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The Country of the Free Laos

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IX.—*Extract of a Letter received from Captain STOKES, of H.M. Steam-vessel Acheron, dated 13th June, 1848, at Simon's Bay. (Communicated by the Admiralty.)*

[Read Jan. 8th, 1849.]

AMONG the most important projects afloat for the improvement of this colony may be mentioned the establishment of extensive cotton-plantations at Port Natal and its vicinity. The plant is obtained both indigenous and from foreign seed: the preference seems awarded to the native production, some specimens of which, recently exhibited at Graham's Town, are reported to be worth at least 1s. per pound. The cultivation of indigo has also been attempted.

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X.—*The Country of the Free Laos. By DR. GUTZLAFF. (Communicated by Sir George Staunton.)*

[Read December 11, 1848.]

NONE of the nations of Asia has attracted so little attention as this numerous race, though they have a written national history which commences a few years subsequent to our æra. They have silently spread over the whole interior of the peninsula which they inhabit, penetrated through the densest forests, and subsequently cleared the land of its gigantic trees and luxuriant vegetation. They have likewise become expert miners, and have produced the greater part of the gold, silver, and copper which now circulate in Annam, China, and Siam.

They are divided into many tribes, which speak nearly the same language, with slight variations, and they have attained very different degrees of civilisation. In the north they extend to the mountains of Yun-nan, Kweichoo, Hoonan, and Kwangse, where they are known under the names of Yaou, Meantsze, and Lolos. A great part of them have yielded to Chinese civilisation, and become subject to the sway of the mandarins, whilst other tribes in the more remote recesses of the country retain their independence, and show a fierce spirit of resistance. On the borders of China and the peninsula they are distributed in numerous townships, with scarcely any connexion among them. They are peaceful and industrious, but when goaded to opposition, defend themselves with the resolution of despair. Towards Assam, where they have intermixed with the western tribes on the frontiers of Tibet, they are most rude and uncivilised, and often engage in feuds with their southern neighbours. We know them there as Moamareas, Nagas, Khanties, Singphoos, &c. All along the Irawaddy,

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between the Birmah dominions and the Saluen river, to the sea of Martaban and the north-western frontiers of Siam, they are the humble vassals of Birmah. There is every probability that a commercial intercourse with Martaban will be gradually established, and some Englishmen have for the first time visited the chief of Lapoung. The King of Birmah claims nine principalities under the name of Kosanpri. The inhabitants being much oppressed by the Birmans, it is very probable that they will, during the present troubles, endeavour to regain their freedom. As this territory, however, does not fall within our description, and we have already alluded to the tribes which live under Siamese and Cochin-Chinese rule, we confine our present remarks to those who are called by the Chinese Laou-chang, and who enjoy the largest share of liberty, as they merely acknowledge the nominal sway of some petty mandarins. They are less known than any other Laos tribe, though they inhabit a territory of considerable extent.

The frontiers are, to the north, the province of Yun-nan, as far as 22° N. lat., the Le-seën river constituting the boundary; to the south, the tributary Laos states of Siam; to the west, those of Birmah; and to the east, the Laktho territory. Those tribes which are north of 22° N. lat. acknowledge nominally the Chinese sway, and their chiefs, who bear the name of Thoosze, are confirmed by the mandarins in their office.

The same chain of mountains which separates Cochin-China from the Moi country crosses the whole length of the land. Numerous streams rise on the eastern side of the mountains, and flow into Tunkin. The western side constitutes the Himahpa, the classical ground of the Laos nation and frequently mentioned in their romances. A mountain forest extends to the territory of Kosanpri, where it is known under the name of Pahimpan, and is visible as far as Amrapoora. Here the founders of the nation are said to have lived, and to have extirpated the wild beasts from the territory. As these romances are of ancient date, and as there is a series of annals commencing a few years after our æra, it is certain that the civilisation of this race must be referred to a very remote epoch. In assigning it to a period after the accession to the throne of China of the Han dynasty (about 150 B.C.), we shall probably not be far from the truth. At that time the whole peninsula was still in a state of barbarism, and the scanty population lived not unlike the mountaineers of the present day. Civilisation came at length from India, and the Shan race only at a late period yielded to the influence of Buddhism.

The mountains contain gold, silver, copper, and iron; some tin and lead have also been discovered, but in very small quan-

tities. The metals are principally sent to China, very little being exchanged with Tunkin, Birmah, or Siam.

The forests contain some of those magnificent trees of which Wallich discovered the first specimens in Pegu. The varnish-tree grows in perfection. The natives themselves understand the manufacture of beautiful lacquered ware, and export some to their neighbours. Fruit-trees are very scarce, and not tended with proper care. The fan-palm alone thrives, the climate, on account of the great elevation of the country, being too cold for other species. The inhabitants cultivate few vegetables, and confine their attention to rice, which is of an excellent quality, white, and gelatinous, but grown in such small quantity that they are obliged to import considerably from Birmah and the south. They are indebted for salt to their rulers, and the moment one of the chiefs proves refractory, the supply is stopped, until they yield implicit submission.

The silkworm is raised in these regions, but the silk is coarse. The natives manufacture some for home consumption, but receive their best silks from China, which they re-export to Birmah. Bullocks are numerous, and strong of limb, and though small, very useful for agricultural purposes. The Laos export many head of cattle to Ava. The principal force of the chiefs consists of cavalry.

The boundaries of the country are ill-defined. Commencing at the north-eastern frontiers, where the Le-seën river forms the boundary, we reach the Keae principality. This with the Na state forms an extensive valley at the foot of stupendous mountains, bordered on the north by the Lo-so river, a tributary of the Kew-lung. The soil is fertile, and exhibits a great variety of vegetation. The inhabitants are agriculturists, and often suffer from dreadful inundations when the rivulets which descend from the heights are swollen with melted snow.

Crossing the Lo-so, which here is a fine navigable river, we reach the Kanlanpa state, hemmed in between mountains, as well as Lun, a small territory situated towards the south. The Kew-lung joins the Lo-so, and thence takes a south-westerly course. The people are employed in mining, and navigate the river downwards in frail boats, with the produce of their own country and that of China. They are enterprising, and inured to hardship.

Having passed the Kew-lung, we reach Lung, a narrow strip of land between frightful precipices and the river. North of the stream is the Yang country, an extensive mountainous district, interspersed with many fertile valleys. The popu-

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lation is very small and poor, and the inhabitants are shut out from all intercourse with other parts of the world. South of it is the Chayle country, and adjacent to it Hoe and Chay. All are ruled by their own chiefs, who have no common interest and often oppose each other. The last-mentioned districts, with Kwan, are situated in a long valley between the Man-loo river and the Kew-lung. There is a tolerable extent of cultivable ground, but the principal part consists of barren rock. Beyond this are the Mang and Ma principalities, the boundaries of which are, on the one hand, the river of that name, and on the west the Mang-leên stream. The land is here fertile, and the population considerable. The most north-western is the Mang-leên state, which constitutes the boundary towards the Laos country, subject to the Birmahs.

The government in the territory of the northern chiefs is patriarchal, and the Chinese rule is merely nominal. The relationship between rulers and subjects is of the most intimate order, and the Laos are strongly attached to their superiors. The men are undersized, having Chinese features, and a yellowish complexion; the women are symmetrically formed, with beautiful countenances and bright eyes. Instead of being subject to their husbands, they generally direct the household affairs, and are favourably distinguished by chastity and decency from those of Birmah. It is impossible to refuse the character of manliness to these people, and not to admit their great superiority over their brethren in the south. They seldom leave their homes, and up to this moment no European has trod on their soil.

The difficulties of conveyance being very great, there exists little intercourse between the various districts, and still less with foreign countries. The principal exports are either pure metals or various ores. Ore is taken in considerable quantities to the province of Yun-nan, and occasionally finds its way to Canton. As the Laos are not acquainted with the best processes, there is a great waste in smelting, and their tools for digging are so clumsy that only the richest ore near the surface will repay the labour. Their goods they transport on horses and bullocks. In their dealings they are very honest, and frequently become victims to the over-reaching Chinese, especially in speculations in the precious metals.

Every housewife has her weaving apparatus, and manufactures the silk and cotton stuffs for the family. It is, however, a sign of gentility to wear a Chinese vest, and the richer classes are never without a full dress of beautiful silk.

The principalities to the east of the mountain range, which

borders on Tunkin, are of much greater extent. The three principal states, beginning from the south, are Ninh-bien-chaou, Thugri-chou, and Don-ho. The first presents a soil of varying surface, stony, and unpromising; the second is intersected by a mountain range, and has on the south extensive forests; the third, separated from the second by the Sonchay river, which runs into Tunkin, contains extensive and fertile plains with productive rice-fields, and stately forests to the south of the Leseën river. This is perhaps the best part of the whole territory. Don-ho has a very large population, and abounds in agricultural produce. The natives are mixed with the Tun-kinese race, and are the most civilized among all the Laos tribes. The chiefs, being very frequently oppressed by their neighbours, maintain a small army for their protection, which has attained some celebrity for horsemanship.

So far as our knowledge extends, they have never been subjected to a foreign yoke. They rear excellent horses, export raw silk, and live a life of comfort and content. They undertake occasionally long journeys, and some chiefs have even visited Bangkok. Upon the occasion of this visit their superior appearance, so unlike that of their brethren in the south, their wealth and intelligence, attracted the admiration of every one, and the Siamese could scarcely be brought to believe that these chiefs belonged to the same race as the Laos of the south.

The territory to the west is hilly and woody; the population much scattered, and a great part of the land is uncultivated. The royal tiger here takes up his abode, the rhinoceros finds shelter, and the forests swarm with deer.

The principal place is Leng, on the south-western extremity, which has been magnified into a kingdom, with eight villages under its control. Though the chief is nominally tributary to Birmah, he keeps up a constant intercourse with China, and many merchants of that country are settled under his jurisdiction. He does not consider himself a subject of the Golden Foot, but belongs to the confederacy known in Birmah under the name of Ta-rout-shan. The southern parts are fertile and produce rice and fruits; the central parts contain many mountains and forests, in which is found the elephant. In the north the mountains are said to be very lofty. At a place called Bodaeyin, there are gold and silver mines, which also yield some copper. A Chinese traveller mentions likewise a reddish kind of sulphur and lead amongst the productions, as well as tin. The Birmans have done their utmost to obtain possession of these valuable mines, but without success. A small per centage is sent to Ava annually, but

the Laos themselves are the real masters, and very jealous of any foreigner obtaining a footing there. A great quantity of the precious metal goes to China for the manufactures of that country, and the chief is said to derive a revenue of 350 catties of silver from the mines, a sum, if anything, rather underrated. The mandarins of Yun-nan, anxious to obtain a share in this great wealth, have left no arts unemployed to establish their mastery over this part, but have failed, owing to the rivalry of the Birmans. Near the capital rubies and emeralds are collected, and are sent both to Bangkok and to Ava, but in greater quantities to Ava, from whence they have found their way to Hindostan. They are considered of a very inferior description.

The regions which border immediately upon the Pa-hima-pan eastward are less known than any other. On the authority of the Chinese, we know that the states of La and Meng are situated there. The former consists of large forests with small patches of cleared ground; the latter is of some extent, and said to comprise 28 cities. Tin is said to be found in the latter territory, and some rock-salt, a very precious commodity in those regions, is likewise found there. The intercourse is entirely confined to China: the country is rich in iron and silver, and the soil in many places fertile. The population appears to be considerable; Vinan, the most north-western of the free states, is a very narrow territory, bordering on Yun-nan. The exact geographical position of the above places is unknown, and Chinese travellers give only the distances from one to the other, according to the number of days it took them to reach them. For instance, they say, from Leng to La seven days' journey, from La to Meng eleven days'. That so many days should be required to make such short distances sufficiently proves the mountainous nature of the road, and the little intercourse that exists between the various tribes.

We have thus, with very insufficient guides, traversed the whole of the Free Laos territory. It is a very interesting country, and the residence of a people who more than any other in Asia have lived entirely to themselves. The Chinese, impelled by war or starvation, have repeatedly in large numbers immigrated to this territory, but gradually amalgamated with the natives, and contributed by this fusion to render the original race stronger and superior. A few of the principal chiefs visit from time to time the Chinese frontier station with a trifling tribute, and whenever the Emperor intends to appear in great state, he orders them to come to the capital to grace his audience with a multitude of tribute-bearers from all regions. This, however, is the whole extent

of the excursions of the Free Laos to foreign countries, and beyond this they know nothing about the surrounding empires. It is probable that their ancestors were animated by a different spirit, for besides their endeavours in the sixteenth century to subjugate the country to the very sea-coast, they engaged also largely in trade. The difficulties in the navigation of the Mekom and the obstacles presented by the many mountains appear to have checked the repetition of a similar march. In 1641 some of their merchants reached Batavia, which induced the Dutch company to send an envoy, named Wusthoft, to their principal settlement, Wink-jan (Vinan?) from Kambodia on the river Mekom. The journey took him two months and 21 days, during which time he reckons that he travelled 250 leagues. The numerous falls in the river presented great obstacles to his progress, and the boatmen had often to leave their barks and to proceed overland for a considerable distance, and then to re-embark again where the river-bed was smoother. He also passed through thick jungles and over dangerous mountains. The chief received him with high honours, but he had to perform the prostrations in imitation of the Chinese court etiquette. The country was at that time at war with Tunkin and Pegu, but carried on a peaceful intercourse with China. The goods which the envoy found in the market (the principal object of his researches) were gold, iron, precious stones, lac, gum benzoin, ivory, rhinoceros horns, raw silk, silk piece-goods, and crystals. A similar catalogue, with the exception of silk, is given in the accounts of Chinese merchants, and such are the articles of trade which pass the frontiers. This undertaking remained without results, and an attempt of the same kind made in the same year by the Portuguese, who sent thither two priests, likewise miscarried, and the envoy was sent back without even being admitted to an audience. Previous to this enterprise many efforts had been made by missionaries, but without success. They were anxious to penetrate either from Upper Kambodia or Tunkin, but could not effect their purpose. A few adventurers had previously been more fortunate, and found their way through Siam, over high mountains and through teak-forests, but without making any discovery worthy of notice. When, however, swarms of Laos in the middle of the sixteenth century overwhelmed Kambodia, the Portuguese, who were established in the factories of that country, assisted the natives to drive the enemy away. In this struggle the King of Kambodia lost his life, and his realm was on the brink of total ruin, when the young prince, his son, under the guidance of these foreign merchants, after a struggle of ten



years, reconquered his country and annihilated the invaders. The particulars of this war have been described by no historian, though perhaps worthy of being recorded as the desperate effort of a nation to possess themselves of a territory bordering on the sea. It is not probable that the Laos appreciated the advantages which would accrue to them if they could carry on trade with foreign nations directly. Their only impulse seems to have been to follow the Mekong to its mouth, and to settle on the alluvial soil along its banks. They did not come without their moveables to the country on which their choice had fallen, nor did they leave their golden treasures behind. All this became a prey to the Kambodians, who thus obtained some compensation for the injuries which had been inflicted on them. The young king was so elated at his success, that he sent an envoy to Malacca in 1598, partly to acknowledge his obligations to the Portuguese, and partly to ask a Jesuit to reside in his territory. This request was readily granted, and many distinguished priests settled themselves in the country. Determined and persevering as were the Jesuits, they were unable to form a settlement in the Laos territory, though they had at their command all the advantages which Kambodia could furnish.

The British penetrated to this country from Pegu before 1587, and members of the Company's factories from time to time visited these regions, until war and rebellion among the Laos prevented their progress. For more than two centuries all enterprise towards this distant land ceased, until the victories of the English in Birmah, and the acquisition of new territory again led to new journeys to the south-western states. The age for seclusion being now past, it is by no means probable that the Laos will be able to keep themselves much longer from intercourse with civilised nations.

When we compare the position of the country with that of several others in Hindostan under the same parallel, the difference is very striking. Whilst mighty conquerors have repeatedly overwhelmed Hindostan, this peninsula has remained under its native princes. The Laos, who from the nature of their territory might have imbibed a spirit like that of the Afghans, have, on the contrary, always been considered a peaceful people. Beyond incursions into the neighbouring territory, in retaliation of prior aggression, they have, with the exception only of their migration to Kambodia, remained quiet in their inaccessible mountain fastnesses. They possess fire-arms, and are good marksmen, but in their warlike expeditions they avail themselves chiefly of the bow.

The fame of the treasures of this country has fortunately not

yet induced conquerors to direct their steps hither. Kublai heard of the mountains that produced gold, but the conquest of Yun-nan employed all his forces. When he finally made an irruption into Birmah from the side of western Laos, his army was decimated by disease, and disheartened by constant reverses, so that nothing could be effected. After him the Tunkinese, being in possession of the southern part of the Laos country, endeavoured to possess themselves of the gold-mines, but they likewise met with disappointment. Many of the inhabitants of Tunkin were, however, permitted to settle, and they proved an industrious race of people. Their attachment to Tunkin was not so strong as to make them traitors to their new rulers, for the Laos princes govern with patriarchal simplicity, whilst the Tunkinese government has always striven to make its subjects slaves.

When finally the Chinese emperor Keën-lung, in the last century, determined upon seizing the gold-mines, the Birman took up the cause of the Laos, and before a soldier had planted a standard in the country the Chinese invaders were either annihilated or made prisoners. So many mishaps have spread the vulgar belief that the land of the Free Laos can never be conquered, because some dreadful monsters guard the avenues to it.

The principal sources of our information about this country are the accounts of Chinese merchants, of which Du Halde in his work on China has preserved one. The annals of the country have for years been in the possession of Europeans, but we have never seen a translation. They resemble the Siamese annals, but are difficult to understand. The laws resemble those of the Siamese in many respects, but are more simple. The romances are deficient in rhythm, but superior in detail when compared with the Siamese. Ritter has quoted all the European authors who have written on this country; but their descriptions are very imperfect, and even the names of the principal states are in many instances omitted. The Tunkinese have also given some vague accounts of this territory. There exists a dictionary of this language in manuscript, and likewise a preparatory version of the New Testament. The language is very simple, and strongly marked by the system of intonation.