

Under the Eyes of French Adventurers: Social Conditions of the Upper Mekong Region in the 1860s

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Introduction

A joint conference of the South Asia Archive and Library Group (SAALG) and the Southeast Asia Library Group (SEALG) was held in July 2015 at the École française d'Extrême-Orient (EFEO) in Paris, France. Thanks to the conference organisers who chose a theme on 'French connections with South and Southeast Asia' I was inspired to extend the areas of my interest in Shan Studies. For, before this, I knew very little about historical relations between the Shan and the French. I thought this would be a great opportunity for me, as a subject librarian, to find out information resources on historical relations between the French and the Shan. Obviously the Shan State had been under British colonial rule from 1886 to 1948, but has never been under the French colony. Having said that, the Shan State shared its borders with Laos, a country that was once under French colonial rule. Therefore, I thought there could be a good chance of finding information resources on French-Shan's historical connections, especially in the borderlands of the Upper Mekong Region.

This paper, which is a revised version of my paper presented at the SAALG/SEALG Conference mentioned above, is an attempt of revisiting some old sceneries of the Upper Mekong Region around the year 1867 AD, by following the footsteps of the French Mekong Expedition, also known as the Mekong Exploration Commission. The main discussion will be about some highlights of remarkable places and people of the Upper Mekong Region, including social customs and traditions of practices as recorded in the report of the commission. In the conclusion, I will say that this paper is the result of an early stage of my research on the history of the Upper Mekong River valley and raise some questions for further investigation. I hope that this paper will give insight into social, political and religious conditions in the Upper Mekong Region around 150 years ago.

The French Mekong Expedition and the Upper Mekong Region

The French Mekong Expedition took place between 1866 and 1868. It is probably less known among European records on the history of the region especially when comparing it with the journey of McLeod in 1837 and the more comprehensive records made by Sir James George Scott in 1900, which is one of the reasons for me to retract some footage of the French Mekong Exploration Commission.

The full report of the Mekong Exploration Commission was published in 1873 in four volumes. Volume two of the report covers the accounts of the commission's adventures in several areas of Kengtung State. My reading of the report, however, is entirely relied on the English translation by Walter E. J. Tips (1996). There are some problematic issues as well as interesting topics in the report, which convinced me to get hold of and spend a great deal of time reading it.

Over the course of two years, the Mekong Exploration Commission traversed almost 9,000 km (5,592 m) from Saigon, the mouth of Mekong River, sailing up through the 19th century Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, Thailand and Myanmar into China's Yunnan province, and finally arrived in Shanghai where the group boarded a ship to return to Saigon.

The main aim of the commission was to explore and examine the course of the Mekong River, and whether it would be navigable as a trading route between Yunnan of China and Saigon of Cochin-China (in the far south of Vietnam). In addition, the commission also had made plans for observing wide areas of subject fields, such as indigenous affairs, economic conditions, trading products, weather conditions, religious beliefs and local traditions and practices etc.

Key members of the expedition were: 1. Ernest Doudart de Lagrée (captain, expedition leader, member of the Agricultural and Industrial Committee Cochin-China, entomologist), 2. Francis Garnier (lieutenant, inspector of Indigenous Affairs, mission leader after Doudart de Lagrée's death), and 3. Louis Delaporte (lieutenant, archaeologist, artist, art historian).¹



A Group Photo of the Mekong Expedition²



Route of the French Mekong Expedition map³

The commission left Saigon on 5 June 1866. They spent nearly four months between June and September 1867 on their exploration in the Kengtung State of the Upper Mekong Region, much longer than they wanted or intended to be, mainly due to the unexpected or underestimated problems they faced with regard to their travel documents for passing through the region, as shall be discussed further below.

¹ (For more information, see in *Wikipedia* "Mekong Expedition").

² Photo Source: https://commons.m.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Commission_at_Angkor_Wat.jpg

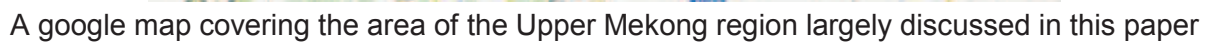
³ Photo source: https://commons.m.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Route_of_the_French_Mekong_Expedition_1866-1868.jpg

At this point, I think it would be useful for general readers if I begin with a brief account of the political and administration systems of Burma and the Shan States during the second half of the 19th century. I hope this will offer an overview of the administration system or the political situations of Kengtung State that had a great impact on the French Mekong Exploration Commission during their time in Kengtung's Upper Mekong Region. The Kengtung State was one of the federated Shan States, which were nominally ruled by Shan rulers, the Saophas, who paid tributes to the Kingdom of Ava (Burma). In other words, the Shan States were under the sovereignty of the Kingdom of Burma, which had extended its power to many parts of the Tai countries, and Kengtung State was obviously in this category. Although the Shan Saophas had the power to rule over their own states, they had to accept and work with the Burmese officers and soldiers who were sent by the court of Ava as the representatives of the governors of the Burmese Kingdom.

When the French Commission entered the territory of Kengtung State, they were facing problems with their travelling documents because they had not obtained an official permission from the kingdom of Burma in time for their journey. Before the group set off their journey in Saigon (southern Vietnam) in 1866 for the Mekong Expedition, the French admiral at Saigon did try to obtain permission from the Burmese court of Ava (Mandalay) for the expedition group to traverse through the Mekong River valley of the Kengtung region, but his attempt was in vain since the Burmese officials were too busy with their own internal affair of the palace revolution at that time (Garny/Tips 1996: 11-12; *Wikipedia* "Mindon Min"). So, the commission left Saigon without the required travel document risking themselves of facing trouble as they entered the territory of Kengtung State, but the trouble was probably much bigger than they expected. Nevertheless, they not only managed to overcome all the difficulties but also managed to visit several historical and remarkable places in the region.

Remarkable Places and People of the Upper Mekong Region

When looking at the geographical surface of the Upper Mekong Region during the second half of the 19th century, there were some significant differences to what we can see today on the map of the same areas. Some remarkable places mentioned in the report of the Mekong Exploration Commission include Xieng Khong, Xieng Sen, Tang Ho, Muong Lim, Muong Yong, Xieng Tong, Muong You, Muong Long, and Xieng Hong. One may note that the Romanization system for the names of the places above, as recorded in the Mekong Expedition report, are probably not familiar with most Shan or Tai people of the modern time. The more popular terms used for those places nowadays are: "Chiang Khong" (for "Xieng Khong"), "Chiang Saen" (Xieng Sen), "Mong Yawng" (Muong Yong), "Kengtung" or "Keng Tung" (Xieng Tong) and "Jinghong" (Xieng Hong); while some of the places such as "Mong Lin" (Muong Lim) and "Mong Yu" (Muong You) have become less popular; and places such as "Tāng Aw" (Tang Ho) seem to have disappeared from the map of today.



When the Mekong Exploration Commission travelled up the Mekong River from Luang Prabang and arrived in Chiang Khong on 4 June 1867, they were held there for ten days mainly because their permission from the Siamese (Thai) authority to travel up the Mekong River was about to expire. So, Commander De Lagrée, leader of the Mekong Exploration Commission, had to send a letter to the King of Kengtung to obtain a permission to traverse the Mekong River valley of the Kengtung region into Yunnan province of China. The governor of Chiang Khong suggested that the group stayed there until they received a permission letter from Kengtung, because there was no human settlement beyond Chiang Khong up until the border of Kengtung and therefore there would be no safe place to stay and no supplies of food. However, Mr De Lagrée told the governor that it was not his business and persisted that they could look after themselves. So in the end, they were allowed to proceed with their journey and traversed up to Tang Ho (Tāng Aw), a port on the west bank of the Mekong River belonging to Kengtung, and waited there for a letter from the King of Kengtung.

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on all sides of the three countries surrounding Golden Triangle area have effectively become the key ports between those countries.

Another remarkable situation here is that, while the places like Mae Sai, Tachilek and the Golden Triangle have grown and progressed, the place called Tang Ho (Tang Aw) seems to have disappeared from the map of today. Back in the second half of the 19th century, Tang Ho was clearly an important port of the Mekong River, especially for trading between Kengtung, Siam, Luang Prabang (Laos) and further down to Cambodia and Cochin-China. When the French Mekong Expedition group arrived at Tang Ho on 18 June 1867, they stayed in the Sala (guesthouse), which belonged to the King of Kengtung, as there were already some traders and travellers staying in the Sala. They observed the trading of goods, which included salt for local consumption coming from Luang Prabang, balls of gambier and areca nuts which were ingredients of chewing betel (Garnier/Tips 1996: 19). The location of Tang Ho appears to have been slightly further to the north of today's Golden Triangle.

While at Tang Ho, Mr De Lagrée realised that they had to wait for one or two more weeks to get any letter from Kengtung, so he sent another letter but this time to the governor of Mong Lin (recorded by Garnier as "Muong Lim"), a province of Kengtung State and the nearest town for Tang Ho, to allow him and his fellows to proceed to Mong Lin whilst waiting for the letter from the King of Kengtung. After long negotiations, Mr De Lagrée and his fellows were allowed to proceed their journey, with the support of twenty men to carry their supplies, and arrived in Mong Lin, a distance of fourteen kilometres (eight and half miles) away to the west of Tang Ho, on 23 June 1867.



A scene of music performance at Mong Lin, drawn by Louis Delaporte (1867)

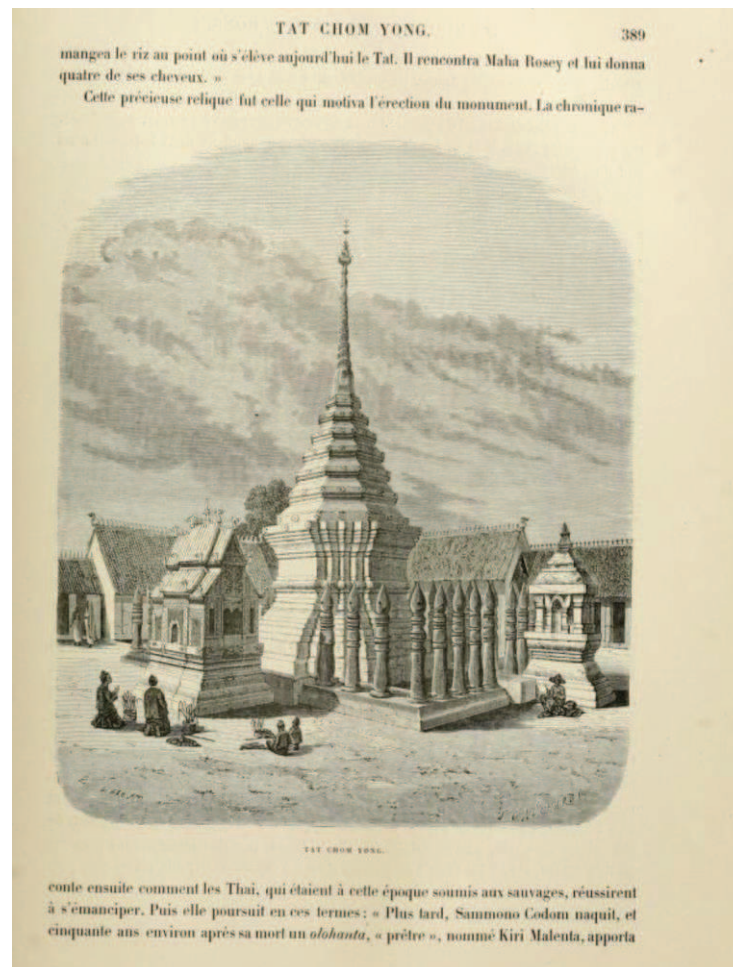
In Mong Lin, the French Commission observed that there was a five-day market, and they were even surprised to see some products imported from Europe such as English textiles being on display in the market. Garnier reported: "We could not help admiring the ability and practical sense of our rivals in the export field" (Garnier/Tips 1996: 25). It was also reported that they were entertained by the "Muong" musicians, as Garnier wrote, "The principal singer had a pleasant voice and that the lively and the very rhythmic tune which he warbled did seem to be rather rousing. His companions repeated a very short refrain after each of the verses of the soloist, providing with the chorus, sung with remarkable unison" (Garnier/Tips 1996: 27). Mr Louis Delaporte, an artist and member of the commission, had drawn a picture showing an interesting scenario of the performance.

After waiting for about a week, the governor of Mong Lin, an old man in his seventies, informed Mr De Lagrée that he had received a letter from the King of Kengtung giving his permission for the commission to continue their journey to Mong Yawng.

The French Commission left Mong Lin on 1 July 1867 heading their journey northwards for Paleo, Keng Lap and Mong Yawng. The French Commission were staying in Mong Yawng, a province of the Kengtung State for more than a month between 5 August and 8 September 1867 (Garnier/Tips 1996: 45, 70) although much of it was against their will, because they were facing serious problems with their travelling documents again here. Nevertheless they took the opportunity to explore the historical places of the area including the ruins of the old city of Mong Yawng, the pagoda of Phra Thāt Chom Yawng and the big Bodhi Tree. With the evidence of its ruined site, Mong Yawng was once a seat of a powerful kingdom.

In the report of the French Commission, Garnier wrote: "Within its walls, we found sizeable ruins of pagodas and extant dagobas (stupas); they indicated a state of prosperity and of great power. One of the most remarkable of these ruins rose on the flanks of the mountain under which the village stood. Thāt Chom Yawng appeared to be older than the ruins of Mong Yawng. After half an hour of walking, we arrived at a *pouchrey* [Bodhi Tree] of huge size, which, according to Buddhist legend, had probably been planted at the time of the monument's construction. The tree was five to six meters in diameter. The monument itself consisted of large galleries which formed a square in the centre of which was a gilded pyramid, over-towered by an iron crown." (Garnier/Tips 1996: 56-58) As one can well notice, the quotes given here are taken out of a long writing on a number of pages of the report of the French Exploration Commission on Mong Yawng and the That Chom Yawng pagoda. Records of historical and archaeological places such as this are invaluable for current and future scholars who would like to pursue their further research on the same areas for new findings or for comparative studies of developments and changes occurred in the areas in contrast with the conditions as stated in previous research works.⁴

⁴ More information on Thāt Chom Yawng and Mong Yawng can also be found in Scott, J. G. 1901: *Gazetteer of Upper Burma and Shan States*, Pt 2, Vol. 1, pp. 434-437.



Thāt Chom Yawng, originally drawn by Luis Delaporte (1867)⁵

There is more interesting information on the Upper Mekong Region as recorded by the French Exploration Commission but my time and space are limited for this article. I hope that readers will be content with the highlights of the report of the French Exploration Commission presented here as useful information for some aspects of studies in the Upper Mekong Region.

Conclusion

The reports of the French Mekong Exploration Commission have provided invaluable information, among many records of their adventures the Mekong River valleys, covering vast areas of Southern China and mainland Southeast Asia, as well as rich information of resources for the study on several fields of the region and its people around the year of 1867. Since then, there is no doubt that the lands and people of the region had passed through different types of situations and changes. Some aspects of social conditions such as political and administration systems of the region may have been changed so much and so many times that many of them are almost unrecognizable, while other social aspects such as local customs and traditions of practices may have been continued and maintained by the communities although it is

⁵ Garnier, Francis 1873. *Voyage d'exploration en Indo-Chine, effectué pendant les années 1866, 1867 et 1868 par une commission française présidée par M. le capitaine de frégate, Doudart de Lagrée*, p. 389.

also possible that at times such customs and traditions may have been affected by the changes of the political and governing systems. The point here is that the historical records such as the reports of the French Mekong Exploration Commission will be invaluable resources of information for the study of such changes and continuities in the region.

For example, it would be very interesting to see how the Bodhi tree in Mong Yawng today looks like when comparing it with the record about the tree made by the French adventurers almost 150 years ago. And the same or similar situation would apply to the pagoda of Phra That Chom Yawng which was observed and recorded in detail by the French Mekong Exploration Commission.

As I already said in the introduction, I have to admit here again that this paper is the reflection of an early stage of my research on the history of the Upper Mekong Region. Therefore, more research is needed to be done in order to find some clearer pictures of social conditions of the Upper Mekong Region at the time. Extensive fieldworks as well as local sources of information are crucial for support or clarification of the statements made in the reports of the French Mekong Exploration Commission. Local resources of information could be found in chronicles, oral and written historical accounts, old manuscripts, and so on. Therefore, most, if not all topics discussed in this paper, leave us with more questions for further investigation. I hope that my discussions on geographical notions, the systems of administration and religious traditions of practices of the Upper Mekong region as recorded in the reports of the Mekong Exploration Commission would shed some light for future studies on the history of the Upper Mekong Region.

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