuy’s arrival, caused in part by his running out of funds *en route* from Vietnam⁹, meant that Macey – the representative of the entrepreneurial *Syndicat Français du Haut-Laos* in Luang Prabang – occupied the post in Chiang Khong on an interim basis¹⁰.

One of the main commercial objectives of the Agencies was, it seems, to secure access to the extensive stands of teak that lay on the Siamese side of the Mekong¹¹. Within only three months of his arrival, the commercially minded Macey had established a reciprocal agreement with the local chief of Chiang Khong whereby residents of either bank could cross the river to cut all types of timber on the opposite bank¹². Macey and his successors were clearly concerned that an overly rigid approach to border demarcation may prevent French access to the rich timber reserves that lay on the Siamese bank. In July 1895, Macey’s successor, Dupuy, asked the local chief to allow residents of the left bank to cross the river to cut teak, but the court of Chiang Khong refused, suggesting that teak was not included in the original agreement with

⁵ For an account of the border tensions between Siam and France that prompted the establishment of the reserved zone see Hirschfield (1968). For the provisions of the treaty see Prescott (1975) and Reinach (1911).

⁶ CAOM, GGI 20677/Pavie to Governor General, Luang Prabang, 30 June 1894. Pavie had visited both towns in May 1894 to make initial plans for the establishment of the commercial agencies (Pavie, 1906: 268-269).

⁷ CAOM, GGI 20677/Pavie to Governor General, Luang Prabang, 30 June 1894.

⁸ CAOM GGI 20677/Governor General to Commissioner of Government, August 1894. Ngin had worked with Pavie as a translator (Pavie, 1901: 200).

⁹ CAOM GGI 20948/Commercial Agents to Governor General in Hanoi, Muong Het, 5 September 1894.

¹⁰ CAOM GGI 20677/Pavie to Governor General, Luang Prabang, 30 June 1894. For detail on the establishment of the agency in Chiang Khong see Lefèvre-Pontalis (1902: 96-119).

¹¹ CAOM RSL D1/Monograph of Chiang Khong and Chiang Saen (Reserved Zone).

¹² CAOM GGI 20714/Report of July 1895, Chiang Khong, 5 August 1895.

Macey¹³. Later, it emerged that higher Siamese authorities had already granted a concession to a Chinese entrepreneur. The local chief, under threat of Siamese retribution, felt incapable of changing the arrangement. The basis of the chief's fears were confirmed just two years later when a new French Agent backed attempts by a Shan entrepreneur to gain access to the teak reserves around Chiang Saen. In this case one faction of local notables were persuaded by the Agent's argument that permission could be granted without reference to any higher Siamese authority, given that the forests lay within the 25 kilometre reserved zone. The local chief who gave this permission was ultimately imprisoned in Chiang Mai¹⁴. As I will show later, this had profound political implications.

There were, of course, broader commercial ambitions. Both Chiang Saen and Chiang Khong were key staging points in the overland and river trade between Sipsongpanna, Luang Phrabang, Kentung and the trading towns of northern Siam. Both riverside towns were seen to be useful locations for colonial intervention in the regulation and taxation of regional trade and for interception of the tribute that traditionally flowed from the upper-Mekong region to the Siamese principalities (Walker, 1999). The early Commercial Agents moved quickly to put a rudimentary regulatory structure in place – issuing passports to merchants, collecting data on boat and caravan trade and taking delivery of the tribute payments of wax from upland villagers on the opposite side of the river. In the month of December 1894, the Agent in Chiang Khong issued *laissez-passez* to 354 people and recorded the passage of 30 trading boats and over one hundred pack animals with 129 *piculs* of merchandise¹⁵. Wax collected in the form of tribute from villages in Lao territory was sold for 594 *roupies*, a not insubstantial amount that equalled the operating expenses of the Agency for about three months¹⁶. In an optimistic mood Macey noted that the “commercial movement and colportage increased from day to day” under French influence¹⁷. But, at the same time, it was also clear that among the imported merchandise traded in the region, “products originating in France are completely absent” in contrast to goods from England and Germany¹⁸. There were, however, early hopes that this imbalance could be addressed by using the Siamese Mekong tributaries as “penetration routes” that would put French merchants “in a position to advantageously fight against the British and German competition, uncontested masters today of the markets of Chiang Mai and Kentung. ... To Chiang Mai we could oppose Chiang Rai, five days away from the Mekong, on the Nam Kok, a beautiful river, easy to navigate in any season¹⁹.”

But, at a minimum, achievement of these plans required local willingness to engage the French in commercial transactions. From the very beginning this had been a challenge. Pavie's close colleague, Lefèvre-Pontalis, who arrived to establish the Agency in Chiang Khong in 1894, complained that “the inhabitants... stayed carefully away from our *sala* [rest house]” refusing to sell them any provisions and forcing them to rely on “distant villages” (Lefèvre-Pontalis, 1902: 98). Similar commercial reluctance was regularly reported in the following years²⁰. One of the key practical problems was that despite the plurality of currencies circulating in the area – the English rouble, the Siamese *salung* and the ‘*bi*’ – French currency was “only accepted with great

¹³ CAOM GGI 20714/Report of July 1895, Chiang Khong, 5 August 1895.

¹⁴ CAOM GGI 22257/Report by the Vice Consul in Nan, 1 July 1899.

¹⁵ CAOM GGI 20714/Report of December 1894, Chiang Khong, January 1895.

¹⁶ CAOM GGI 20677/Pavie to Governor General, Luang Phrabang, 30 June 1894.

¹⁷ CAOM GGI 20714/Report of December 1894, Chiang Khong, January 1895.

¹⁸ COAM RSL D1/Monograph of Chiang Khong and Chiang Saen (Reserved Zone). See also CAOM GGI 20714/Report of September 1897, Chiang Khong, 30 September 1897.

¹⁹ CAOM RSL D1/Monograph of Chiang Khong and Chiang Saen (Reserved Zone).

²⁰ For example, CAOM GGI 20714/Report of June 1896, Chiang Khong, 16 July 1896.

repugnance²¹.” In May 1896 the situation came to a head in Chiang Saen. Marol, who took up the post of Agent in February of that year, reported:

“Since...September 1895, our delegate and all the people in our pay have found themselves in an embarrassing position given the orders by the authorities of this town...to refuse all French money. This also is a barrier to the commerce, which day by day is developing a new importance in this part of the upper Mekong... Finally in May 1896... I found myself in Chiang Saen and the complaints of our nationals were heard more and more and I decided to resolve this intolerable situation. I then had drawn up in Youan [northern Thai] a proclamation making known to the inhabitants of Chiang Saen the value of the French piastre and the other coins in circulation in the territory of the town. Under my demand these orders were signed by the ‘*Chao Luong*’ [chief of the town] and stamped with his seal. Under the order of the chief one copy was put up in the market and the other near the entrance of the Commercial Agency. Those are the facts of the matter²².”

Marol’s action prompted a vigorous protest from the Siamese Minister for Foreign Affairs, who claimed that the notice had made it “obligatory for the inhabitants to accept foreign coins and threatening them with penalties should they not confirm to that order²³.” The Minister’s version of events is certainly plausible as it was Marol who, in April 1896, had required local chiefs in Chiang Saen to prostrate themselves before the French *tricolore* as reparation for insults directed to the French delegate based at the Agency²⁴. The Siamese Minister’s protest reminded the French authorities that “the regulation of money is one of the sovereign rights of the state” and went on to claim that Marol’s action in relation to French currency represented a “direct attack on the rights of a Nation-friend²⁵.”

THE POLITICAL OBJECTIVES

“But the economic issues rest on political issues and the inhabitants of the reserved zone obey the orders from above²⁶.

I need hardly say that as there is no French trade on the upper Mekong, the term Commercial Agent is a misnomer, and that the Agents at Chiang Khong and Chiangsën are...Consulate Agents, or more correctly speaking Political Agents.” (Archer, 1896).

Despite early hopes, and some optimism, it was soon recognised that there were limited opportunities for French commerce in the upper-Mekong region – the overall level of trade was relatively low and largely oriented to local subsistence consumption. Even the pugnacious and entrepreneurial Marol came to recognise that “the commercial movement on the part of the river that we occupy provides only a poor yield²⁷.” It also became clear that the trade which did exist was primarily oriented towards Siam and the Burmese Shan states, and that there were insurmountable social, political and geographic barriers to giving Indochinese merchants a greater share of this borderlands

²¹ CAOM RSL D1/Monograph of Chiang Khong and Chiang Saen (Reserved Zone).

²² CAOM GGI 20784/Marol to Commandant Supérieur, Chiang Khong, 15 March 1897.

²³ CAOM GGI 25625/Minister for Foreign Affairs to Chargé d’Affaires, Bangkok, 13 November 1896.

²⁴ CAOM GGI 20714/Report of April 1896, Chiang Khong, 15 May 1896.

²⁵ CAOM GGI 25625/Minister for Foreign Affairs to Chargé d’Affaires, Bangkok, 13 November 1896.

²⁶ CAOM RSL D1/Monograph of Chiang Khong and Chiang Saen (Reserved Zone).

²⁷ CAOM RSL D1/Monograph of Chiang Khong and Chiang Saen (Reserved Zone).

commerce (Walker, 1999). Nevertheless, in local dialogues along the border the issue of trade took on an importance that went beyond its purely commercial significance. The liberty of French commerce came to be seen as an indicator of French prestige. The incident of May 1896 concerning French currency is, I suggest, indicative of the desire of the local French administrators to establish *legitimate political authority* on the Siamese side of the Mekong River. In this sense, the politically symbolic role of French coin – and the potent symbolism of its rejection – was considerably more important than any minor enhancement to what was increasingly recognised as a relatively desultory local economy.

From the perspective of the Commercial Agents, central Siamese influence was the key barrier to the extra-territorial expansion of French authority. In Chiang Khong the local chief answered to the prince of Nan, who in turn answered to Bangkok. The posting of a central Siamese commissioner to Nan strengthened the bureaucratic connections between Bangkok and this relatively peripheral region²⁸. For the chief, and other local notables in Chiang Khong, loyalty was expressed annually in the form of annual pilgrimages to Nan during which they “drunk the waters of allegiance”²⁹. In the case of the more recently resettled Chiang Saen, the local chief answered directly to the Siamese Governor in Chiang Rai, a representative of the modern bureaucracy rather than the traditional elite. It was clear that the Governor exercised substantial local influence – determining the selection of Chiang Saen’s new chief in the mid-1890s³⁰ and regularly issuing directives to local authorities and village headmen. The French were alarmed by the regular “unauthorised” visits made by local officials to both Chiang Rai and Nan and, even more galling, the regular “incursions” by Siamese officials into the reserved zone³¹. In July 1895 the Agent complained that, despite the provisions of the treaty, the Siamese “exercise not less than a real authority on the residents. Any compliance with French wishes on the part of a local mandarin will draw an immediate punishment”³². And two years later, in October 1897, Marol lamented that “the Siamese, despite all our efforts, have not ceased to be the masters of the country we occupy”³³.

These concerns about the influence of the Siamese came to focus on the presence of Siamese postal agents in both Chiang Khong and Chiang Saen. By early 1895 a Siamese Post Office had been established in both locations³⁴ prompting French protest that this breached the provision of the treaty forbidding Siamese policing in the reserved zone³⁵. French concerns were informed by the view that these were political agents rather than postal agents. In Chiang Khong, the postal agent’s house – guarded by a force of 15 men – was viewed as the “heart of Siamese intrigue” and in Chiang Saen the establishment of the Post Office in the house of the town’s chief was seen as demonstrating its primarily political purpose³⁶. French anxiety that the postal agents were the “real masters of the country”³⁷ heightened when, in January 1896, the postal agent in Chiang Khong met with the local chiefs to advise them of the line of conduct that they must take in relation to the French and to insist that they follow his orders,

²⁸ CAOM GGI 20714/Report of April 1896, Chiang Khong, 15 May 1896. CAOM GGI 26387/Report of October 1897, Chiang Khong, 1 November 1897.

²⁹ CAOM GGI 20714/Report of July 1895, Chiang Khong, 5 August 1895.

³⁰ This issue is discussed in more detail below.

³¹ For example CAOM GGI 20714/Report of March 1895, no location, no date and CAOM GGI 25301 Commercial Agent to Lao Bureau in Hanoi, no location, no date.

³² CAOM GGI 20714 /Report of July 1895, Chiang Khong, 5 August 1895.

³³ CAOM GGI 26387/Report of October 1897, Chiang Khong, 1 November 1897.

³⁴ CAOM GGI 20714/Report of December 1894, Chiang Khong, 1 January 1895.

³⁵ CAOM GGI 25813/Undated telegram from Hanoi to French Minister in Bangkok.

³⁶ CAOM GGI 20714/Report of January 1896, Chiang Khong, 31 January 1896; Report of December 1894, Chiang Khong, 1 January 1895; Report of June 1896, Chiang Khong, 16 July 1896.

which came from Bangkok³⁸. Similar sentiments were expressed in a letter to the chief of Chiang Saen from Chiang Rai at the time of the re-appointment of a postal agent there³⁹. An unwelcome line of conduct had already been signalled when, on New Year's Day (January 1) 1896, local notables in Chiang Khong paid courtesy visits to the Siamese *postier* accompanied by celebratory "music and gunshots" but pointedly ignored the French Agency⁴⁰. Matters came to a head when two postal couriers, transporting mail by river between Chiang Saen and Chiang Khong – dressed in "military cap and khaki jacket with thick red stripes"⁴¹ – were arrested by a French river patrol. While reports of the arrest attempted to play up the political purpose of the postal service – "post in Siam is a State service, done by policemen"⁴² – cooler heads in Hanoi prevailed, ordering their immediate release and ruling that nothing in the treaty prevented the provision of a Siamese postal service or their "borrowing of the Mekong river route" for that purpose⁴³.

FINDING A LOCAL ELITE

Why were the local French administrators so keen to displace Siamese authority in towns that lay on the *Siamese* side of the border? Their actions went far beyond enforcement of the provisions of the treaty that prevented a Siamese policing or military presence in the reserved zone. It is clear that what they were attempting to do – albeit unsuccessfully – was to resist the bureaucratic extension of Siamese influence into these peripheral districts. Their primary objective, I suggest, was to establish French *political* influence over local authority structures. As Tarling (1998: 58) has noted, "no regime, colonial or otherwise, can after all exist without an elite group that, in some way or ways, ties the mass of the people to the state". This was an important task in the upper-Mekong – a peripheral province of a peripheral colony – where the administrative presence amounted to no more than a handful of administrators backed by meagre military force. But what made this task particularly challenging in the upper-Mekong region was that there were no viable authority structures in place in the territories that lay *within* the newly demarcated colonial borders. The French upper-Mekong territories were sparsely populated – largely as a result of warfare and forced migration in the first half of the 19th century – and the key sites of political influence lay *outside the colonial borders*. This mismatch between territorial control and political influence had a crucially important bearing on the early development of the upper-Mekong border. It is instructive, then, to look at what administrative options the French had within the upper-Mekong Lao territories themselves.

In the far northwest of the newly acquired Lao territories lay the prosperous town of Muang Sing, "a quite considerable point of transit and exchange" where "the market... is one of the most frequented of these [upper-Mekong] regions"⁴⁴. This was certainly the most substantial township in the French upper-Mekong territories. However, early on in the colonial period, the British contested the legitimacy of the Siamese ceding of Muang Sing to the French and backed up their claim with an occupation force of several hundred troops (Chandran, 1977; Hirshfield, 1968;

³⁷ CAOM GGI 20714/Minute to Resident Minister in Bangkok in relation to February report from Chiang Khong, Hanoi, 9 May 1896.

³⁸ CAOM GGI 20714/Report of January 1896, Chiang Khong, 31 January 1896.

³⁹ CAOM GGI 20714/Siamese Governor in Chiang Rai to authorities in Chiang Saen, 20 August 1895.

⁴⁰ CAOM GGI 20714/Report of January 1896, Chiang Khong 31 January 1896.

⁴¹ CAOM GGI 21751/Commandant Superior to Governor General, Luang Phrabang, 19 August 1896.

⁴² CAOM GGI 25813/Governor General to the Minister Resident in Bangkok, Hanoi, 8 November 1895.

⁴³ CAOM GGI 21751/Governor General to Secretary General, Hanoi, 2 September 1896.

⁴⁴ CAOM RSL D1/Note on the Shan Country, 1 December 1905.

Grabowsky, 1999) After prolonged negotiations the French claims to the territory were recognised and, for a period in the late 1890s, Muang Sing was chosen as the centre of upper-Mekong administration⁴⁵. But its remote location and political orientation made it an unfavourable base for the establishment and extension of political authority: “This country [Muang Sing]... turns, so to speak, its back to the rest of our Indo-Chinese possessions and attaches itself, from the historical, political, ethnographical and economic points of view to the small states that make up oriental Burma and southern Yunnan⁴⁶.” The cross-border “tangle of alliances and family relations”⁴⁷ among Muang Sing’s chiefly elite resulted in ongoing instability and, ultimately in 1911, a revolt against French rule.

To the southeast of Muang Sing lay the settlement of Luang Namtha, which in the latter colonial period would become an important provincial centre. Here there was a vast and well-watered rice plain that was “certainly the crown jewel of upper-Laos”⁴⁸. An “intelligent and active” chief, who had been appointed by the Siamese prior to the treaty of 1893, offered some promise and the French confirmed him in his position despite evidence that he retained his old loyalties to the “King of Nan and a delegate in Chiang Khong”. In late 1897 this chief travelled to Nan in an attempt to recruit more settlers, descendants of the Luang Namtha population who had been transported there as war captives in the first half of the century. But he returned, disappointed, with only four additional families, the war captives having prospered in their new location⁴⁹. The prospects of Luang Namtha becoming a centre of administration were, at this stage, bleak: “the small number of the residents, their indolence and also the difficulties of communication with the exterior place considerable obstacles against its development⁵⁰”.

A third upper-Mekong administrative option lay at Vieng Phoukha, several days’ journey further south along a well-established caravan trail towards the Mekong. In July 1896 the *Commandant supérieur* in Luang Phrabang proposed that this be chosen as the administrative centre for *Haut-Mékong*. He put forward two main arguments for this choice. First, given the trails that ran north to Muang Sing, south to the Mekong and east towards Luang Phrabang it was “the most central point of all the territory.” Second, the region was occupied by the “*Khas Kuenes*, hardworking people grouped under the authority of two influential chiefs”. Freed of their traditional allegiances to overlords in Chiang Khong and Nan, the *Commandant supérieur* envisaged that a “perfect understanding” could be put in place with these chiefs, and soon after sufficient men were recruited from their two domains for the organization of an indigenous militia, with detachments posted to all the key locations in the region. The ability to raise a policing force “without recourse to the outside” was no small consideration, especially given the cost of supplying and maintaining Lao or Vietnamese forces in the remote upper-Mekong region⁵¹. The upland villagers also showed a greater willingness than the lowlanders in the region to become involved in French *corvée* labour projects aimed at establishing basic administrative and communications infrastructure⁵². However, the remoteness of Vieng Phoukha – “arbitrarily chosen as a node of hypothetical routes” – ultimately made it an unattractive administrative option. There was, no doubt, a substantial population of

⁴⁵ CAOM RSL E11/Administrative and defensive reorganisation of Haut-Mékong, Hanoi, 20 May 1903.

⁴⁶ CAOM RSL D1/Note on the Shan Country, Saigon, 1 December 1905.

⁴⁷ CAOM RSL D1/Note on the Shan Country, Saigon, 1 December 1905.

⁴⁸ CAOM RSL D1/Report on Vieng Phoukha, 30 April 1898.

⁴⁹ CAOM RSL D1/Report on Vieng Phoukha, 30 April 1898.

⁵⁰ CAOM RSL D1/Territory of Muong Luong Pou Kha, 8 February 1896

⁵¹ CAOM GGI 20671/Commandant Superior to Governor General, Luang Phrabang, 22 July 1896. For details on the indigenous militia see CAOM RSL D1/Report on Vieng Phoukha, 30 April 1898.

uplanders, but early efforts to civilise and develop the district failed lamentably. A market was established, but it was a desultory affair selling only rice and some local legumes. Chickens were rare and eggs unobtainable because “an egg represents, in the theories of the *Khas*, a future chicken”⁵³. In 1900, Vieng Phoukha was abandoned as an administrative centre and left to a sole telegraph operator⁵⁴.

Further south again, on the banks of the Mekong opposite Chiang Khong, lay a small collection of villages that would eventually develop into the provincial centre of Ban Huay Sai. This cluster of villages had been recently settled by a disparate collection of Shan sapphire miners “emigrated from Xieng Tong [Kentung] because of the English occupation” (Pavie, 1906: 349). French administrators were ambivalent about these Shan settlers, who were moving into the upper-Mekong region in considerable numbers. They had a reputation as “trouble makers and plunderers who make a living only from robbery”⁵⁵ and they were also suspected of having divided loyalties given their Burmese origins. Nevertheless, the French were keen to identify suitable chiefly intermediaries among the Shan settled on French soil, and they made early attempts to elevate the position of Shan village headmen by issuing them with “licences”⁵⁶. However this initiative appeared to have failed when it was found that the headmen had sent the licenses to the prince of Kentung in what was now British-controlled Burma⁵⁷. One Shan chief, who claimed to have lost his licence, was arrested both for this disloyalty and for the derisory amount of wax that he delivered, as a taxation payment, to the Agency in Chiang Khong⁵⁸.

There was, however, one Shan chief who particularly impressed the French, not the least due to his claim that he had links to the Burmese royal family⁵⁹. This chief, *Chao Koum*, enthusiastically welcomed the French presence and, on the occasion of the official opening of the Commercial Agency in Chiang Khong, he was photographed on the steps of the Agency with his wives (Lefèvre-Pontalis, 1902: 103). He played a key role in managing labour and material contributions for the construction of Fort Carnot⁶⁰ and his potential as a French intermediary was highlighted when he provided important information on British troop build-up in the Shan states and at various points along the Mekong border⁶¹. In an early letter to *Chao Koum*, the second Commercial Agent (Dupuy) encouraged him to attract new settlers to French territory and to put in place a system of stable village administration:

“It is my pleasure to inform you that [the Resident Superior] has agreed, during his trip in the region, to fix his attention on the Nghieous [Shan], who live or lived on the part of the French territory I have the direction of. [He] has decided that the Nghieous, who, contrary to our intentions, have crossed to the right shore, can return to their villages, so long as they name a chief that is recognized by us, living on our territory, and to submit themselves to the rules in force... These new comers will have to submit themselves, just as the villages already established, to the authority of a chief of their race, recognized by us, residing on our territory and whose rules in force are within the limits of the Commissariat. I find it of the greatest importance that you communicate to

⁵² CAOM RSL E11/ Administrative and defensive reorganisation of Haut-Mékong, Hanoi, 20 May 1903.

⁵³ CAOM RSL D1/Report on Vieng Phoukha, 30 April 1898..

⁵⁴ CAOM GGI 20696/Resident Superior to Governor General, Vieng Phoukha, 13 April 1900. RSL E11/Administrative and defensive reorganisation of Haut Mekong, Hanoi, 20 May 1903.

⁵⁵ CAOM GGI 20714/Report of August 1895, Chiang Khong, 5 September 1895.

⁵⁶ CAOM GGI 20714/Report of April 1895, Chiang Khong, no date.

⁵⁷ CAOM GGI 20714/Report of May 1895, Chiang Khong, 1 June 1895.

⁵⁸ CAOM GGI 20753/Resident Superior to Governor General, Luang Phrabang, 21 (month unclear) 1895.

⁵⁹ CAOM GGI 20753/Resident Superior to Governor General, 21 September, 1895.

⁶⁰ CAOM GGI 20714/Report of December 1894, (location unclear), January 1895.

⁶¹ CAOM GGI 20714/Report of February 1896, Chiang Khong, 5 March, 1896.

the concerned people, in the shortest amount of time possible, this decision of [the Resident Superior] and that you let me know, without delay, the way in which this good-intentioned measure was welcomed and the results of its implementation”⁶².

But French hopes for stable administration were dashed by the death of *Chao Koum* in about 1900. There was no obvious replacement. *Chao Koum*’s brother had a “deplorable past” and had fallen under the influence of Antoine, an independent French settler – of very dubious morals – involved in timber extraction. His sister was married to a young man of “very low standing, despised even by his friends”. And the new local chief of Huay Sai “caused so much complaint that he already would have been replaced if there was a worthy substitute”⁶³. A visitor to Huay Sai in the early 1900s commented on the deplorable state of local administration:

“During my last trip to Xieng Khong, I noticed that the village of Ban Houei Say (the French Xieng Khong) was left to anarchy. Every night, despite my interdictions, the inhabitants gambled, and bloody fights followed. At night, the Shan, and even some French, chased women, who would run away terrified into the countryside. Because of such a situation, the peaceful inhabitants left the area”⁶⁴.

PLAYING POLITICS IN CHIANG KHONG AND CHIANG SAEN

The early actions of the French administration along the upper-Mekong border were strongly influenced by the tension between the territorial and political elements of colonial rule. Following the resolution of the dispute with the British over Muang Sing, the French were the uncontested territorial masters of northwestern Laos, despite their puny military and administrative presence. There was no serious challenge from any of the neighbouring states to the territorial integrity of this newly demarcated province of French Indochina. But the local French administrators faced a key political problem, given the lack of appropriate authority structures within this territory onto which colonial rule could be grafted. Accordingly, it should come as no surprise that these administrators placed so much emphasis on cultivating political influence in the townships that lay on the Siamese side of the border. These were the largest towns in the upper-Mekong region⁶⁵ and from the earliest days it was clear that much of the French territory on the upper-Mekong lay within their sphere of influence.

In Chiang Khong, however, there appears to have been substantial resistance to the extension of French authority. Relations between the various Commercial Agents and the local authorities seem to have been characterised by ongoing tension and what Scott (1985) calls “everyday forms of resistance”. From the very outset the French were frustrated by the delays in the construction of the Agency and the evasions of the town’s chief when he was pushed to provide more labourers (Lefèvre-Pontalis, 1902). In September 1895 the Agent complained about regular “insults and menaces” directed against him and the refusal of the local authorities to allow French *protégés* to travel in the reserved zone, despite the fact that they had been issued with French passports⁶⁶. In

⁶² CAOM GGI 20762/Dupuy to Chao Koum, Chiang Khong, 10 January 1896.

⁶³ CAOM RSL E11/ Administrative and defensive reorganisation of Haut Mekong, Hanoi, 20 May 1903.

⁶⁴ CAOM RSL F1/Muang Sing to Resident Superior, Muang Sing, 15 May, 1903.

⁶⁵ The town of Chiang Khong had a population of about 500 and headed a district of 38 villages and some 5,000 people. Chiang Saen’s population was slightly larger, at 600, with a dependent district of 31 villages and about 6,000 people. A detailed study of these territories is provided in CAOM RSL D1/Monograph of Chiang Khong and Chiang Saen (Reserved Zone), Chiang Khong, 26 November 1897.

November 1885, the brother of the town's chief assaulted one of the Lao employees of the Agency "under the very windows of the chief". The assault was followed up with a threat that any French subject that came onto the territory of Chiang Khong would receive similar treatment⁶⁷. Further, and serious, evidence of the "animosity" of the local elite towards the French came in May 1896 when a "regrettable incident" took place on the occasion of the ordination of monks at the town's temple. A Lao member of the local French militia – who attended the ceremony to mark the ordination of his father – had reason to complain when the brother of the chief "touched his wife [in a manner] which morals forbid". On hearing of the complaint "this high functionary threw himself at once into a violent rage at the militia man and gave the order to put him in chains". The unfortunate incident took a more serious turn when the chief himself, "profiting from having nearly the whole population of Xieng Khong there, [took the opportunity] to affirm his less than amicable sentiments on our regard, threw the most gross insults against the French in general and our army in particular"⁶⁸. A protest letter addressed to the chief – one of many issued by the Agency – was duly despatched.

In Chiang Saen there were similar difficulties and ongoing annoyances but there were also some promising political developments. Most encouraging to the early administrators was the desire of a substantial section of the local population to become French protégés and, in some cases, to actually migrate to sparsely settled territory on the French side of the Mekong. In August 1896 several families indicated that they would move to the French side of the Mekong after the harvest of their current rice crop⁶⁹. The following month, a chief from a village close to the Siamese base of Mae Khi (see map) – which lay just outside the reserved zone – came to the Agency to seek permission to move to French territory, a result of his ongoing disagreements with the chief of Chiang Saen. Once permission was granted, he returned with three families and settled on the left bank seven kilometres above Chiang Saen⁷⁰. Given his popularity, it was hoped that his followers would join him once the rice harvest was complete. During November 1896 the numbers seeking French protection continued to increase⁷¹. Hoping to encourage the flow of population, the French administration in Luang Phrabang was persuaded to "promise a three-year tax exemption to those who pass to our territory"⁷². In January 1897, the Commercial Agent Marol confidently predicted the migration of the entire population of Chiang Saen to the French side of the Mekong⁷³.

Understandably, the Siamese authorities responded to the growing influence of the French over the population of Chiang Saen. One of their main strategies was to encourage the population of the town to move outside the reserved zone and thus beyond the reach of French influence. As early as January 1896 the Siamese governor in Chiang Rai had ordered the interim chief of Chiang Saen, *Chao* Chaiavong, to move to Chiang Mai but this order "did not seem to be to the taste of the chief who refused to exile himself"⁷⁴. In early 1897 *Chao* Chaiavong was told that he would be confirmed as the new chief of the district only if he moved out of the reserved zone⁷⁵. By April 1897 he had indeed done so, largely under the influence, according to Marol's account, of his deputy, *Chao* Kam Tan, a persistent enemy of the French⁷⁶. By July of the following year the move had paid off and *Chao* Chaiavong was advised that he would

⁶⁶ CAOM GGI 20714/Report of first half of September 1895, Chiang Khong, 17 September 1895.

⁶⁷ CAOM GGI 20714/Report of November 1895, Chiang Khong, 30 November 1895.

⁶⁸ CAOM GGI 20714/Report of May 1896, Chiang Khong, 16 June 1896.

⁶⁹ CAOM GGI 20714/Report of August 1896, Chiang Khong, 1 September 1896.

⁷⁰ CAOM GGI 20714/Report of September 1896, Chiang Khong, 1 October 1896.

⁷¹ CAOM GGI 20714/Report of November 1896, Chiang Khong, 1 December 1896.

⁷² CAOM GGI 20714/Vaicle to Governor General, Luang Phrabang, 24 October 1896.

⁷³ CAOM GGI 20714/Report of January 1897, Chiang Khong, 1 February 1897.

⁷⁴ CAOM GGI 20714/Report of January 1896, Chiang Khong, 31 January 1896.

be confirmed in his new position and, in fact, would travel to Bangkok to receive his appointment from the King. Suitably prestigious positions in the local administration were created for other members of the Chiang Saen elite who moved to Mae Khi⁷⁷.

The struggle between the Siamese and the French for influence in Chiang Saen needs to be understood in terms of the contested local politics of this district⁷⁸. Following the defeat of Burmese forces located there in the early 1800s, Chiang Saen had been abandoned. Substantial resettlement commenced only in the 1870s as a response to growing Shan influence in the upper-Mekong region. Seeds of difficulty lay in the fact that the newly-installed chiefs were drawn from different northern Thai towns: “because of the difference of origin of the first Mandarins, continuous disputes occurred between the Princes of Lampoun and of Xiang Mai”. By 1894 –the year of French arrival– the key power holders in Chiang Saen were *Chao* Bouli (one of the original princes) and *Chao* Chaiavong, the eldest son of the recently deceased chief. While the Siamese favoured *Chao* Chaiavong –in part due to his Siamese literacy– in practice these two “shared between them the power and the advantages of the duties of the *Chau Muong*”. However, they fell out in 1897 when *Chao* Bouli granted, at French urging, a timber concession to a Shan entrepreneur without reference to higher Siamese authorities (see page 6). As a result of the rift, when *Chao* Chaiavong moved to Mae Khi, *Chao* Bouli remained in Chiang Saen along with his chiefly allies and their various followers. Eventually, in November 1897, *Chao* Bouli was persuaded to travel to Chiang Mai where he was promptly imprisoned, generating considerable French protest. Despite this setback a number of *Chao* Bouli’s allies remained in Chiang Saen. Fearing Siamese retribution they sought reassurance from the new French Agent, Hubert, who replaced Marol in mid-1898:

“ ‘If we are called to Meky or Xieng Hai to drink the water of oath, must we go or should we have this ceremony here?’ The answer of M. Hubert on that matter seems not to have been that categorical. ‘It is not necessary’, he is said to have replied. They gathered from this that they could do without. These declarations had the effect of putting the authorities of Xieng Senh in opposition with the temporary legal Chief of the Province and with the Siamese Government. They were, and still are, persuaded that with the 1893 treaty, the reserved zone has been neutralized, detached from the province that it is part of and from the Kingdom of Siam.”

The basis for Hubert’s advice to them was that, because he had left the reserved zone, *Chao* Chaiavong had abandoned any rights in relation to the administration of Chiang Saen. He advised the chiefs remaining in Chiang Saen to form their own local administration and to “alert *Chao* Chaiavong that he has not to take care of the territories of the zone anymore, and that he must abstain himself from making any requisition or act of authority there”. The dissident chiefs were well aware of the implications of this action:

“Today, we have rebelled ourselves against the Chief of Chiang Rai and the King of Siam by not drinking the water of oath. We are relying on you to keep supporting us; without that, we are lost.”

⁷⁵ CAOM GGI 20714/Report of September 1897, Chiang Khong, 20 September 1897.

⁷⁶ CAOM GGI 20714/Report of April 1897, Chiang Khong, 12 May 1897.

⁷⁷ CAOM GGI 20714/Report of July 1898, Chiang Khong, 4 August 1898.

⁷⁸ The following account, including the details of Hubert’s involvement, is based on CAOM GGI 22257/Copy of the report of the investigation on the events in Chiang Saen, Nan, 1 July 1899.

These attempts to establish a non-Siamese authority structure naturally prompted a Siamese response. The Siamese governor in Chiang Rai –together with *Chao Chaiavong*– mobilised a military expedition of locally requisitioned men that moved into the reserved zone in February 1899⁷⁹. The rebel princes –who by now were said to have a price of 100 *roupies* on their head– and most of their followers fled to the French bank of the Mekong. But the Siamese military action was half-hearted. Confronted by the French officials and a small contingent of Lao police officers, the military expedition faltered and finally withdrew. Nevertheless, it was not a happy ending for the dissident chiefs. Although French diplomats in Bangkok were able to negotiate a face-saving amnesty decree, the rebel chiefs lost any semblance of the authority they had formerly held:

“These people were not molested, but brought to bankruptcy and considered outlaws. Indeed, living at Xieng Sen, where they had their homes and land, they were forced to move to Meky (new administrative centre of the Xieng Sen province); their clients had to follow them also, and abandon, like them, their huts and their rice plantations. Those clients, who could have helped them build in their imposed residence some new installations, plant new gardens and weed out new rice plantations, were, in principle, allowed to do so, but they were actually forced to change masters and to take a protector among the Princes of Meky. So that the three Princes were more or less abandoned by all of their clients⁸⁰.”

ALTERNATIVE PERCEPTIONS OF THE UPPER-MEKONG BORDER

The disgrace of the rebel chiefs of Chiang Saen brings us up in time to the incident described at the beginning of this paper. It can be seen that the French Agent’s determination to humiliate the Siamese officials represents part of the ongoing colonial effort to displace the Siamese in local authority systems. The irony is that the battle is played out in a borderland landscape that appears increasingly devoid of effective authority structures –in which the abbot of the local temple is a keen player of “Chinese swivel” and in which local notables are readily induced by their creditors to defile sacred ground in the pursuit of trivial treasure. In this section I want to shift the focus away from this political intrigue and manoeuvre and concentrate more explicitly on the alternative perceptions of the border itself that were at play in this period of upper-Mekong contestation. While wary of creating unitary categories, I suggest that it is useful to examine the territorial border from three different perspectives: those of the local French officials, the Siamese officials and the local chiefly elite.

French officials and the ambiguous zone

“The political sphere could be mapped only by power relations, not by territorial integrity”. (Thongchai, 1994: 79).

In local French discourse the meaning and symbolism of the territorial border was, during this period of colonial rule, relatively “thin”. It was, to quote the French vice-consul in Nan, an “illusory frontier,” merely a “big river”⁸¹ and, in local discourse and practise, it did not represent a clear and unambiguous demarcation between French and non-French sovereignty. The Commercial Agencies are a potent symbol of this borderline ambiguity –as the key sites of upper-Mekong colonial administration

⁷⁹ CAOM 22257/Garanger to Governor General, Chiang Khong, 10 April 1899 and, for a somewhat different version of events, CAOM GGI 22257/Copy of the report of the investigation on the events in Chiang Saen, Nan, 1 July 1899.

⁸⁰ GGI 22257/Copy of the report made by the Vice-Consulate in Nan, Nan, 20 April 1900.

⁸¹ GGI 22257/ Copy of the report of the investigation on the events in Chiang Saen, Nan, 1 July 1899.

throughout most of the 1890s, they lay, in fact, on the Siamese side of the territorial boundary. These Agencies put in place some of the typical boundary-marking practices of modern states –passports were issued and records were kept of trans-border trade– but the intention here was less to enforce border control than it was to facilitate, and document, the unhindered access of French *protégés* to Siamese territory. Many of the other standard practises of modern boundary making were notably absent. Given that the river itself formed the border, little attention was paid to borderline mapping, delineation or demarcation, a situation quite different to that applying in many of the mountain frontiers of Southeast Asia (Thongchai, 1994: 64-65). Absent also was any serious attempt to put in place a customs regime on the upper-Mekong border or to collect taxes on trans-border travel and trade. Military supervision of the border was also minimal. Very early on, Macey organised the somewhat “theatrical” construction of Fort Carnot on the Lao side of the river opposite Chiang Khong, but less than ten years later it had “returned to the bush”, a testament to the low priority accorded to military defence of the border⁸². Indeed the blurring of the border overlooked by Fort Carnot is reflected in the fact that, for the first decade of colonial rule, the township name “Chiang Khong” was used to refer to settlements on both sides of the Mekong⁸³ and letters and reports despatched from the Commercial Agency in “Siamese” Chiang Khong were consistently stamped as originating from “Laos.”

Of course this is not to argue that the border lacked any symbolic significance for these early colonial officials. At times, especially in the first years of the local administration when Anglo-French tensions on the upper-Mekong came to a head, significant concerns were expressed about the need to defend the border against external threat. In February 1895, the Commercial Agent (Dupuy) wrote directly to the Governor General in Hanoi complaining that the “immense frontier” which separated northern Laos from the troubled neighbouring regions was “not protected on any side”⁸⁴. He complained that the sole military forces in northern Laos were “212 militiamen of the King of Luang Phrabang, hardly trained and lacking uniforms”. Particularly disturbing for Dupuy in his isolated and poorly equipped outpost, was the fact that “only the Mekong” separated French territory from the well-resourced British forces in the Shan States, a situation of military vulnerability that “gave the populations of the left bank a very poor idea of the grandeur of our country”. When British forces crossed the Mekong to seize Muang Sing in May 1895, Dupuy wrote that “if he had troops at his disposal he would not hesitate to go immediately to occupy Muang Sing” to assert French rights of territorial possession⁸⁵. But of course he lacked such military backing, and confronted with a personal request for assistance from one of the chiefs of Muang Sing – who was accompanied by the French’s favourite Shan chief, *Chao Koum*– Dupuy could only signal his intention to remain at his post in Chiang Khong. It must have been a poignant moment, the hollow symbolism of the Mekong borderline all too evident to the Agent and his *protégés*.

A shortage of manpower was thus one of the reasons for the lack of borderline regulation. Even once a more substantial administrative and military infrastructure was established, the colonial presence in northwestern Laos was exceptionally light. The Resident Superior’s 1896 proposal for upper-Mekong administration made provision

⁸² Detailed plans for the construction of Fort Carnot are attached to GGI 20714/Report of December 1894. For the later description of the Fort’s demise see CAOM RSL E11/Administrative and defensive reorganisation of Haut-Mékong, Hanoi, 20 May 1903. For the low military priority placed on Chiang Khong see also GGI 20696/Resident Superior to Governor General, Vieng Phoukha, 13 April 1900.

⁸³ CAOM RSL E11/Administrative and defensive reorganisation of Haut-Mékong, Hanoi, 20 May 1903.

⁸⁴ CAOM GGI 20662/Dupuy to Governor General, Chiang Khong, 24 February 1895.

⁸⁵ GGI 20714/Report of May 1895, Chiang Khong, 1 June, 1895.

for a Commissioner in Vieng Phoukha, a Delegate in Muang Sing and an Agent in Chiang Khong/Chiang Saen⁸⁶. The military forces supporting the post in Vieng Phoukha are not specified, but provision was made for only 12 men in Muang Sing and 30 in Chiang Khong. By 1898, the indigenous militia for the entire region amounted to about 85 men⁸⁷. Quite simply then, there was insufficient manpower to mount any concerted surveillance, let alone defence, of the Mekong River border. However, the notable lack of emphasis on the border itself during this early colonial period did not just arise out of a lack of manpower. There were, as the various activities of the Commercial Agencies demonstrate, more fundamental economic and political issues that encouraged among local colonial officials a territorial worldview in which the colonial borderline had limited salience.

First, it was clear to local officials that the northern Lao colonial territories were relatively resource-poor and substantially dependent on external economic linkages. From the earliest stages it was realised that a clear demarcation between Siamese and French territories would restrict access to the substantial resources – especially teak – and rich commercial opportunities that lay on the Siamese side of the Mekong. This economic worldview amounted to what we would now call a free trade zone in which French commercial *protégés* could freely circulate-unencumbered by local taxation-and in which access to natural resources could be secured through reciprocal agreements and free circulation of French currency. This free trade vision came into conflict with the Siamese practice of granting local trading monopolies to Chinese and Shan merchants and indigenous notables. When, in September 1896, a Shan merchant from Chiang Mai was granted exclusive rights to the purchase of stielac collected in the territory of Chiang Saen, Marol complained that this represented “a serious impediment to the freedom of trade on the upper river”. He also alleged that the trading monopoly represented “a violation of Article V of the treaty of... 1893”, although that provision only prevented the levying of customs duties in the reserved zone⁸⁸.

Second, it was also clear to local colonial officials that key sites of political authority lay outside the newly-demarcated colonial territories in northwestern Laos. Given the lack of stable and well-developed authority structures in French territory on the upper-Mekong, the local administrators had little choice but to direct their attention towards the locally substantial polities of Chiang Khong and Chiang Sean. Their goal was to establish French prestige in these towns and to insert themselves into their social hierarchies as legitimate leaders. Only through achieving popular leadership and winning the confidence of local chiefs could these early French administrators hope to expand the population of French *protégés*, a population that could form the basis for agricultural development, commercial activity, *corvée* labour, taxation, and military recruitment. This local political objective drew attention away from the broader colonial objectives of establishing and defending the integrity of unambiguously demarcated colonial territory. Thongchai (1994: 70) has highlighted the extent to which colonial ideologies promoted a correspondence between territory and political allegiance-whereby the territorial border also represented the boundary of authority. However, for these local officials such an elimination of ambiguity would have greatly reduced their potential political influence in this upper-Mekong region.

My argument then, is that for reasons of manpower, economics and politics, French colonial officials on the upper-Mekong placed limited emphasis on imbuing the territorial border with symbolic and practical meaning. The model of territorial organization employed by these local officials was of an ambiguous zone in which

⁸⁶ CAOM GGI 20671/Commandant Superior to Governor General, Luang Phrabang, 22 July 1896.

⁸⁷ CAOM RSL D1/Report on Vieng Phoukha, 30 April 1898.

⁸⁸ CAOM GGI 20714/Report of September 1896, Chiang Khong, 1 October 1896.

French influence spilled across the territorial border. The cultural rationale they employed for this territorial model was the supposed ethnic commonality that united the virtuous, hardworking and honest – if somewhat simple – indigenous population on both sides of the Mekong: “there is a general understanding among the people of both shores who are almost all related to one another”⁸⁹. This was a population, whose “inner sentiments turn them naturally towards France” and who “will be completely devoted to us” if appropriate protection could be offered⁹⁰. This local perspective can be seen as one element of the broader French colonial project that used the language of racial commonality to assert the legitimate extension of French authority over populations that lay within the territory of Siam (Streckfuss, 1993). And it was a perspective in which the key boundary was not the territorial boundary but the social boundary between this local population and the Siamese. As the Commercial Agent Léon wrote in the conclusion of his report on the theft from the temples in Chiang Saen:

“[There is a] danger... in leaving in unworthy hands the future of a part of the Indo-chinese population. A new regime more adapted to the spirit of the treaties being applied, the Indo-chinese people would, indeed, find in our French good faith and in the leniency typical of our nation, surer factors to slowly elevate themselves to the level of civilized races. That being, we recognize our goal in taking over the Mekong. Knowing today the state of mind of these simple, gentle, laborious people, who we are, as of today, called to direct the future of, it can never be enough repeated to our Government and to the Superior Authority to beware of the weaknesses found with the trouble-making Siamese. The Youen [northern Thai] farmer is naturally good and honest, he is always ready to submit himself to an equitable condemnation made by one of the ruling authorities”⁹¹.

This argument about trans-Mekong cultural commonality was, in the eyes of local administrators, given legal backing by provisions of the 1893 treaty in relation to the “reserved zone”. The language of legality was clearly important to the local administrators, and in defending their actions in Chiang Khong and Chiang Saen they made repeated and vigorous reference to the importance of monitoring and enforcing the provisions of the treaty. But it was clear that their actions went well beyond the limited provisions of the treaty, much to the annoyance of the Siamese and also to the considerable frustration of their seniors in the colonial administration. The distance between local and official views in the French administration was made clear in a stern letter, despatched in May 1899, that spelt out in no uncertain terms that the Commercial Agents had no political role and that their primary roles were to collect commercial information, facilitate navigation and act as intermediaries between Lao merchants and the local authorities on the Siamese side of the river⁹². The letter emphasised that they should only monitor breaches of the treaty and that these breaches should be reported to higher French authorities but not discussed with the local chiefs or the Siamese authorities: “you must not involve yourself in any aspect of administration on the right bank”. But in Chiang Saen the letter seems to have had no effect. As we have seen, in 1900 the new Agent Leon was still seeking to take on a central role in local administrative and judicial matters. This was too much for the French representative in Bangkok who wrote to the Governor General calling for Léon’s dismissal. Clearly Leon was not a man who understood the desired rules of frontier zone diplomacy⁹³.

⁸⁹ CAOM GGI 20839/Léon to Governor General, Chiang Saen, 24 January 1901.

⁹⁰ CAOM GGI 20714/Report of September 1897, Chiang Khong, 30 September 1897.

⁹¹ CAOM GGI 20839/Léon to Governor General, Chiang Saen, 24 January 1901.

⁹² GGI 20693/Resident Superior to Commercial Agents, Vientiane, 4 May 1899.

The exclusive sovereignty of the Siamese

Local French attempts to play down the significance of the territorial border and to emphasise trans-border economic, cultural and political connections were challenged by the Siamese emphasis on their exclusive sovereignty within Siamese territory. The French were concerned that a Siamese emphasis on the integrity of the territorial border could restrict the consolidation of trans-Mekong political influence. As one French official wrote after the demise of the rebel chiefs in Chiang Saen:

“The few supporters of the dissident Princes will accuse us of having pushed them forward, to then abandon them at the last moment; the majority of the population will interpret this abandonment of our claims to be a backing off, and the Siamese will take advantage of this state of mind to continue their strategy, that I have noted several times, whose goal is to put into opposition the populations of the same origin of both of the shores of the Mekong, and to make of that illusory frontier, that is the big river, a barrier that our influence will be unable to cross over⁹⁴.”

What is striking from reading the French archival material is how quickly the Siamese appear to have adopted a worldview in which the newly demarcated territorial border represented an unambiguous demarcation between Siamese and French authority. Despite ongoing French protest, the Siamese persisted with a program of establishing bureaucratic control in the border districts of Chiang Saen and Chiang Khong using postal agents as representatives of the developing national administration. While there is, no doubt, an element of paranoia in French accounts of the postal agents, it seems clear that they were one small element of the Siamese project of extending administrative control to the very limit of their newly demarcated sovereign territory. In the modern Siamese system of territorial organization (Chaiyan, 1994; Ramsay, 1976; Tej, 1977), the administrative anomaly of a reserved zone was simply unacceptable and, the provisions of the treaty notwithstanding, the postal agents played a key role in mounting a practical defence of the border. The local authorities were repeatedly reminded that the French had no administrative powers on the Siamese side of the Mekong⁹⁵ and they were urged, for example, to forbid the presence of French troops on Siamese territory⁹⁶. When the French Agent in Chiang Saen used riverside land for the construction of a naval base, the local chiefs were ordered, in a letter from Bangkok bearing the royal seal, to make no further territorial concessions⁹⁷. The presence of the agencies themselves was seen as already disrupting the territorial integrity of the borderline. By July 1898 the Siamese officials in Chiang Rai were sufficiently emboldened to establish customs stations in the reserved zone⁹⁸ and in 1898 the Siamese mobilised military forces to advance as far as the Mekong itself in response to the “rebellion” of the dissident chiefs in Chiang Saen. The French Agent was alarmed by the rumour that one of the bands of troops was heading to Chiang Saen to cut off his head⁹⁹. A more peaceful, but probably more significant, Siamese presence was established in the early 1900s with reports in February 1902 that the Siamese were imposing taxes of four *roupies* per head in the reserved zone, an act interpreted by the colonial officials as a direct challenge to French trans-Mekong influence¹⁰⁰.

⁹³ CAOM 25826/French Legation in Bangkok to Governor General, Bangkok, 25 September 1901.

⁹⁴ CAOM GGI 22257/Copy of the Report by the Vice Consul in Nan, Nan, 1 July 1899.

⁹⁵ For example, CAOM GGI 22257/Translation of letter from Administration in Mae Khi to authorities in Chiang Saen, 12 November 1898.

⁹⁶ CAOM GGI 20714/Report of May 1895, Chiang Khong, 1 June 1895.

⁹⁷ CAOM GGI 20714/Report of October 1896, Chiang Khong, 11 November 1896.

⁹⁸ CAOM GGI 22257/Report of July 1898, Chiang Khong, 1 August 1898.

This practical resistance to French borderline ambiguity was also combined with ideological manoeuvre. As Streckfuss (1993) has argued, the Siamese responded to French assertions of trans-border racial and cultural commonalities by asserting the common identity of all people that lay within the modern borders of Siam. A letter written by the Siamese commissioner in Chiang Rai to the dissident chiefs in Chiang Saen contains early elements of this ideological project¹⁰¹. He starts by asserting that the “territory called Siam is the land where we have been living peacefully since our ancestors’ time”. He acknowledges that the left-bank territory has been given to the French but argues that this was a decision of “our King” motivated not by fear of the French but from the King’s desire to “protect his servants and people from troubles and hardship”. He also acknowledges that the distance of Chiang Saen from Bangkok makes them vulnerable to rumour, misinformation and inducements, but he urges them to remain steadfast:

“Please, you and your hearts should not be shaken by wrong news and information. You all should not be misled by sycophancy because you are all smart, not stupid at all. You should think it over and investigate the facts instead of accepting rumours or gossip. You are all gentlemen. You should act like men. You should not let your hearts be weakened like women. Keep secure and be strong... Even when someone tells us to leave our parents, even when someone lures us with precious or priceless or desirable offers, if we are steadfast and honest, we would have time to answer that, regardless of the valuable offers or even when they threaten to take blood from our necks, we will stand firm. We would not leave our parents for wealth. The same goes with our government. We were born in Siam. Our governor is our King. We are to respect and serve his compassion till the day we die. Even when someone offers us treasure or higher ranks of social position, we cannot abandon our gratitude for our Kings mercy. We must strongly serve the King, as we are the dust of the King’s feet, until the day we die... In response to this warning, I hope that you will not feel despised or take any offence. Please take it as a warning from a friend who is also a servant of the King.”

This letter can be seen as part of what Streckfuss (1993) calls the project of “extending Thai racial boundaries to the existent territorial limits”. The territory is defended with the imagery of an inclusive Siamese family, compassionately led by the King. The shared identity of this family – which embraces both the Siamese officials and the local chiefs – is repeatedly asserted both by the use of inclusive pronouns¹⁰² and in the assertion of common service to the King – “we are the dust of the King’s feet”. The border itself is not specifically mentioned, though in the opening paragraphs of the letter the division between Siamese territory and French territory is clearly marked¹⁰³ and justified in terms of the wise political strategy of the King. This territorial division becomes ideologically charged when the trans-Mekong influence of the French is portrayed as an insidious attack both on masculinity – “you should not let your hearts be weakened like women” – and on filial loyalty. The language of steadfastness,

⁹⁹ CAOM GGI 22257/Garanger to Governor General, 10 April, 1899.

¹⁰⁰ CAOM GGI 20714/Report of February 1902, Chiang Saen, 4 March 1902 and Resident Superior to Governor General, Vientiane, 28 March 1902.

¹⁰¹ CAOM GGI 22257/Siamese proclamation to the residents of Chiang Saen. The file contains a French translation as well as the original Siamese text. References here refer to my translation of the Siamese text.

¹⁰² Such as, in Thai, *raw tang thang laay*.

¹⁰³ There is a clear distinction between “*din deen faay siam ni*” (the Siamese territory of this side) and *din deen faay saay hay pen khong farangset* (the left side territory given to the French).

security, sincerity and honesty represents a direct challenge to the administrative ambiguity promoted by the French. And it was perceived as such by the newly appointed Agent, Garanger¹⁰⁴.

But the Siamese were also pragmatic. Realising the strength of French influence and the real danger of substantial sections of the population crossing into French territory, they moved to depopulate the riverside settlement of Chiang Saen. This appears to have been partially achieved as a result of the relocation of the town's leadership – first the loyal *Chao* Chaiavong and his entourage and later, after negotiating an amnesty with the French, the disgraced rebel chiefs. But, “Siamese retaliation [did] not limit itself there” and this political withdrawal from the Mekong was backed by even more potent symbolic measures:

“[In late March 1900 the Siamese] sent to Xieng Sen a Mandarin Siamese from Xieng Hai who, accompanied by a Prince of Meky, came and removed from the two most ancient pagodas of Xieng Sen two statues of the Buddha particularly venerated by the population. One must be aware of the importance populations who are simplistic from the inside attach to these old relics... These removals, considered by the natives as sacrilege, expose them to the worst possible misfortunes, leaving them without protection, to the will of wrong-doing spirits. The consequence of this measure will be, in the near future, the more or less absolute desertion of the old center of Xieng Sen that is already today more or less empty¹⁰⁵.”

In pursuing this strategy of borderline depopulation the Siamese appear to have been drawing upon a longstanding view that boundaries between polities ideally involved the separation of people through the creation or maintenance of deserted “corridors”. As Thongchai (1994: 66) reports in relation to a territorial ruling in southern Siam: “There should be a just decision so that the inhabitants of the two countries may live at some distance from one another”. The *territorial ambiguity* of a relatively depopulated Chiang Saen corridor can, in this sense, be seen as a challenge to the project of *political ambiguity* promoted by the French. If exclusive sovereignty could not be achieved then a strategic territorial withdrawal was preferable to the administrative destabilisation of divided political loyalties.

Local authorities and spatial pragmatism

What understanding did the local authorities – the various township and village chiefs – have of the border during this contested period? The French archival material provides no easy answers given that the thoughts and views of these local authorities appear in fragmented and much translated form. Here I will merely attempt some very preliminary comments.

First it is clear that some local chiefs accepted the view that French authority extended across the Mekong. As early as January 1896 the local authorities in Chiang Saen had sought French military protection against a “band of *ngieu* [Shan] bearing 30 rifles” that was terrorising the surrounding villages¹⁰⁶. Later, after the political split in the town, the rebel chiefs certainly saw some benefit in aligning themselves with French authority, this time seeking protection from the Siamese. They were not alone in this, with numerous other minor chiefs seeking French protection. For example, in late October 1896, the inhabitants of a village located ten kilometres from Chiang Saen reported to the Agency offering their loyalty to the French. They indicated that they

¹⁰⁴ CAOM GGI 22257/Garanger to Governor General, Chiang Khong, 3 January 1899.

¹⁰⁵ GGI 22257/Copy of the report made by the Vice-Consulate in Nan, Nan, 20 April 1900.

¹⁰⁶ CAOM GGI 20714/Report of January 1896, Chiang Khong, 31 January 1896.

wished to reside in their old village but they undertook to follow the orders of the French, serve *corvée* labour and pay the same tax as residents of French territory. Their opinion was that if French protection was offered under these terms “in a few months almost all of the people of the reserved zone will have registered at our Agency”¹⁰⁷. A few years later the Shan chiefs of Thoeng (located outside the reserved zone) requested that “the territory of Muong Theung, its notables and its population be placed under the protection of the French government”¹⁰⁸. A similar request for French protection was forthcoming from Chiang Kham, also located well outside the reserved zone. And even the recalcitrant chief of Chiang Khong sought French advice on whether or not he should comply with the Siamese introduction of taxation in the reserved zone¹⁰⁹.

Interpreting these requests, and the worldview of territory and administration that motivated them, is not straightforward. For some chiefs within the reserved zone, pledges of loyalty and requests for protection may have reflected a belief that the provisions of the treaty had extinguished Siamese authority and that they, in fact, lay within the borders of French territory. Perhaps even the more distant chiefs, such as those in Chiang Kham and Thoeng, held out some hope that their districts may be incorporated within French territory. But, while there was clearly considerable room for misunderstanding – and the local French officials appear to have done everything they could to promote borderline ambiguity – the persistent reality of Siamese authority was all too clear with regular lines of communication maintained between Siamese officials and local authorities. More likely is that the local chiefs saw themselves as lying within overlapping spheres of French and Siamese influence, a pre-colonial worldview (Thongchai, 1994) that certainly persisted, with French encouragement, into the colonial period. As Thongchai has argued, this was a worldview in which territorial position – and the boundaries between such positions – was less important than interpersonal ties of allegiance and protection. In this worldview the fact that these chiefs in fact resided on the Siamese side of the border was probably not a major consideration. What was important was that French authority seemed to provide them with an alternative source of power and protection.

But even the most recalcitrant local chiefs recognised that a borderline of strictly demarcated sovereignty could have strategic value. When Siamese military forces moved into the reserved zone, the rebel chiefs of Chiang Saen were quick to cross into French territory to escape arrest, or worse. Clearly they realised that the new system of territorial demarcation prevented Siamese troops from pursuing them across the border. Indeed, it seems likely that their awareness of the easy proximity of trans-border refuge played a part in strengthening the spirit of their resistance. Like many before and since, they experienced one of the attractive ironies of national borders – while borders are a central component of modern state authority they also provide ready refuge for those seeking to rebel against it.

CONCLUSION

In this chapter I have taken the work of Thongchai (1994) as a starting point. I have suggested that there is considerable benefit in examining some of the localised dimensions of the creation of the modern ‘geo-body’ and the worldview of clearly demarcated sovereignty that underlies it. I suggest that this local perspective is particularly valuable when it comes from areas that lie at the geo-body’s furthest extent,

¹⁰⁷ CAOM GGI 20714/ Report of October 1896, Chiang Khong, 11 November 1896.

¹⁰⁸ CAOM GGI 20843/French translations of letters from the local administrations in Muang Theong and Chiang Kham.

¹⁰⁹ CAOM GGI 20714/Report of February 1902, Chiang Saen, 4 March 1902.

where the historically and socially arbitrary nature of modern demarcation is all too evident. This local perspective provides nuance and subtlety that supplements Thongchai's analysis of the elite territorial worldviews that informed treaty negotiations.

One of the key findings to emerge from the upper-Mekong archival material is that local French administrators had a colonial worldview in which territorial demarcation was relatively unimportant. For them the upper-Mekong was a frontier sphere of influence in which French status and authority should follow the natural economic, political and cultural connections that spanned the territorial border. The dominant colonial discourse of clearly demarcated sovereignty was of little interest to them. But, as Thongchai has demonstrated, this modern territorial worldview was rapidly incorporated into Siamese discourse and underlay their claims to exclusive sovereignty within the reserved zone, despite the provisions of the treaty and local French promotion of administrative ambiguity. What remains to be investigated is to what extent more junior Siamese functionaries incorporated this new approach in their day-to-day dealings with the French and the local chiefs. The reports, for example, of the Siamese postal agents in Chiang Saen and Chiang Khong would make fascinating reading! And further ethno-historical and archival research is also clearly needed to give a fuller picture of how the local indigenous authorities responded to the new opportunities and constraints afforded by competing territorial discourses.

Ultimately the upper Mekong commercial agencies had a short life, falling into disuse and abandonment in the early years of the 1900s. In fact the 25 kilometre reserved zone itself was abolished in the Franco-Siamese treaty of 1902¹¹⁰ as colonial negotiators came to recognise that its ambiguity was a recipe for ongoing conflict and instability along the frontier (de Reinach, 1911: 37-41; Boulanger, 1931: 315-316, 339-343). But this should not be read as the elimination of alternative world views about the borderline. There is a great deal of historical and ethnographic evidence from the twentieth century (some of it discussed in Walker, 1999) that notions of unambiguous territorial demarcation coexisted with alternative orientations towards linkage, overlap and commonality. This is not simply a matter of local perspectives conflicting with the demarcating practices of modern states. Rather it is a more complex process through which the Mekong border has been strategically imbued with divergent meanings in response to social, political and economic developments. The fixed locations of borderlines may often reflect the arbitrary exercise of state power (and a particular territorial world view) but the meanings of borderlines are the mobile products of dialogue.

¹¹⁰ The treaty of 1902 was not ratified and the abolition of the reserved zone was restated in the Franco-Siamese agreement of 1904.

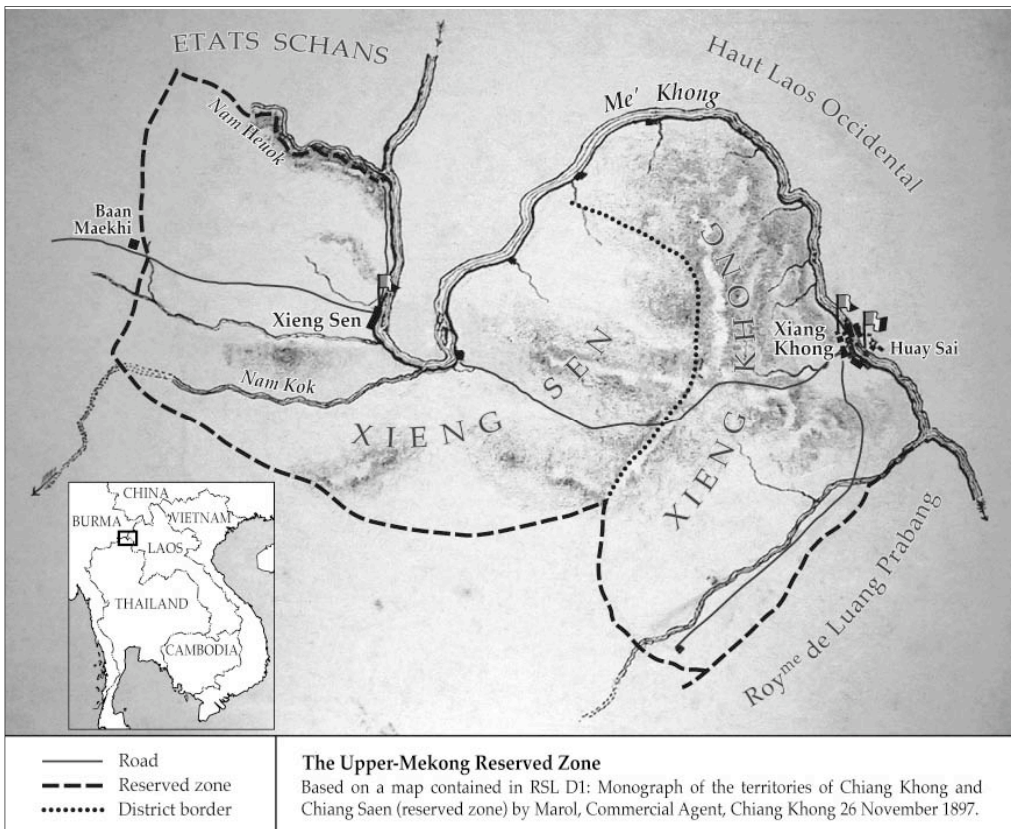


fig 1.
cf. p. XX

ARCIVAL SOURCES

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- GGI20671 – Political reports from M. Vacle, Commissioner of Government in Luang Prabang.
- GGI20677 – Letter from M. Pavie on the establishment of French agencies on the right bank of the Mekong.
- GGI20693 – Role of the Commercial Agents in Laos
- GGI20696 – Construction of the police station in Muang Sing.
- GGI20714 – Monthly reports from the Commercial Agents in Chiang Khong and Chiang Saen.
- GGI20753 – Arrest of the chief Pou, King of Nam Nghi of the Ngieou race
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- GGI25301 – Frontier incidents in Paklay, Nong Khai and Chiang Saen.
- GGI25625 – Siamese government protest against the introduction of French currency in Chiang Saen.
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