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4 Land of the lotus-eaters: Vientiane under the French

This was the earthly paradise that all the French had promised; the country that was one vast Tahiti, causing all the French who had been stationed there to affect ever after a vaguely dissolute manner.

(Norman Lewis, *A Dragon Apparent. Travels in Indochina*)

When the French explorers first visited Vientiane in the late 1860s they found a largely ruined and desolate place, sacked by the Siamese more than a generation earlier.¹ Other than the palace only the *vat* remained standing, but abandoned, fragile and tarnished.

The ever vigorous tropical vegetation, which fortunately softened the appearance of these barbarous devastations and covered them with greenery and flowers, gave these ruined sanctuaries a deceptive appearance of decay. Tall grasses grew everywhere on the sacred porches, climbing plants already clasped the columns and vigorous trees made their way across the roofs.²

The French did not take formal control of the former kingdom of Viang Chan until the Franco-Siamese Treaty of 3 October 1893. By then Vientiane had been sacked again, this time by Ho bandits during 1873-1875, intent on plundering gold from its temples and monuments. In the 1880s Étienne Aymonier's mission to explore the Khorat Plateau extended to the Mekong and crossed it in several places.³ Two Cambodian members of his team – Iem and Dou – reached Nongkhai and crossed to the site of Vientiane in February 1883. Much of their time was spent investigating the That Luang, its associated village of around 30 huts and the peasants' methods of rice cultivation and palm juice extraction. But when they came to the site of the former capital, they found that the king's palace lay in ruins, invaded by the forest, as did the palace of the *upahat* (second king or viceroy). Vat Sisaket survived the ravages of war and jungle better, and in particular its wall paintings dating from the early nineteenth century had been spared destruction. The *vat* was still functioning, with six monks in residence, although the library had lost all its collection of sacred books.⁴ However,

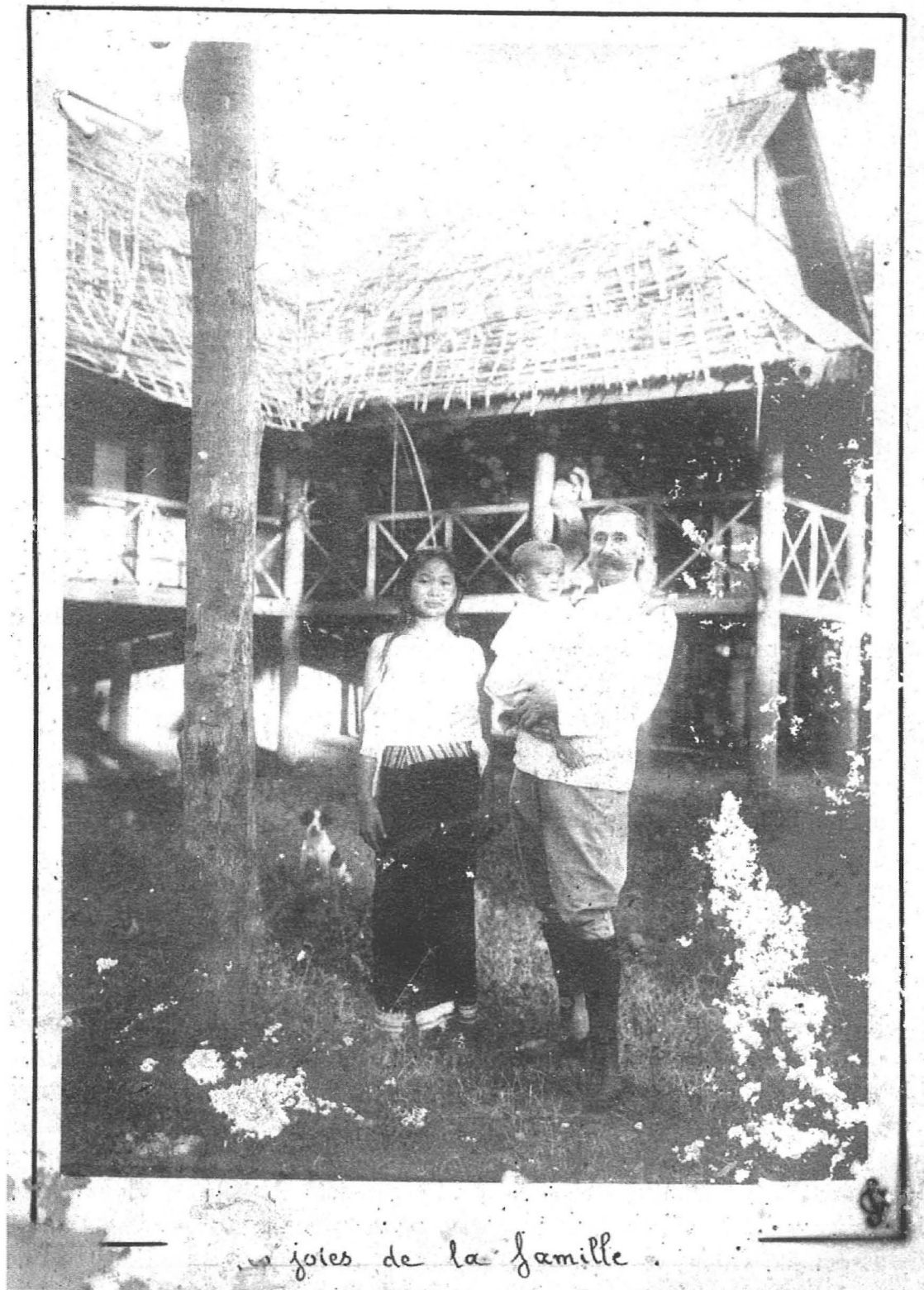


Plate 4.1 *Les joies de la famille*: a Frenchman with *phou sao* and child in early nineteenth-century Laos (Photographer unknown).

well under half the original estimated 80 *vat* structures remained⁵ and the town itself scarcely functioned as a market town, a far cry from the important city that van Wuysthoff had seen two centuries earlier.⁶

By the 1930s, however, Vientiane had risen from the ashes and turned into a small, sleepy colonial town, the political capital of French Laos – an amazing achievement, considering the little economic benefit that this part of South-East Asia brought to its colonial rulers. The whole French enterprise in this truncated cultural territory the French dubbed ‘Laos’, and the creation of Vientiane as capital, had something of fantasy about it, but for the period until the late 1930s at least the protectorate was, according to Virginia Thompson, an American journalist, ‘the country where the French find themselves most happy’.⁷ Vientiane became a haven for lotus-eaters.

Why did the French choose Vientiane, a ruined city, as the administrative capital of their Lao territories? Indeed, what were they doing in this inland region of South-East Asia at all? Their focus was already clearly fixed on Vietnam where they had established the colony of Cochinchina based on Saigon in 1857 and protectorates in Annam and Tonkin (based on Hue and Hanoi, respectively) in the 1880s, and also the beleaguered kingdom of Cambodia, from 1863. Back in the 1860s, the Mekong had promised the French a way into rich productive regions of southern China. But despite the enthusiasm of Francis Garnier and others,⁸ when an official French Mekong Expedition explored the river in 1866–1868 it was soon found that the river was not navigable beyond the Sambor rapids to the north of Kratié in southern Laos. And yet the French persevered. What motivated the French to claim the territory later in the nineteenth century and to persist in holding on to it in the twentieth?

Iché and other French writers put the *mission civilisatrice* argument.⁹ This ‘mission’ had two components. Firstly, it aimed at the cultural assimilation of the various Indochinese peoples through the provision of education and inculcation of respect for French culture. No doubt this open-arms approach, inviting the Lao to join in French ways of life, blended with the exoticism, the sense of excitement stemming from the Lao physical and cultural environment, helped make the French particularly happy here among the generally friendly Lao natives. Secondly, it was hoped that, by developing administrative organisation and economic activities, Indochina would eventually be assimilated functionally into the French Republic.¹⁰ But behind both were the common colonialist goals of national glory and economic advantage, as well as the specific one of France’s imperialist strategy for mainland South-East Asia. As William Duiker pointed out in his study of nationalism and revolution in neighbouring Vietnam, this led inevitably to the emergence of serious contradictions in the running of Indochina. In particular, there was a large gap between the ‘publicised goal of the white man’s burden and the more pragmatic objective of exploiting the economic resources of the colonial territories for the benefit of the home country’.¹¹ Whatever the balance of motives, however, once the territorial

claim to the Lao territories on the Mekong's left bank was made, the choice of location for the political and administrative headquarters was largely determined by the shape of the state the French had created.

French Laos

The story of the French capture of the left bank Lao territories has been well told by numerous scholars and need not be detailed here.¹² With its arch competitor, Britain, exerting growing influence in Siam, the French also had a regional strategy of blocking their rivals and shoring up their existing possessions in Annam, Tonkin, Cochin China and Cambodia. Initially, in the 1880s, French claims to the Lao territories were legally tenuous: the French had assumed the role of overlord, though claiming to act in the name of the court in Hue – that is, imposing their control over Lao territory on behalf of imperial Vietnam.¹³ However French control was not finally settled until the 1893 treaty which was forced on Bangkok by French gunboat diplomacy. According to Charles Le Myre de Vilers, the French minister plenipotentiary to Siam, tough tactics were needed:

Diplomatic niceties are inappropriate in Siam. With Asiatics you impose your will when you are the stronger, or you stand aloof if you are at a disadvantage. There is little point in negotiating: it is a waste of time.¹⁴

The treaty gave France a Mekong border with a 25km demilitarized zone on the western, Siamese side (conventionally described as the 'right' bank). August Pavie, who had objected to using a river as the boundary in 1893 on the grounds that 'it was a line of demarcation "natural" to no one', maintained that France should use force if the Siamese gave trouble: 'A protectorate over Siam will be our compensation'; 'If we neglect such an opportunity now, will we ever again be offered another to round off our Indochinese empire?'¹⁵ Powerful Governor-General of French Indochina, Paul Doumer (1897–1902), continued to push the French case for taking all of Siam (or at least the Lao-populated Khorat Plateau region) and while this was never accomplished, French-Siamese treaties in 1903 and 1907 gave the west bank territories of Luang Prabang and Champasak back to French Laos. Vientiane's former west bank tributary area and its cities were not returned, and, as we have already noted from the 1860s, Nongkhai on the Siamese side had developed a hold on the economy of Vientiane's former tributary area on the east bank.

The Mekong thus became a fixed boundary dividing two territorially bounded states conceived in the European fashion of the nineteenth century, replacing the looser mandala system of overlapping suzerainty that had previously prevailed in the Lao lands. According to David Chandler, the Lao elite accepted this new, rigid political structure because it gave them

security, prosperity and some modern benefits such as education and heightened administrative authority.¹⁶ *Laos Français* was proclaimed as one of the five components of the French-Indochinese Union. Auguste Pavie was appointed Commissioner General of Laos in 1894 and sent to Luang Prabang; and a clumsy set of internal administrative arrangements was put in place. The kingdom of Luang Prabang had been incorporated as a protectorate, thus maintaining its royal family and associated social and political structures, while the centre, based on the Vientiane region, and the south were ruled directly as a single colony.¹⁷ On the ground, the administration was at first sub-divided between *Laos septentrional* and *Laos méridional* with, respectively, Luang Prabang and the island of Khong (shifting to Savannakhet in 1899) as the two administrative capitals, one essentially traditional Lao and the other newly established by the Europeans.¹⁸

On 19 April 1900 Governor-General Paul Doumer signed a decree tying the three sections of Laos more closely together and creating a new administrative capital at Vientiane.¹⁹ Its central location in relation to the north-south orientation of the new Lao political unit made Vientiane a more logistically sensible choice than either Luang Prabang or Savannakhet. Grant Evans has added a further consideration, arguing that Vientiane was deliberately chosen so that the new administrative headquarters could draw on the prestige of the ancient capital.²⁰ Under Doumer's April 1899 decree *Laos Français* was administered by a *Résident-Supérieur* with powers delegated by the Governor-General in Hanoi but with the Luang Prabang king fixed in his palace in the north. Ten provinces were ruled by *Résidents* as administrators of civil services, responsible to the *Résident-Supérieur*.²¹ Each province was further divided into *meuang* (cantons) administered by a *Thao-meuang* (*chao-meuang*, or *chef de canton*) assisted by three officials, and *ban* (villages) directed by a *Pho-ban* or *mae*, assisted by a council of elders (*conseil de notables*). Vientiane Province had four *meuang* located at Vientiane, Tourakom, Patchoum and Borikan.²² Although the Governor-General in Hanoi had over-riding authority within the French-Indochinese Union, the *Résident-Supérieur* system thus depended on the cooperation of the local traditional Lao leaders. By contrast the French found the Lao villagers less inclined to meet their expectations when it came to work, with the consequence that Vietnamese were introduced into the civil service and encouraged as middlemen in commerce and industry. 'Large-scale industry was non-existent in Laos', a report to the Conseil de Gouvernement noted in 1921, 'and the Lao race does not seem predisposed to provide it with the active labour it needs. ... [However] Annamite immigration was developing rapidly and may provide a solution'.²³ This promotion of Vietnamese migration had momentous effects on the country's social and economic structures as well as reinforcing the reality that Laos, as far as the French were concerned, was always going to be in the shadows of Vietnam.

Martin Stuart-Fox argues that the authorities in both Paris and Hanoi 'saw Laos not as a political and geographical entity in its own right, with its

own unique history and culture, but rather as a component of Indochina in which Vietnam held pride of place'.²⁴ This became even clearer in the first half of the twentieth century when the colonial empires in Asia settled down, at least in the sense of establishing and maintaining fixed geographical boundaries, and this preferential policy was reflected in development patterns. Governor General Albert Sarraut was quite explicit when he wrote in a 1912 letter to the Minister of the Colonies in Paris: 'French Indochina today is Gia Long's Empire reconstituted, expanded by us through [the acquisition] of exterior possessions [ie. Laos and Cambodia]'.²⁵ In fact, while, as Stuart-Fox has noted,²⁶ a picture was projected back in France of a fabulously wealthy Laos, this was designed mainly to justify and encourage colonial expansion in general. Up to the end of 1902 French private capital invested in Laos amounted to a mere 0.3% of the total French funds invested in Indochina and no foreign private capital had been invested at all.²⁷ French colonial policy in Indochina deliberately barred entry of non-French capital. Currency regulations, high tariffs and direct constraints contributed to a near-monopoly for capital from France.²⁸ Consequently few of the plans for economic exploitation involving French capital came to fruition: some mining and timber cutting occurred but the planned railways were not built and plantations and industries were not set up in the proportions predicted.

Vientiane: a French colonial creation

On 6 July 1894 Auguste Pavie had journeyed from Luang Prabang to Vientiane to start the reconstruction of the city. Count de Barthélemy recounted his visit the following year when he stayed in the Resident's house which he described as merely 'the most important hut with French flag flying'.²⁹ The Resident was keen to show off the reconstruction works he had initiated on Wat Sisaket and That Luang, using Lao labour and funds from his budget and in the firm belief that he was saving the Lao culture from extinction.³⁰ But Barthélemy apparently cared little for the ruins, which he thought 'generally wearisome for those without a specialist interest'. He was, however, more impressed with his host's work in urban matters, finding that already the 'pretty Lao houses lost in banana trees, lining up harmoniously. . . [.] revealed the European taste and touch'.³¹

The first European map of Vientiane drawn up by Le Blévec, navy sub-lieutenant, during the French survey mission along the upper Mekong in 1895–1898, reveals more of these initial steps in the development of a colonial capital in France's new Lao territories.³² Apart from Vat Sisaket and the Vat Ho Pha Kaeo, a large tract of empty land stretched along the river-bank from Vat Simeuang to Vat Kang. The royal palace of King Xetthathirat and the audience hall had disappeared. The palace of the Crown Prince was marked as '*ruines*'. Le Blévec identified a solitary European-style house in Vientiane, constructed between the river-bank and Vat Sisaket over

the royal cremation ground and parts of the brick foundations of Chao Anou's royal palace.³³ This villa had evidently replaced the hut the Count de Barthélemy had stayed in and was both the residence and the offices of France's principal representative in Vientiane. Raquez in his 1902 *Pages Laotiennes* tells us that an official residence had been built in 1898 by the first administrator of Vientiane, Pierre Morin, who is also noted for his building activities in Annam, including the famous hotel named after him in the imperial capital, Hue.³⁴ The residence was a spacious wooden house on piles and covered with a thatched roof, and had been built by men from the four *meuang* of Vientiane province, using the foundation materials and respecting the basic plan of the ruined Lan Xang royal palace. The gardens surrounding the residence were described as festive with 25-metre high trees that scattered the lawns with their red flowers – 'drops of blood in the green grass' – and with large-leaved banana, palms and young teaks sheltering a school.

Further growth followed a decree in 1899 that proclaimed Vientiane as the seat of the *Résidence-Supérieur* of the whole of Laos. With administrative functions transferred from the former seat in Savannaket a year later, Vientiane seemed set to embark on an optimistic future and the creation of an essentially European town began in earnest. The town site was surveyed and the Resident's villa constructed and occupied by 1902.³⁵ The ruins of Chao Anou's palace had been identified as the most propitious site for the house, supporting Evans' argument about the French seeking to associate themselves with the indigenous royal past. There may, too, have been an advantage in the city being in ruins in that it was relatively free of surviving social and physical structures, notably in comparison with Luang Prabang, where the traditional monarchical system was still strong. It also represented a clear replacement of one political system by another – an example of architectural construction being used to convey a message of political dominance. The ornamental ponds to the east of the palace had gone and on the river-bank the French had now built a court house and, downstream, a prison.

Vientiane's pre-colonial morphology had by now largely vanished beneath the forest and undergrowth. Towards the Nam Passak, a sometimes torrential river to the west of the royal palace, had been the upper town, where the aristocracy and the wealthy lived. In the middle of this quarter was located the sixteenth-century pagoda, Vat Ong Teu, to which senior officials had come once a year to pledge loyalty to the king of Vientiane. The common people lived in the lower town, where Vat Simeuang sheltered the protective pillar and spirit of the town. As we have seen in Chapter 3, three defensive walls had been built in the sixteenth century, the first protecting the royal palace and its outbuildings. The second wall surrounded the upper and lower towns and was eight kilometres in length. When the French began work reconstructing Vientiane the remains of the walls still existed – according to Alfred Raquez, writing in 1902, made of bricks,

'serious in its width, and its gates protected by fine fortifications'.³⁶ Three city gates were clearly observable at that time, one running alongside the road parallel to the Mekong towards Ban Si Kai, the Luang Prabang Gate and the That Luang Gate. Main roads still today follow the path of these royal roads. The third, outer wall took up the bend in the Passak and had included compounds belonging to the nobility, villages, rice fields and countryside stretching beyond That Luang (see Chapter 3, Plate 3.6).

Raquez's account, published in 1902, describes the rebirth of Vientiane and remarks on the ethnic mix of its residential population.³⁷ At the time of the 1893 treaty there was merely a scattering of Lao huts sheltered beneath banana trees. But the treaty had lifted the dust from the ruins and now a Government Commissariat had been erected, drawing around it a larger number of Lao dwellings. A detachment of troopers, many of whom were accompanied by their families, added to the native Lao population. Other Lao returned from Siamese territory where they had been deported to in 1827. In fact the French planned to encourage a mass return of Lao to Vientiane after the 1893 Franco-Siamese treaty. The French asserted that Lao people taken by force from their home villages by the Siamese had the right to French 'protection'. Between 1896 and 1898 French consular officials from Bangkok travelled to Lao settlements in Prachinburi to encourage Lao to return to the Vientiane district, issuing French identification papers and promising assistance once they reached the French side of the Mekong. The Thai government did not recognize the right of the Lao in Siamese territory to this protection but apparently did not put obstacles in the path of any who wished to return. During the dry seasons of 1897 and 1898 hundreds of Lao families set out in the direction of Vientiane in response to the French appeals. Some Phuan villages to the north of Bangkok were also involved in this population movement back to Vientiane and its surroundings. However, the resources available to French officials in Vientiane were not up to the task of accommodating these returnees, and because of this, many of them went back to their villages in Siamese territory.³⁸ By 1899 the French venture seems to have been abandoned, the lack of provision of resources from the French-Indochinese administration in Hanoi representing another example of Vientiane's marginality to the colonial enterprise.

The establishment of French Laos behind a new river border with Siam may have removed Vientiane from direct Siamese threat at last, but at the price of losing much of the city's historical hinterland on the Siamese side of the river. Vientiane's marginal location within the French-Indochinese colonial space, its underdeveloped local economy, and the lack of economic resources of interest to the French state constrained its role and helped determine its form and appearance as it re-emerged in the twentieth century. Following the Siamese destruction of Vientiane, most commerce had begun to concentrate in towns to the west of the Mekong, but with the political settlement of 1893 the Mekong changed from being the main street of Lao

society to become a political boundary dividing the Lao people between French and Siamese control.³⁹ By the 1860s Nongkhai on the opposite bank of the river had already assumed much of Vientiane's former economic role, and by the end of the nineteenth century this town had a population of some 6,000–8,000 inhabitants. By contrast, Vientiane's growth as an economic centre was limited by the depopulation that had occurred following the Siamese attacks. But Chinese shopkeepers had started to drift in, attracted, according to Raquez, by the peace and protection guaranteed by the French flag. Some of the French colonial troopers were Vietnamese, as were the stonemasons and carpenters required for construction works in Vientiane. Eventually, a first European store had opened, but run ('naturally' comments Raquez) by foreigners – Foesch and Hauff. European settlers – *colons* – came in very small numbers, seeming to validate the judgement of French general, Lucien de Reinach, who had visited in the mid-1890s that, other than the very highest areas, Laos was unsuited to European colonization.⁴⁰ By 1900, the French community there consisted of government men and just a few dozen technicians and other employees working in the main trading and shipping company and other enterprises.⁴¹ Vientiane was a town for administrators, army people and essential service providers.

Even the administrative role was small-scale. According to Robert Aldrich's analysis, only 14 Frenchmen worked in the colonial government's headquarters in Vientiane in 1900.⁴² They carried out the duties required by the Indochinese level of administration; that is, customs, immigration and security, and monitored the local, racially indigenous level that remained under Lao royal prerogative, subordinate to the French Résident-Supérieur and staffed by Lao *chao meuang*.⁴³ Given the lack of capital to develop resources and the trading restrictions imposed by geography and politics, the number of administrators needed in the colony remained low. It was difficult to raise taxes and, as Evans notes, from the outset the colonial administration failed to pay its way: 'It raised just enough money to pay its officials and no more. There was nothing for development, road building, schools, hospitals, or any of the other fruits of the *mission civilisatrice*'.⁴⁴

Nevertheless the French colonial administration liked to pretend that it was making great strides towards creating a civilized town at Vientiane. Such bravado was echoed in the views expressed by the French woman, Marthe Bassenne, who visited in 1909. She boasted how the slow but certain rehabilitation of the city was due entirely to the efforts of the French:

No trace of the ancient civilization would have remained visible had Eastern Laos not become French in 1893. As soon as the country had been organized, our residents mused upon fighting with the jungle for those remainders of the old capital, to lift it out of its ruins, to repopulate the city. Moreover, the creation of this new Vientiane has resulted in its becoming the administrative capital of the whole of Laos. Thus, little-by-little the city has regained its importance, but,

what conscientious efforts, what determination and energy is still necessary to render it its past splendour! They hacked across this jungle that was a city, to pave roads along which, alternating with the bamboo huts, are erected stone houses in which public services are housed. This is a slow process done within the limits of the budgetary resources that one has to defend every inch of the way, each year.⁴⁵

Gaston Strarbach and Antonin Baudenne gave an equally encouraging, if more poetic, view of Vientiane's progress in their novel *Sao Tiampa, Épouse Laotienne* (*Sao Tiampa, The Lao Wife*).⁴⁶ Completed in Vientiane in 1911, the book was published the following year in Paris where the exotic background and fervid plot attracted, like other romances of the time set in Indochina, an avid audience.⁴⁷ Arriving by Mekong steamer from Luang Prabang, the novel's protagonist, Vébaud, first sees white patches among the dense greenery. Soon it becomes clear that these are the bright facades of colonial buildings, slashed by the silhouetted trunks of areca palms, and, here and there, roofs glinting in the sun. But the dominating image is of the perpendicular river-bank that stretched as far as could be seen, the sunshine reverberating on the bare sandbanks. The 'Great River' stretched a kilometre wide in front of the town. Disembarking and entering the town, Vébaud was favourably impressed by the straightness of the metalled roads, the bursts of elegant buildings thrown without apparent order among the clumps of trees. After his time in northern Laos, a 'taste for life was rekindled in him like an echo coming from France'.

But it was a small town; indeed, according to Georges Maspéro, chief of civil services throughout Indochina, Vientiane was little more than a village in 1902 – a hundred or so Laotian huts, a few Chinese shops, a dozen pagodas in ruins.⁴⁸ The Résident-Supérieur's house was the town's pre-eminent modern building but, as we have already noted, it had gone through several transformations. Joseph Chevallier, a 25-year-old cavalry officer posted to Indochina and put at the service of the Résident-Supérieur in Laos, provides further impressions in his letters.⁴⁹ Arriving in Vientiane by launch on 3 July 1902 after taking part in repressing unrest further south, he was met by what seemed the whole European population of Vientiane. The official presentations over, he hastened to the Résident-Supérieur's house, which he described as 'ordinary and ugly' – a large, slightly raised ground floor surrounded on all sides by the 'inevitable and indispensable veranda that had been fitted out, I don't know why, with hideous scarlet cotton blinds'. The offices were to one side, and the 'large and beautiful' reception rooms and the Résident-Supérieur's private quarters to the other. These were built in the usual style of military stores and offices. Chevallier noted that they were only temporary and, in fact, a new house was already being built for the Résident-Supérieur, a strange mix of Khmer style and official style as used in Cochinchina and Tonkin, and of a design that appeared to him to be difficult to live in.

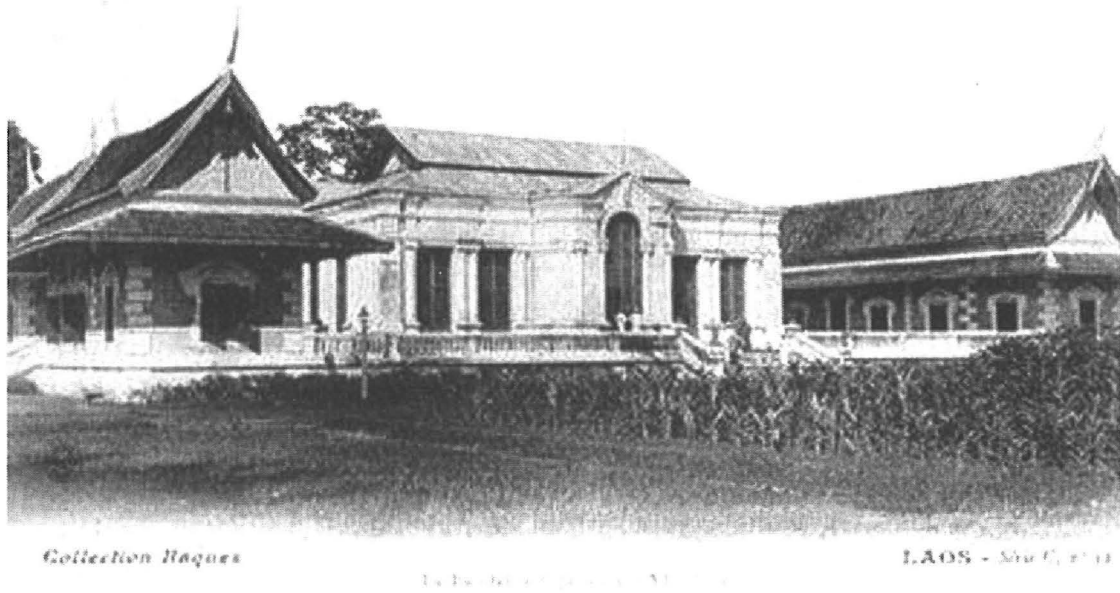


Plate 4.2 The Résidence-Supérieure at Vientiane, c. 1903 (Collection Raquez Laos Series C, No. 12).

The photographic *Collections Raquez* includes a view of the new Résident-Supérieur's palace – a simple one-story, stuccoed building with a separate brick pavilion on each side. The central building is neo-classical in style with portico and pilasters, whereas the side buildings are a combination of European brick and stucco material with quoin decoration and roofs and door and window surrounds in indigenous style. The high pitched roofs and the verandas around the side buildings were the only accommodation made to the local climate. The persistence of European ventilation systems and fenestration was a failing throughout the Protectorate, with the exception, as Eric Pietrantoni noted, of the Royal Palace at Luang Prabang.⁵⁰ The same failing applied elsewhere in Indochina until the late 1920s when the chief government architect, Ernest Hébrard, began to introduce more effective ways of encouraging the flow of fresh air through his buildings, to use canopies to shade windows from the sun, and to incorporate a wider range of indigenous elements in their decoration.⁵¹

‘Going native’

The mismatch of Lao climate and French conventions impacted also on social life in Vientiane. Marthe Bassenne described a dinner she attended at the Residence in Vientiane in 1909. The dinner, she wrote,

reunited the civil servants of Vientiane. Among the guests were two ladies – two Frenchmen have taken their wives and children, who

light-heartedly support their exile, to Laos. We were twenty-five to thirty persons gathered around the flowery table, ie., about one-fifth of the Europeans that live in this immense Laos that is bigger than all of France. The men were wearing mildewed smoking jackets, the women fresh outfits and I found this effort quite meritorious in a country so far away.⁵²

In the census of 1907, which counted a total population of 585,285 in Laos, the French numbered a mere 189 of whom 172 (91%) were males. This proportion of French appears to have remained about the same throughout the colonial period.⁵³ Chevallier commented in his letters on the ambience that reigned at such dinners: a sad spectacle where the residents of this poor little village gossiped, sometimes helping each other to bear the boredom of exile but often – and this criticism was mostly sheeted home to the *colons* – behaving like ‘dogs eating and arguing with each other’.⁵⁴ He concluded that, having seen similar goings-on in Hanoi, this must be the model of behaviour in French colonial towns.

Little had changed when, 20 years later, J. A. Pourtier described in his novel *Mékong* another party held by the Resident, although this time at the Resident’s secondary palace at Phaket. Following a fireworks display, there was a traditional ball with feature acts by ‘native dancers’. For this show, a row of armchairs and two rows of chairs had been reserved in the main reception room for the invited guests whose places had been marked with ‘scrupulous care and a diplomacy made difficult by the sickening susceptibility of a few strong-minded persons’.⁵⁵ Between dances, the gathering caught up on colonial gossip. There was still the enormous imbalance between European men and European women and still the sense of trying to uphold civilized manners in one of the French empire’s most isolated outposts.

The civil servants and army men were, of course, sent there and rarely stayed beyond the term of their posting. In fact, Laos was generally considered as a ‘dead-end posting’.⁵⁶ Joseph Chevallier, the only French officer in Laos in 1902, was, as we shall see, an exception. Those Frenchmen who chose to settle there – the *colons* – did so for a variety of reasons, and for some it was the isolation that seemed to be the attraction. In much of the popular early nineteenth-century fiction concerning Indochina, as Nicola Cooper points out in her book on the encounter between Lao and colonial French, distance from the homeland, metropolitan France, was commonly portrayed as having a ‘disorienting and debilitating effect on the settlers’.⁵⁷ Pourtier suggests that Laos in fact attracted its share of social misfits, both *colons* and temporary residents. Indeed some of the administrative appointments to Laos, like M. Malavaux, the Customs Officer, in Pourtier’s novel, were clearly inappropriate in terms of their character and especially their ability to cope well in a multi-cultural environment. Invited to the soirée at the Residence, he preferred to skulk outside, smoking and

swapping gossip with other middle-ranking officials, and finding every cause to criticise the local Lao.

He jostled the natives who were standing around the door of the Residence, trying to catch something of the show going on inside. M. Malavaux detested these people. He called them lazy and deceitful. 'All they think of is drinking and eating; they sing at their father's funeral', he would insist. M. Malavaux was not of a class sufficiently high to temper this contempt with condescending amiability. He was naïvely, brutally, the enemy of everything native.⁵⁸

For other *colons* it was more of a Shangri-la – from their point of view, pleasantly exotic, the 'earthly paradise that all the French had promised', as one Indochina traveller, Norman Lewis, called it.⁵⁹ But he added that this country was 'one vast Tahiti, causing all the French who had been stationed there to affect ever after a vaguely dissolute manner'. This was generally attributed to the fact that life was not only comfortable but often stupefyingly boring. The majority of French civil servants were stationed in the main towns, where security of employment and the political calm meant that a low level of activity was required. Most French residents were therefore 'frankly bored with life in this distant possession', wrote another traveller, Harry Franck, in 1926, 'and, outside their routine tasks, are interested mainly in café pleasures and the joys of feminine society'.⁶⁰ The abundance of Lao women and girls as servants and concubines made up for the lack of European women. The 1907 census counted 49 '*métis*', children of mixed European and indigenous parentage, most of whom would have lived in Vientiane and other towns.

Cooper refers to the 'boundary anxieties' that the Lao-French encounter provoked. These can be summed up as a fear that the proper distance between natives and Europeans, colonised and colonisers, the self and the other, was being closed, threatening the 'physical and biological integrity of the European'.⁶¹ The 'immoral, if not barbarous, character of the native populations' was seen to challenge the civilized status of the European. This led, as outlined below, to particular forms of town planning, notably ethnically based residential segregation, being seen as appropriate for Indochinese cities, including Vientiane. It also led to rules to guide inter-cultural relationships, both official and personal. But such rules were often cast aside, at least in the private realm. When European women were present, a proper segregation between French and Lao was seen to be essential; when they were absent, French men would be tempted to '*s'indigéniser*' or 'go native' – to use the disparaging term used by critics back home in Europe. Taking on a Lao *de facto* wife – or '*encongayment*', a French term coming from the Vietnamese for a native concubine, *con gai* – was a common feature of this 'lapsed behaviour'.

Vébaud, in the novel *Sao Tiampa*, typifies the Frenchman who breaks these rules. Missing the social life he was used to in France, Vébaud soon found himself trying to live out exotic fantasies mixing notions of the female, the Orient and the other: he is seduced by the mysterious little Lao woman, Sao Tiampa, whom he takes as his wife. From time to time he tries to break away but 'Laos is in his veins like poison'. A colleague with longer experience in the country says he has seen people leave Laos swearing curses at it but cutting short their leave in France eager to return:

You are experiencing that now, the slow poison which distils that terror. It penetrates us, taints our blood, spreads through our bodies. . . . And we no longer know if we love or hate it. A plague more dangerous than opium and alcohol combined mixes with the air that fills our lungs, impregnates our food, saturates the dark forests, the plain surrounded by marshes; and flows angrily back into the river. Then there are the mosquitoes . . . and the lethal rays of the sun and the sluggishness that it produces, the Asiatic wiles and cheating that the facial expressions of the *p'hu sao* [young unmarried women] symbolise and encapsulate so well. And still, like me, you love this Laos, you are its conquest, its prey, and you come back to it . . . ⁶²

But, so the book's publisher tells us, despite his attempts to understand a civilization so different from his own and the charms of the tropical forest, Vébaud leaves disappointed and misunderstood by this Asia about which he had dreamed since childhood.⁶³

Thus the epithet 'land of the lotus-eaters' quickly emerged and stuck firm; Laos was portrayed as a country where an indolent lifestyle prevailed – a view still commonly seen in tourism literature today.⁶⁴ *Inaction et ennui* (inaction and boredom) were the order of the day. Indeed, these words were chosen by Marie-Joseph Chalvin, the editor of Joseph Chevallier's letters for the chapter covering the 5-month period that Chevallier spent in Vientiane in 1902.⁶⁵ From his very first letter from Vientiane (8 July 1902), Chevallier himself talks about *le farniente* (luxurious idleness) of the Laotian capital.⁶⁶ Boredom no doubt fostered the use of opium which was freely available, indeed encouraged by the official opium regime, a monopoly known as the *Régie de l'opium*, that had been established initially as a joint enterprise between the French treasury and the Royal counterpart in Luang Prabang and then, after 1914, operated solely by the colonial government.⁶⁷

This mix of opium and ennui is portrayed sharply in Louis-Charles Royer's 1935 novel, *Kham: La Laotienne* (Kham: The Lao woman).⁶⁸ Although Royer is describing Luang Prabang, the same general picture goes for Vientiane and other colonial towns along the Mekong. Many civil servants considered residing in Luang Prabang as a disgrace. Laos was seen as so desperately poor because the efforts and financial resources of the

Indochinese government had been reserved for those colonies likely to be profitable: Tonkin, Annam, Cochin-China, all countries producing rice, tea, rubber and other exportable commodities. Some officials, therefore,

waited for their leave like ordinary soldiers; only thinking about that and taking a lukewarm interest in the colony that they were supposed to run; others really loved Laos; but it was they who had been 'colonized'. They had been contaminated by the native indolence; they let their lives just flow along; without expecting from it anything more than a clear sky, tasty fruit, fresh drinks and easy women. The first group maintained their French habits along with their false collars; the second walked around in canvas shoes – and in bare feet at home – much happier when the administrative despatches were late, watching the strawberries ripen in their garden and breasts of their servant girls.

Some smoked opium, carefully, to chase away the depression of the worst evenings; they put themselves to bed in a sensuous stupor out of which they made no effort to escape and it was like this that certain of them stayed in Laos, after retirement, continuing to navigate the river, in order to chat with friends scattered from Ban-Houei-Sai to Vientiane, stretched out on their rafts like kings lazing on their chariots, between a cool pernod and the warm body of a Laotian woman.⁶⁹

Thus in this colonial discourse indigenisation was seen to comprise three main elements – boredom, a native wife, and opium. But the ultimate manifestation, according to Cooper, was 'departure and rejection of the homeland' in favour of the exotic.⁷⁰ Morgat, the hero of Royer's novel, falls into this lotus-eater pattern, deciding to stay with Kham, his *phou sao* (young unmarried woman, concubine) in Laos, rejecting the wealth he had won from the discovery of a rich gold deposit and preferring life in a small village on the edge of the Mekong.

For Morgat lives *à la laotienne*, sleeping beneath a bamboo roof, eating rice, fishing with ancient traps, catching wild game, with no other distraction than seeing the 'phou saos' dance during the 'boun' [festival days]; but, each evening, he returns to his rush mat and the girl with golden breasts for whom he had given up everything.⁷¹

But 'don't complain', the author admonishes in the novel's final line, 'he is happy'. Our real-life character, Joseph Chevallier, was equally enchanted by the country, though not – as far as we know from his correspondence – indulging in either *phou sao* or opium, and he, too, decided to stay on after his commission as aide to the Résident-Supérieur ended. Even by contrast to his former colleagues in Saigon or Hanoi, he was fortunate, for:

Here . . . I am in a completely new country, among people who are not yet spoiled by contact with Europeans and Vientiane is very certainly a town that merits being seen. It is an extraordinary combination of ruined pagodas and imposing monuments that denote a remarkable, old and very advanced civilization.⁷²

To his great regret, however, a new budgetary ruling in Paris led to the cutting back of French missions in the colonies and he was forced to accept repatriation. But he was ‘bitten by the exotic’, as Chalvin, the editor of his letters, put it, and spent most of his remaining career outside metropolitan France.⁷³

Economic development

Raquez described the commercial scene in Vientiane in 1902.⁷⁴ An official marketplace was beginning to attract a few Lao farmers who ranged their goods on the ground, but it required serious pressure to obtain sufficient foodstuffs to satisfy – indeed enable – the Europeans to live. In 1912 a new covered market was constructed on the site of today’s Nam Phou fountain: two pavilions of brick with tiled floors and well-kept tables.⁷⁵ The administration encouraged Vietnamese and Chinese traders to step into the breach and soon the burgeoning commercial centre was inhabited by the Kinh Viet and Chinese. Brick and cement shop-houses started to appear on the inland side of the row of largely ruined *vat*, while a treasury building was constructed in 1909 on the banks of the Mekong near the Résident-Supérieur’s palace, where it stood until it was demolished a century later. Between these and stretching along the Mekong lived the French civil servants. Many of Vientiane’s Chinese, Vietnamese and Laotian shop-houses, as well as the mandarins’ meeting rooms, the offices of the *Messageries fluviales* and a waiting room for steamer passengers, faced the Mekong. A road ran parallel to the river and on the narrow strip of land separating it from the river several *sala* – communal shelters – had been erected for itinerant coolies and traders since it was the custom in all Lao towns and villages to offer a shady resting-place to travellers.⁷⁶

It was this view of Vientiane from the river that Starbach and Baudenne’s Vébaud saw as he left for France at the novel’s end.⁷⁷ It seemed that the whole European colony, then around 70 people, came to farewell the boat as it left the Vientiane wharf.

The launch cast off . . . A few turns of propeller and Vientiane draws back into its cloak of greenery around its ruins and its houses. The forest engulfs it. . . . The modest capital soon no longer exists.

The passage rounds off the bitter-sweet strain that permeates the novel. This strain, with its underlying paternalism, peaked in the protagonist’s earlier



Plate 4.3 Vientiane in 1902: the quayside with its Chinese and Lao shops (Joseph Chevallier. (1995). *Lettres du Tonkin et du Laos (1901–1903)*. Paris: L'Harmattan).



Plate 4.4 Vientiane in 1902: along the river (Joseph Chevallier. (1995). *Lettres du Tonkin et du Laos (1901–1903)*. Paris: L'Harmattan).

contemplation on the future facing Laos and its people, a growing concern among those in Laos and in France who were questioning their role as colonisers. The Laotians had such an easy life – why inflict modernization on them?

The only justification for colonization is economic. Why develop the modest appetites of a people happy in their simplicity and make them victims to things of no consequence to them...? Anchored in our [French] national habits, we can see the rationale [for these economic changes]: is it going to be the same for other people who perceive the benefits with difficulty and who will only adopt them with extreme repugnance?

Happy Laos! From the Boloven Plateau to the Yunnan border, your mountains and the Great River provide defence against the explosive invasion of progress, and your sleep is so calm, so surprising, that the civilized person, with all his utilitarian baggage, sometimes hesitates to let progress disturb the quietude.

For us Occidentals...our soil only produces when it is vanquished...[;] the whole painful edifice [of European society] rests on this inescapable law. But the Laotian lives on a prodigal soil, slumbers when the climate overcomes him, and saves his energy. What's the good of wearing oneself out for such an easy living? When the rains come, he sows a handful of rice, in the period between two full moons he strikes into an acre of sodden field, and that's his most painful task. Succulent fruit ripen at hand's reach, the river throws up fish and each cast of the net brings in more than he needs.⁷⁸

Later Virginia Thompson was to pick up this theme of the simplicity of the Lao way of life when she observed that the Lao were 'the national group which has the least political and economic importance in Indo-China'. But, like Starbach and Baudenne, she comes to their support, quickly adding that 'for the rare Frenchman who sees in the Laotians a silly, lazy and naïve people, there are hundreds who are charmed by their gentle affability and their aesthetic appearance'.⁷⁹

The 1920s

Through the 1920s many things changed in Vientiane's social and economic life – and in Laos more generally. Opium abuse seems to have been brought under control, following on from the Résident-Supérieur's 1907 order forbidding civil servants from smoking it. Living with *con gai* became less common. The population of the town grew to around 9,000 by the end of the decade, including perhaps 100 Europeans.⁸⁰ The administrative hub had been reinforced by further building, and was surrounded by a cluster of schools and the hospital.⁸¹ A land survey and registration system had been

established just prior to WWI, and a *plan d'alignment* introduced to straighten the early roads and tracks, making a grid of thoroughfares running perpendicular and parallel to the Mekong. A new main corridor – Avenue de France (now Lan Xang Avenue) – was opened, parallel to the ancient royal route which at that time was known as rue Rouffiandis (now Nongbone Road), and a sewerage system was constructed between 1917 and 1922. However, within this evolving colonial fabric the local people maintained their village structure and traditional way of life. Isolation continued to deter more substantial change and, to the regret of the colonial authorities and the European community, to hold back exploitation of the country's economic resources. In a vicious circle, the lack of goods to export and the small agricultural population with little demand for imports meant that transport and communications infrastructure remained underdeveloped.

Royer's characters occasionally make the journey back to France. It is here that the isolation of land-locked Laos in the early twentieth century is most acutely felt. From Vientiane or Luang Prabang, the travellers must first take an open boat to Thakhaek, and then a car to Vinh in central Vietnam and the railway either north to Hanoi or south to the ports of Tourane (Da Nang) or Nha Trang where they could connect with a steamer to Saigon.⁸² The French shipping company, Messageries Maritimes, carried small numbers of passengers, mostly officers and civil servants, the rest of the trip to France. They would take their leave in spring so as to pass summer in Europe and return to the colony in October or November to escape the French winter. French tourists came in equally small numbers to Laos for the elephant hunting around Luang Prabang, despite the practice being technically outlawed. Defeuilles' 1927 book, *L'Indochine*, has a section on tourism, but it has only this to say about Laos: 'Of Laos, one goes above all to experience the Mekong with its Khône waterfalls and several Khmer ruins, but it is little in comparison with the beauties of Tonkin and Cambodia'.⁸³

Although Vientiane was the terminus of the steamers – boats specially made in France to cope with the shallow waters of the upper Mekong – the river trade was desultory.⁸⁴ French subsidies to the shipping monopoly, the Compagnie des Messageries fluviales de Cochinchine, made no difference. A spine road was constructed from Luang Prabang to Vientiane and on to Savannakhet and the Cambodian border, but the promised railway links to coastal Vietnamese towns failed to materialize; hence Vientiane's port languished, and no great railway terminal or commercial quarter was built. It remained easier to conduct trade across the Khorat Plateau to Bangkok, which was linked by rail by the 1920s.⁸⁵ Some half-hearted attempts were made to cultivate rubber and coffee and to develop mines, but cattle-raising activities were retracting into Annam.⁸⁶ Two colons were trying to grow rice commercially in Laos in the early 1920s, one in Vientiane and the other in Pakse in the south. So even if opium smoking had been cut back, the main

export from French colonial Laos was always raw opium.⁸⁷ In the map of colonial Indochina produced by historians Brocheux and Hémery to show the main resources exploited by the French, the entire territory of Laos remains featureless.⁸⁸

Restoring the ‘Lao heritage’

The comfort that the French felt living in Laos and the paternalistic affection they had for the local people combined to produce a particular way of representing Laos and Laotians to the rest of the world. As we have seen, in their novels about life in Laos they focused on the exotic, and especially on the lifestyles and charm of Lao women. Much of this related to the greater personal freedom women enjoyed in Laos compared with Cambodia and Vietnam – or, at least, that was how Frenchmen perceived the situation. Louis Malleret, in his 1934 treatise on Indochinese exoticism in French literature, summed this up neatly, using words from the novel *Komlah* by his compatriot, Roland Meyer:

In Laos where women’s liberty is much greater than in Cambodia or Annam, the *phou sao* are concerned, ‘in the coolness of their huts smelling sweetly of straw thatch’, only with dreams of love.⁸⁹

Many descriptions were written about the *cour d’amour* – the ‘pretty phrases that Laotian Ronsards and du Bellays exchange with one another on summer nights’.⁹⁰ In fact, this was a Lao tradition that authorized girls over 16 years of age to stay unattended on the veranda while their parents slept and to join in a courting game in which love songs or poems were improvised and exchanged with their young admirers.

In celebrating this particular feature of Lao heritage, the French demonstrated their highly sexualized valuation of Lao culture. But, in addition, the French administration combined its modernizing and colonizing project with a selective rehabilitation of another aspect of the city’s cultural heritage, notably through their restoration of monuments and a partial resuscitation of the city’s symbolic morphology. It was this invented image of Laos and its people that was presented to the rest of France and the world in the 1931 International Colonial Exhibition in Paris.

Selective monument restoration

The arrival of French officials in the 1890s had heralded another wave of destruction in Vientiane that wiped out many remaining traces of the city’s pre-colonial fabric. Gagneux and Pfeiffer have criticized this as vandalism committed under the pretext of urbanism,⁹¹ and, as we have seen, French official buildings were indeed constructed on the sites of old palaces. Like the pretence that development was occurring apace in Laos when little in

fact was happening, so too the French wanted to believe that they were helping to revive, or at least preserve, Lao culture and restore its heritage.⁹² There is no doubt that committed scholars aided this process, particularly Parmentier with his drawings used for the reconstruction of the Vat Ho Pha Kaeo and the work done by the chief of the Archaeological Service, Henri Marchal, in association with Prince Phetsarath, in the 1940s to raise awareness of the value of Vientiane's temples.

The long program of works done on the That Luang typifies the French interest in monument restoration and preservation, yet suggests other motives for their concern. Thirty years after Garnier and his colleagues had admired the That Luang, Aymonier's Cambodians had found the central pyramid smashed by Chinese Ho bandits searching for hidden treasures.⁹³ In 1896 a lightning strike caused further damage. In 1901 Captain Lunet de Lajonquière wrote presciently in the introduction to his all-too-brief description of the old city:

At the start of this new era it is interesting to crystallize the image of the old city and particularly to study in detail the numerous pagodas and their ornaments which will, no doubt, be destroyed through clumsy restoration.⁹⁴

He was correct: one of the first actions taken by the new French Protectorate was to engage the builder, Pierre Morin, in 1900 to restore the stupa and the result was generally agreed to have been a monstrosity, the curved central chedi structure being replaced by an angular 'Norman tower'.⁹⁵ The holes in the towers where the Ho had looked for treasure had been filled in, and several minor buildings surrounding the monument were restored as were the stylized lotus leaf decorations and sculptures.⁹⁶ In the French restoration effort the main entrance to the That Luang was reversed towards the west, whereas formerly the monument's principal gateway was to the east and had been traditionally approached by canal, not road. Other 'restorations', while cosmetically appealing, further distorted the original spatial logic of Vientiane's key urban sites. The main doors of the Vat Ho Pha Kaeo (main Buddha image sanctuary), originally facing east (so that its Buddha image, backing onto the western wall, faced the east, the auspicious orientation symbolizing enlightenment), were re-oriented to the west, to face the garden of the Résident-Supérieur's residence where a statue of Auguste Pavie stood.⁹⁷

Although there was general dissatisfaction with Morin's restoration, it was not until between 1929 and 1935 that a sympathetic reconstruction was undertaken by Léon Fombertaux, an architect from the *École Française d'Extrême-Orient*.⁹⁸ The reconstructed complex, with the central tower taken back to something resembling its original form, was eventually re-inaugurated on the 2,500th anniversary of the Buddha's birth in 1957. The establishment of the EFEO by Governor-General Doumer in 1899 had

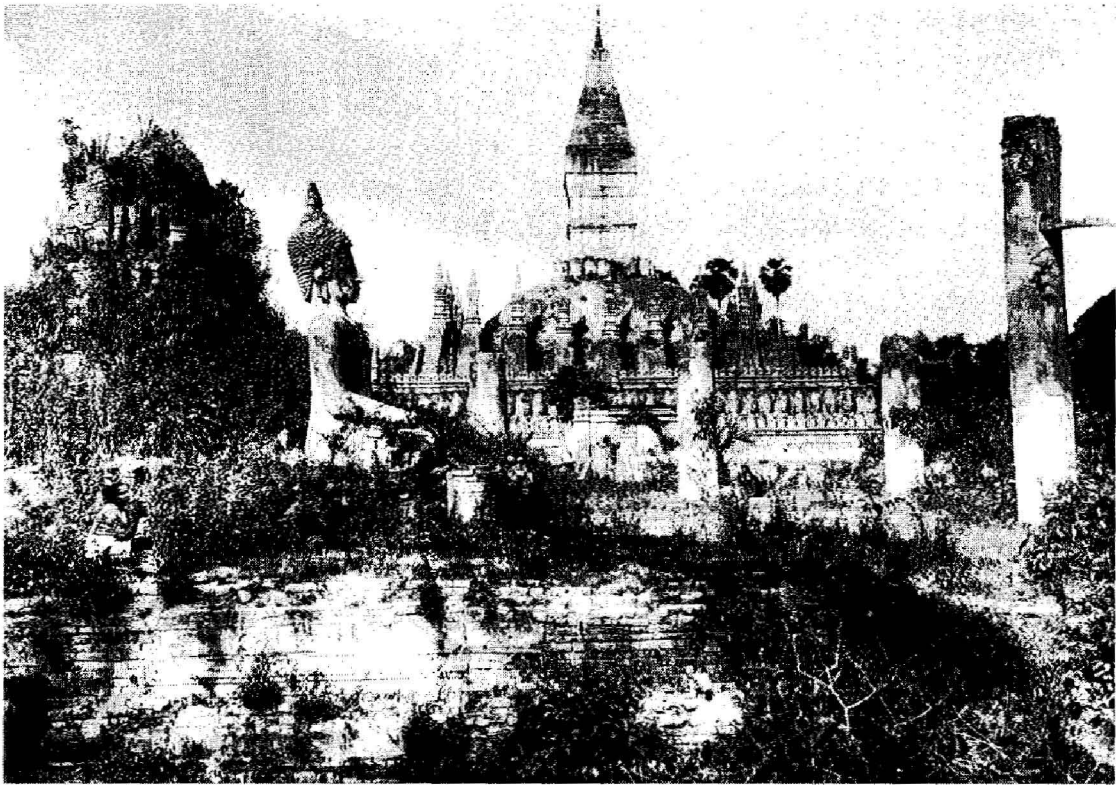


Plate 4.5 That Luang in 1919, seen from the western side of the complex and showing Morin's 'Norman tower' (Musée des arts asiatiques-Guimet, Paris. Photo RMN – Thierry Ollivier).

been an important turning point in terms of professionalism in heritage management. With its headquarters in Hanoi, it supported research by a team of historians, archaeologists and ethnographers that led to the identification, classification and documentation of Indochina's ancient treasures.

The first general listing of Indochinese monuments was proclaimed by decree of the Governor-General in 1924. This applied to Indochina a 1913 French law relating to the classification and protection of historic monuments.⁹⁹ Such activities, though in fact mostly focused on other parts of Indochina, allowed the Protectorate of Laos to boast a proud record in conserving and restoring archaeological remains, monuments and statues.¹⁰⁰ The list for Vientiane in 1930 stood at 13 structures, mostly *vat* but also the That Luang and a collection of Buddha images that had been transferred from Vat Sisaket to the *Résidence-Supérieure*.¹⁰¹

A number of scholars and commentators have argued that the restoration of monuments in Laos was not only done out of scientific and aesthetic interest in the monuments themselves but also as part of an effort to cement French legitimacy. Geoffrey Gunn, for instance, claims that 'whatever the professions of science and scholarly detachment ... in Laos, as in other parts of Indochina, archaeological endeavour was pressed into the service of

Table 4.1 Historic buildings in Vientiane classified by Presidential decree to April 1930

<i>Property</i>	<i>Description</i>
Vat Chan	Carved wood of the enclosing wall; stupa ruins
Vat Kang	Stupa remains
Vat Phya	—
Vat In Peng	Khmer pieces on the altar, annexes and dvarapalas
Vat Hai Sok	Buddhas
Vat Ongteu	Vat remains, gable timbers, bronze Buddhas
Vat Sisaket	Vat; furniture; cloister; 7 large inlaid bronze Buddhas; 4 inscribed stele; 2 panels from the Vat Ho Pha Kaeo; stone statues and sculptures; library and stupas
Vat Ho Pha Kaeo	Vat and remains of the compound
Vat Yot Keo	Remains of the library (disappeared)
Vat Xiang Va	Candle-holder
Vat Tai Noi	Vat remains
Résidence Supérieure	9 bronze Buddhas
That Luang	Stupa, compound, statues and remains of surrounding stupas

Source: EFEO, *Liste Générale de Classement des Monuments Historiques de l'Indochine. Arrêtés des 16 mai 1925, 20 novembre 1926, 21 juin 1928, 13 juillet 1928, 29 avril 1930*, EFEO, Hanoi, 1930, pp. 103–4.

the state and empire' and points to the particular selection of monuments chosen for restoration.¹⁰² In Vientiane the EFEO undertook the restoration of Vat Sisaket in 1922–1923 and 1927–1931 and That Luang in 1934, the former *vat* containing within its compound the major library of religious texts in Laos and the second having symbolic importance in both Buddhist and non-Buddhist ritual as the central sacred reliquary, as well as being associated with Chao Anuvong and his defiance of the Thai. The task of restoring the Vat Ho Pha Kaeo, the former home of the Emerald Buddha, was delegated to the leading local engineer of the day, Prince Suvanna Phuma, and was completed in 1937–1939. Thus, concludes Gunn,

by strengthening Buddhist social institutions, by restoring religious and 'political' edifices such as the king's palace in Luang Prabang, the French sought not only to legitimise and buttress the system of royal power – where that was thought to be advantageous – but to coopt traditional hierarchies in the interest of indirect rule and the administrative expediency which flowed from that measure.¹⁰³

Grant Evans takes a similar line, making the point that the French administration and EFEO began restoring Buddhist monuments, such as the That Luang, in order to provide national symbols.¹⁰⁴ In this, the French were merely doing in Laos what they did back home in France although it was in

part an effort, too, to distance their Lao territory from the Siamese cultural influence. Indeed, the EFEO itself recognized that its activities contributed to the process of nation building in the Indochinese colonies – to the renaissance of Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam.¹⁰⁵ The speeches by Lao delegates to the celebrations in Hanoi marking the 50th anniversary of the EFEO are full of thanks for the efforts of the French to preserve Laos' heritage.¹⁰⁶ Both Gunn and Evans note the irony that the activities of such colonizing institutions as the EFEO actually had a contradictory effect.

On the one hand, they contributed to the imposition of French power, but on the other laid the groundwork for the flowering of indigenous nationalism and pride in indigenous culture. In essence, the growth of Lao nationalism and French colonialism were intimately connected.¹⁰⁷

According to Søren Ivarsson, the restoration work on Vat Ho Pha Kaeo carried out just prior to and during WWII was, in particular, a symbol of French attempts to stimulate Lao nationalism in a period when the whole colonial enterprise was under challenge.¹⁰⁸ First built by King Xetthathirat in 1566 shortly after he moved his capital from Luang Prabang to Vientiane, the royal temple of Vat Ho Pha Kaeo was situated within the royal palace compound to house the Emerald Buddha.¹⁰⁹ It will be recalled that after the Siamese assaults the temple remained in ruins from 1828 until 1937 when Henri Marchal and the EFEO began to restore it.¹¹⁰ Prince Phetsarat was interested in establishing it as a museum of religious art and started collecting artefacts in and around Vientiane. Prince Suvanna Phuma oversaw the reconstruction works which took 5 years, using the old plans and incorporating as many of the original features as possible, including the great carved doors. At the inauguration ceremony on 18 March 1942 attended by Prince Phetsarat and Admiral Decoux, Governor-General of Indochina, its restoration was hailed as a very auspicious sign for the future of Laos. Søren Ivarsson notes that:

The fate of the temple was seen as so closely related to the sorrows and happiness of the country that it was characterized as 'the national temple of Laos' ... Following 150 years of devastation it was finally restored and resurrected to its former glories under French tutelage in 1942. In the same manner the historical narrative portrayed a new Laos in the making. Although new and modern in its appearance it was formed from a specific historical heritage.¹¹¹

But war delayed the planned establishment of a museum within the former royal chapel and it was not until 1968 that Madeleine Giteau of the EFEO organized and categorized the collection.

The International Colonial Exhibition 1931

The great *Exposition Coloniale Internationale* held in 1931 reinforced the exotic image of Laos but also the role of Indochina as a model of French colonial enterprise in both the fine choice of places to establish colonies – that is, in countries with thousand-year-old civilizations – and the exemplary style of administration.¹¹² The Governor-General, Alexandre Varenne, had made clear from the outset of planning for the exhibition in 1926 that:

The organisers of the Paris colonial exhibition count precisely on Indochina to provide against the involvement of great foreign colonies a shining example of what our colonizing spirit can achieve. . . . It must give the impression of size, an idea of power, richness and strength.¹¹³

It eventuated that only the Danish, Dutch, Belgian and Portuguese empires were represented, Great Britain, France's arch rival, having declined the invitation to participate. Nevertheless the various displays were on a grand scale. The Indochinese colonies were given a central location in the 110-hectare exhibition grounds in the Bois de Vincennes in eastern Paris.¹¹⁴ A replica of Angkor on the Grande Avenue des Colonies was the most prominent, reflecting the primacy French explorers, administrators, scholars and art experts gave to the Indianized architecture of the ancient Khmer capital. The small Laos exhibit was nevertheless also well located on the edge of the artificial Lac Daumesnil, named after a Napoleonic hero, and adjacent to the main restaurant. As with the earlier colonial fairs in Marseilles in 1906 and 1922, those designing the exhibit had gone out to Indochina to research their topics. The designers were required to conform strictly to the Indochinese architectural types and rules in order to evoke an authentic display and an exotic ambience.¹¹⁵ Cooper points out that this requirement contained an impossible contradiction, since the concept of exotic representation was entirely subjective and at odds with efforts to recreate the authenticity of indigenous architecture. She concludes, however, that 'what the *section indochinoise* in fact amounted to was remarkably similar to the results of French colonial urbanism: a transfigured vision of indigenous buildings which better conformed to French aesthetics'.¹¹⁶

The choice of monuments to re-create revealed much about the attitude of the French authorities to their Indochinese possessions, in particular the assertion that France was saving them from decline. Thus the Angkor ruins encapsulated Khmer disintegration, while the imperial palace of Hue, representing Annam, reflected the decline of Vietnam's Nguyen dynasty. It was the remoteness of Laos that they chose to bring to the attention of a French public grown blasé of exhibitions.¹¹⁷ They chose a village scene with replicas of four huts and the Vat Xiang Thong library and chapel, with, in

the distance, the high-pitched and melancholic sound of a Lao *khaen* (bamboo flute) echoing through the Lao forest.¹¹⁸ Unintentionally they revealed that Laos remained a backwater, with no industrial, commercial or modern urban developments worthy of being featured.

The small book on Laos written by Roland Meyer for the exhibition made several telling references to Vientiane. The site of French Vientiane on the ruins of a dead city was chosen, he claimed, as a symbol of the renaissance of Laos.

This audacious initiative won for us everyone's hearts . . . It [Vientiane] was a magician's work. Far from our maritime bases, without roads or railways, away from all practical communication lines, other than that of the Mekong, then unconquered and scarcely explored, a pleasant and prosperous modern town has risen from the moist debris and among the restored ruins and shines today over a hundred-league radius, the unrivalled queen of central Indochina.¹¹⁹

This was pure propaganda, a clever gloss on France's achievements in the city. Meyer's book also sought to reinforce – as indeed did the whole colonial exhibition – the French construction of 'Indochina', that new piece of geo-space described by Panivong Norindr as no more than 'an elaborate fiction, a modern phantasmatic assemblage invented during the heyday of French colonial hegemony in Southeast Asia'.¹²⁰ Cooper observes, too, that the origins of the separate countries were 'completely occluded' in the effort to portray a more unified Indochina.¹²¹ Moreover, the exhibition embodied a strange paradox, one that captures the essence of the entire French enterprise in Laos: despite their much vaunted love of the place and its people, the amount of real progress the French brought to Laos was nearly always overstated in the official speeches and public documents such as Meyer's book. Little investment was in fact put into the country or its capital, Vientiane.

Vientiane in the 1930s

Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, the French colonial administration, French leaders in the metropolis, and French scholars and tourists boasted frequently that urban development was one of France's major contributions to the development of Indochina. For example, Georges Maspéro, archaeologist and Acting Résident-Supérieur of Cochinchina 1918–1920, wrote that:

In Indochina the French have been great builders. Abandoning the bamboo, clay and thatch of the natives, they have used brick and iron, reinforced concrete, sometimes stone. They have built solidly and for the future.¹²²

However Vientiane does not rate a mention in Maspéro's description. In retrospect, it is clear how different Laos was from the rest of Indochina, where urban development was one of the major impacts French colonization had on the landscape, economy and way of life. Even in Cambodia, Phnom Penh was emerging as a large and architecturally stylish city. By contrast, as Pierre-Bernard Lafont notes in his 1991 sketch of urban development in Laos, Vientiane was no more than '*un gros bourg*' – a smallish market-town – for the first two decades of the twentieth century and urbanization in general was of little importance under the Protectorate in Laos.¹²³ Despite the fact that the Résident-Supérieur au Laos had shifted, with his administrative functions, to Vientiane in 1900, the population of the official capital grew only slowly. Vientiane might well have been declared an 'urban centre' in 1904 and raised to commune status in 1916, but the total number of residents did not reach 10,000 until the late 1930s. Of these only a hundred were European, mostly French.¹²⁴ At least until the 1920s, Luang Prabang was really the only urban centre in Laos – and it, too, was small compared with Hanoi, Saigon-Cholon, Haiphong and Phnom Penh.

Ignoring these mediocre demographic statistics and obvious inter-city comparisons, remarkable achievements were being claimed by the French Indochinese Administration. When Governor-General Pierre Pasquier visited in November 1929, he hailed Vientiane as 'This town which we have made rise from its ruins' and he praised the Vientiane people, who had turned out to welcome him enthusiastically, for their efforts in exploiting the territory. But he seemed to reflect on the town's difficult birth and the relatively slow growth of Laos in general when he referred to 'ungrateful Nature which seemed intent upon accumulating obstacles upon obstacles as if to make more distant and deliberately discourage the efforts of the venturesome colonists and traders to undertake exploitation'.¹²⁵ The geographer, Charles Robequain, was probably also conscious of the contrast with other Indochinese cities when he commented in 1925 that:

Doubtless, it is easy to laugh at these European buildings, whose architecture is often very ordinary, with their very white walls, orderly gardens where trees have not yet had time to grow. But it would be profoundly unfair not to recognise the work accomplished: there is something comforting, moving in this French experience, in this push to establish, in this enthusiasm and confidence.¹²⁶

Moreover Robequain and other commentators made much of the point that, unlike its rival Luang Prabang, Vientiane was entirely a French creation.

It is undeniable, that's what all visitors say, that Vieng-Chane still has a much more artificial appearance than Luang Prabang; it is still a little like a forced plant, a hothouse plant: it needs, to exist, careful attention. . . . Luang Prabang is like a manifestation of an instinct that



Plate 4.6 Vientiane from the air, c. 1929 (P. Pollachi. (1929). *Atlas Colonial Français: Colonies, Protectorats et Pays Sous Mandat* (p. 210). Paris: L'Illustration).

perpetuates itself; Vieng-Chane is a work of deliberation, and it is our work; we found Luang Prabang fully formed, whereas we have created present-day Vieng-Chane.¹²⁷

Indeed the French impact was everywhere to be seen – in the town's narrow economic base, its physical and social divisions, and in the layout of the streets and the architecture of its buildings. It was an administrative town, dominated by the *Résidence-Supérieure* in the middle of the town and surrounded by a narrow range of state-funded functions, such as finance, education and training, hospitals, law and order. A sprawling hospital, primary and trade schools, and the offices and workshops of the public works department covered several blocks downstream beyond the Ho Pha Kaeo. Upstream two commercial hubs had formed to deal with the import-export trade and run shops to provide provisions to the town population. One of these was on quai Auguste Pavie (now Fa Ngum Embankment) on the riverside and a smaller one on rue Georges Mahé (Thanon Samsenthai). A public market was located on rue Tafforin (now the site of the Nam Phou Fountain): this consisted of two covered halls, half-walled at the sides.¹²⁸ Private enterprise followed government, including a number of European and Asian commercial firms and transport companies, and the Catholic Missions built a church to serve the Lao who were returning to live in Vientiane as well as foreign residents.¹²⁹ The Buddhist *vat*, many still in ruins, spread along the river towards the Nam Passak, while the indigenous Chao Meuang administration was located in offices on rue Georges Mahé opposite the main police station, the Hotel du Commissariat. In 1920 provincial advisory councils were created across Laos to advise the French administration on indigenous social and economic matters.¹³⁰ In Vientiane this comprised heads of the *meuang* and three notables.¹³¹ An Indigenous Consultative Assembly was established in 1923, mostly drawn from the various provincial advisory councils but adding some of the more highly educated Lao.

In other parts of the French empire, as in British and Dutch colonies in Asia, the European settlers separated themselves from the pre-existing native town. This was a pattern so common that it earned a special name in urban geography – the imposed colonial city model. But, of course, the French were building, not on a thriving pre-existing urban population, but a set of deserted ruins. It was only after the French began re-creating Vientiane that the Lao began to return. Social spaces based on race quickly began to emerge. The French certainly did not want to live in the traditional Lao way and, even when they took on *phou sao* as de facto wives or temporary concubines, they expected the Lao women to adjust to living in houses that were European in style or at least strongly influenced by European architectural notions. In Vientiane, the French lived in distinct European quarters to the south-east. The Vietnamese lived to the north-west of the commercial centre. Initially the returning Lao built their traditional

houses – typically of timber, sometimes with daub, and almost always on stilts and surrounded by coconut trees and a fence-enclosed garden¹³² – close by the centre of the settlement. But by the mid-1920s when Charles Robequain was studying the town, the Lao had nearly all moved out to the peripheral suburbs, especially upstream towards the Nam Passak, ‘withdrawing little by little before the French and Vietnamese’.¹³³

Robequain was probably talking of the average Lao; the Lao elite on the other hand – those who worked closely with the French – copied the French-style villas though adding indigenous decorative frills.¹³⁴ This was particularly noticeable in Luang Prabang; but in Vientiane the Lao elite remained smaller in numerical size and influence. Members of the Lao elite sent their children to French schools in Laos and, for higher education, to Vietnam and Paris, and this attracted them to living in and around the urban areas where the best educational opportunities were to be found. Joel Halpern maintains that the limited access to educational opportunities for most Lao meant that the elite became self-perpetuating.¹³⁵ Often trained as engineers and lawyers, many of the Lao elite were employed in technical positions such as infrastructure building. However, overall the Lao elite’s role in urban development was limited; in Vientiane, while the physical

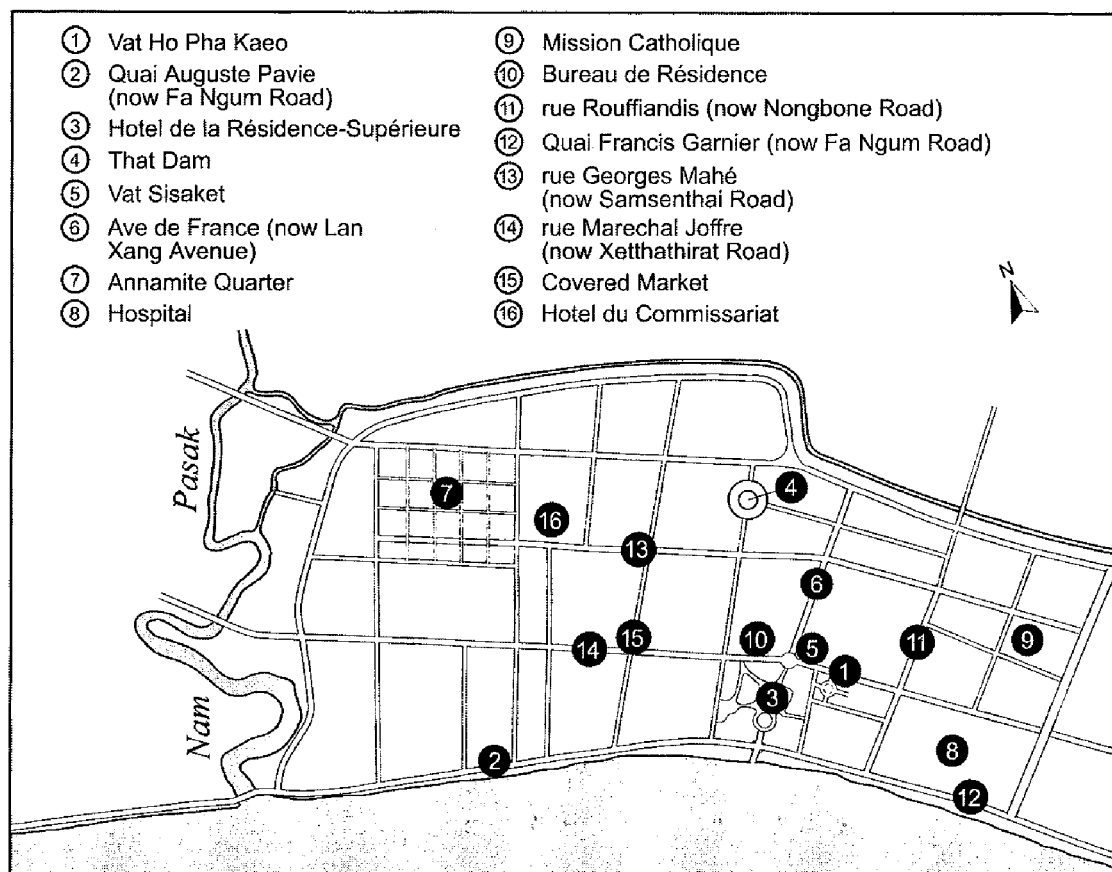


Figure 4.1 Vientiane in the 1930s (based on the public works map entitled *Centre de la ville de Vientiane, dressé par l'Ingénieur en Chef de la Circonscription Territoriale des Travaux Publics du Laos: Ch. Mariage, Vientiane, 1931*).

landscape was increasingly colonial, its population became less and less Lao. Rather, as Pierre Bernard Lafont observed, 'Urbanization under the Protectorate with the exception of Luang Prabang, was based above all on Vietnamese immigration'.¹³⁶

The colonial civil service was largely staffed by Vietnamese, and Vietnamese and Chinese traders and shopkeepers combined by the time of WWII to give the city a minority Lao population. According to Goscha's analysis of the employment structure of colonial Laos in the 1930s, 54 per cent of the bureaucratic posts were occupied by the 'Annamese' even though they represented less than 2 per cent of the total population of Laos.¹³⁷ This left less than half, and mostly lower-level, positions for the Lao. Goscha attributes this to the fact that the 'inner workings of the French bureaucratic system in Laos had concentrated Annamese immigration in the Laotian *urban* centres, where the Lao population was lowest, but where the French needed the most administrative help in building and running "Laos". Part of the problem until 1928 had been that those seeking civil service posts anywhere in French Indochina had to pass entry examinations and that these examinations were held only in Hanoi and Saigon, thus making it easier for Vietnamese to apply. The opening of the *École de Droit et d'Administration* (Law and Administration School) in 1928 may have helped reduce the imbalance but Vietnamese dominance of the bureaucracy continued through the 1930s. The fact that the only languages used in these colonial offices remained French and Vietnamese was another source of great resentment among the Lao intelligentsia.¹³⁸

The result of the colonial employment and immigration policies was to create a capital city in Laos which the Vietnamese dominated numerically. Figures show that there were 10,200 Vietnamese in Vientiane in 1937 compared with only 9,000 Lao.¹³⁹ Vietnamese were also employed as mechanics, carpenters or miners and conducted their own businesses as shopkeepers and traders. A commercial centre had emerged in the small grid of streets around the official covered market built in 1912. This was commonly referred to as the Chinese quarter but many of the shopkeepers were in fact from Vietnam, though possibly of Chinese ethnic origin, and there was a sprinkling of Lao. The typical structures were brick shop-houses of one or two storeys with terra-cotta tile roofs, a very common pattern throughout urban Indochina, but a few more lowly shop-houses had daub walls built on brick foundations. There was also a quarter for poor Vietnamese coolies, with huts made of bamboo and straw built on the ground rather than on stilts, in the suburban zone.¹⁴⁰

Not only does Vientiane's development in the 1930s reflect the dynamics of the colonial city in terms of racial, ethnic and power relations, but French notions of '*urbanisme*' were also at work. Despite Vientiane still having less than 20,000 inhabitants by the end of the decade and the scale of colonial city-building efforts being very much less than in Hanoi and Haiphong in Tonkin, Saigon in Cochinchina and Phnom Penh in

Cambodia, the same ideas about how cities should be designed and constructed influenced the shape and look of Vientiane. The town had been surveyed in 1914 but it was not until the late 1920s that it was officially decided that each major Indochinese urban centre would have a comprehensive master plan developed.¹⁴¹ Ernest Hébrard was the most prominent 'urbanist' imported from metropolitan France in 1923 for this purpose and his impact on Hanoi, Phnom Penh, Dalat and other towns remains highly significant.¹⁴² His tenure in Indochina was, however, short-lived; he was effectively forced out by the conservative *colons* in 1929 before he could venture into Laos and it was not until 1941 that the first 'urbaniste' was sent to Laos to prepare master plans.¹⁴³ Nevertheless the basic ideas of French urbanism had their impact on Vientiane even before this through the decisions made by the Service des Travaux Publics. Although subject to the instructions of the Résident-Supérieur, this was the principal agency responsible for the road layout, positioning of public buildings, control over private construction and, effectively, the physical character of the city.¹⁴⁴

In Hanoi and other major cities, the colonial authorities sought to create ordered cities and this extended to infrastructure development.¹⁴⁵ The roads were straightened and metalled, footpaths and gutters installed. The same approach was used in Vientiane, but, due to its less significant status in the colonial political and commercial hierarchy, such improvements were limited. The roads remained unmade and dusty, there were few footpaths, and traffic continued to be full of contrasts – wagons pulled behind hump-backed oxen, and the rubber-tired cyclos first introduced in the early 1930s, alongside cars of different models and vintage.¹⁴⁶ The Vientiane water supply system was, according to Pietrantoni, both inadequate and unsanitary. The water was distributed through public fountains, with very few houses (mostly European) having water on tap. There was no underground sewer system and the system of collection and gutters was often inadequate. Electricity was installed in 1925 and nearly all urban roads were lit by electric lighting. The number of households with electricity remained limited and in Vientiane there were only 732 households connected to electricity by 1944.¹⁴⁷ Vientiane had three cemeteries – one for each of the Annamite, Chinese and French communities. There were no Lao cemeteries because of the practice of cremation and interment in 'monuments funéraires'.

Existing maps of Vientiane in the 1930s portray the town building achievements of the French colonial regime overlaying the traces of the ancient city.¹⁴⁸ The capital had been and was still essentially enclosed between the river and a ring of moats running along the foundations of the ruined brick walls. The walls had been pierced by three gates. Four avenues, the same as today, ran parallel to the river, reflecting the measures taken in pre-colonial times to protect the city against floods. Onto this pre-colonial pattern the French sought to impose a different, European urban vision. One of the most obvious manifestations of this was the imperialism of road naming. The thoroughfares of the city were given names that celebrated

French heroes – quai Auguste Pavie, rue Georges Mahé, and rue Foch. Today, even though many of the most obviously nationalistic French impacts on the town have long disappeared, such as the road names and the statue of Auguste Pavie that once stood outside the Ho Pha Kaeo,¹⁴⁹ the French town-planning influence on Vientiane remains indelible. This is particularly true in terms of the land use and racial zoning, where four ‘*zones de constructions*’ had been defined: a French civil servant quarter, combining administrative buildings and detached two-storey villas set in gardens; the commercial shop-house quarters; the suburban residential quarters for the Lao; and, even further out, the residential areas for the poorest Vietnamese. In this creative process, many elements of the indigenous city were destroyed, including the site of the old Royal Palace, which became the focus for construction of French administrative buildings, and the river frontage, which was taken over as a European space. Pietrantoni makes the assertion that all the various French colonial plans for Vientiane had one and the same defect: they required the razing of the existing town.¹⁵⁰ It was perhaps fortunate that events elsewhere, especially the arrival of the Japanese and the outbreak of WWII, prevented their full execution.

Japanese intervention in French Indochina

The capitulation of France to Hitler’s German army in June 1940 brought Indochina into the war on the side of the Axis powers. French Indochina, like France, had been unprepared for the outbreak of WWII. When it came in September 1939, local reserves in Indochina were called up and Indochinese men were drafted into the French army to fight in Europe. Communication links between France and Indochina were reduced to a telegram service; Indochina was now effectively operating independently from Paris. The period of direct Japanese intervention in Indochina was short – less than 5 years from June 1940 to March 1945 – but it was momentous in its effects. During their period of military victories and economic expansion, the Japanese taught a new lesson of ‘Asia for the Asians’ and fostered anti-colonial movements in much of South-East Asia. In the case of Indochina, the Japanese intervention effectively untied France’s colonial hold, although, paradoxically, it was the French colonial authorities rather than the Japanese who played the ‘nationalist’ card in these years.

The years leading up to the outbreak of WWII had been ones of relative calm in Laos, although there was clearly some anxiety about Japanese regional intentions from the mid-1930s.¹⁵¹ Japan’s direct intervention began in November 1939 when pressure was put on Acting Governor-General Georges Catroux to remove or lower the tariff wall against Japanese economic expansion into French Indochina, and to accept a Japanese inspection mission charged with ensuring these matters were implemented.¹⁵² The principal aim was to block off the aid, mainly from the United States, that

was passing along Tonkin's Yunnan railway to Chiang Kai Shek's nationalist troops in China. Catroux decided to accede to Japan's demands – sacrificing national pride for national interests, as Japanese historian Murakami puts it,¹⁵³ but earning the Vichy Government's displeasure. He was quickly replaced by Admiral Jean Decoux. This enabled the Japanese to occupy the French Indochinese territories without using military force. In accordance with the Matsuoka-Henry Agreement signed on 30 August 1940, the Japanese dispatched its army, navy and air forces to Indochina on 5 September. From Tokyo's viewpoint, making use of the colonial administration was seen as the cheapest, most skilful way to administer the territory.¹⁵⁴ The Japanese army headquarters regarded it as the most effective way of maintaining calm and allowing it to get on with military operations in the country, as well as elsewhere in East and South-East Asia.¹⁵⁵ Tokyo installed Japanese officials to shadow the French – a shadow Governor-General, shadow Residents in Tonkin and Cochinchina, senior bureaucrats at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and two Japanese representatives on the colonial Council for Indochina.¹⁵⁶

Reactions to the Japanese occupation were complex. It suggested to many Asians that they, too, could overthrow their Western masters. From the French point of view, however, it seemed to have been agreed that France would retain its colonial rights in Indochina and that it did not, at least in the initial years, mean Japanese support for national independence. It was only a military occupation and the French colonial authorities were left to continue running Indochina on a day-to-day basis. Troop numbers were never very high: on the eve of the Pacific War (December 1941) they numbered only 75,000 and even before the Japanese coup of 9 March 1945 were still only 40,000.¹⁵⁷ French trading interests, damaged by the loss of markets in Europe because of the war, were well served by the Japanese connection and the dire need Japan was experiencing for finding new supplies of food and raw materials. Indochina's share of total value of Japan's imports rose from less than 1 per cent in the 1930s to 12.8 per cent in 1942 before falling back to 1.1 per cent in 1944 and zero in 1945.¹⁵⁸ Rice was a critical import for the Japanese, but after 1943 Japanese war economy demands increasingly encouraged the French colonial landowners to cultivate jute, castor beans, hemp, flax and cotton and to step up the exploitation of forests and mines.¹⁵⁹

The Japanese largely left Laos alone at the start, but, as Thailand gradually moved into Japan's camp, border skirmishes with the French troops in Laos and Cambodia escalated into a veritable war in December 1940.¹⁶⁰ Despite French victories over the ensuing weeks, Japanese pressure led to a Franco-Thai treaty in May that ceded two Lao provinces (Champasak and Sayaburi) and two Cambodian provinces (Battambang and Siem Reap) to Thailand. This provoked the French in Laos, as well as the Lao themselves, into action. The King of Luang Prabang, angered by this loss of land to the Thai, especially Sayaburi on the western banks of the Mekong opposite

Luang Prabang, proposed the immediate unification under his throne of all Lao territories, including Vientiane, and this was enacted in August 1941.¹⁶¹ As compensation Luang Prabang was given control over all the northern provinces, whereas the south remained under direct French administration. An onslaught of Japanese and Thai propaganda provoked the colonial authorities to subject Laos to what Eric Jennings calls a 'sustained Pétainist nativist campaign, aimed at least in part at building a cultural firewall against Thai ambitions'.¹⁶² In Laos, much of this responsibility fell to Charles Rochet, Director of Secondary Education in Laos, who proceeded to establish in Vientiane a cultural association backed by the city's Lao intelligentsia, which set up a newspaper, *Lao Nhay* (Great Laos) and through it began spreading nationalist ideas.¹⁶³

Thus French policies and programs embodied contradictory objectives. While the general French intention to maintain the French Indochinese Union remained, much activity focused on nation-building at the level of the Vietnamese, Cambodian and Lao constituent parts. Jennings quotes Vichy documents to estimate that 600,000 Indochinese youngsters passed through a series of youth organisations, sports clubs and scout movements set up under Decoux.¹⁶⁴ But these tended to stress the local 'nation', rather than the Indochinese superstructure the French had sought to create. In Laos this included the Young Lao Movement, established by Rochet. Jennings also interprets the reopening of Vientiane's restored Vat Ho Pha Keow by the colonial authorities in March 1942 in this light, the temple being treated as 'nothing short of a national site', and he quotes from Governor-General Decoux's travel log to capture the underlying spirit of the ceremony:

Preceded by their flags and banners, delegations of Laos' different provinces, schools, associations, and *Tirailleurs* marched by... Then Prince Phetsarath retraced the history of Wat Phrakeo: its past vicissitudes and the national and religious meaning that one has to attach to the restoration of this pagoda, which for all Laotians represents far more than a mere religious building and is truly the symbol of the soul, and the national and moral unity of the Lao people. Then all rose as the Lao anthem was sung by Lao youth movements assembled at the foot of the terrace.¹⁶⁵

In May of the following year, Decoux took one of the apparently more progressive steps in his South-East Asian career when he transformed the Indochinese Grand Council into a Federal Council and appointed to it a majority of Indochinese members.¹⁶⁶ According to Sorbonne colonial historian, Charles-Robert Ageron, this was a deliberate attempt to counter the Japanese Greater East Asia myth with the 'mystique of the Indochinese Federation'.¹⁶⁷ Ironically, its effect was to raise further the independence aspirations of the three component parts – Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos.

The fact that Japan allowed France to administer Indochina meant that the Japanese had very little direct impact on Vientiane's built environment. Urban development and town planning were left to the French colonial authorities. In his 1949 retrospective account of his period in office, Decoux made a list of his major achievements in the cities of Indochina – a list, he said, that would 'strike the imagination of both the elite groups and the masses, demonstrating to them by hard facts that the French effort has not been dimmed but, on the contrary, shines across all its territories with a new light'.¹⁶⁸ At the bottom of his list were public works carried out on the royal palaces and residences at Hue, Hanoi, Phnom Penh and Luang Prabang. No reference is made to Vientiane, clearly not a high point in his Indochinese vision. Indeed, in relation to a visit to Laos that he made in 1941, his impatience with the pace of change there can be read in his reference to his desire to 'snatch this delightful country from its traditional *farniente*'.¹⁶⁹

However, the collaborative relationships between the French colonial authorities and the Japanese occupiers came to an abrupt end in March 1945 when the Japanese staged a *coup de force*, overthrowing the French civil administration, disarming the French troops and police, and taking full control themselves. The relatively peaceful times Indochina had been experiencing were over. The coup was in response to the rapid tide of events occurring on the world stage: Paris was liberated in August 1944 and Vichy France had fallen, Nazi Berlin was threatened, and Japan was essentially on its own in the Pacific War. On 30 August 1944, General Charles de Gaulle established a provisional Free French Government and, with regard to Indochina, repudiated all agreements between Vichy and Tokyo, declaring that 'The territories of the Empire, no matter where they are or what they are, belong to no-one but France'.¹⁷⁰ Fearing an invasion by General MacArthur's forces based in the Philippines, and suspecting that the colonial regime was preparing to switch its allegiance to the Free French,¹⁷¹ the Japanese in Hanoi, the Indochinese capital, launched their surprise Operation Mei. At precisely 7:00 pm on 9 March 1945, the French army headquarters and the Gia Lam airbase in Hanoi, were seized.¹⁷² While the French authorities there resisted until the following afternoon, generally the French surrendered with little resistance. The 90,000 French and Indochinese troops were quickly disarmed by Japan's 40,000 soldiers and nearly all civilian officials and the military were taken prisoner, including Governor-General Decoux.

Vientiane under the Japanese

It took 24 hours before the 9 March 1945 *coup de force* impacted on Vientiane. Charles Rochet tells the story of peace interrupted in his account, *Pays Lao. Le Laos dans la tourmente (Land of the Lao. Laos in Turmoil)*.

I was able to live the happy years that preceded the turmoil in the most lovable and most 'lost' of the Indochinese countries: Laos or the land of the Lao. Tucked away behind mountain ramparts that isolated it from the rest of the world, it was really the land of oblivion, charm and dreams. I doubt if one could find another corner of the planet where one could live so pleasantly; I doubt that one could find a more endearing people.¹⁷³

In the early morning of 9 March people out walking had heard several distant volleys of gunfire, which was not in itself surprising given that the town housed a garrison of more than a thousand men. But at 8:30 am all the departmental heads were summoned by phone to the *Résidence-Supérieure* and met with the news that the Japanese had assumed control of Indochina's administration. There were vague reports of fighting in Saigon and Hanoi, but, communications being cut with outlying towns such as Vientiane, no details were available. Shortly afterwards, an army officer arriving in Vientiane reported having seen Japanese troops fighting only four kilometres away. The Japanese had entered through Thailand and were advancing on Vientiane.¹⁷⁴ The *Résident* was unsure what to do; nothing had been planned, not even a list of men who could be mobilised. The army abandoned Vientiane, along with part of the Indochinese Guard. Most offices and shops closed and groups of residents gathered in the streets to discuss the news. Soon cars loaded with European families and their luggage headed out of town towards the Chinese border to the north. Lao families scattered into the bush. By afternoon the town was silent, reported Rochet. In the evening he burned his personal papers, and then sat calmly on the veranda.

The night was strangely dark. I too was waiting for the inevitable. A shot close by, then another, then more. . . And then silence again. My servant ran in, trembling with fear. I had all the lights turned out and was waiting to see what would happen next. I hadn't time to cross the garden: there they were. . . A sound of feet marching growing louder, coming nearer. . . Down the road surged a column of infantry. . . The Japanese had entered Vientiane.¹⁷⁵

Next morning, 10 March, the town was largely deserted.¹⁷⁶ At 10:00 am the remaining French residents were called together into a large hall to hand over arms, listen to orders and salute the Japanese *kampeitei* (military police) officer in charge. A long and humiliating internship lasted until 9 June 1945; nevertheless, despite the 'vexations, privations and tormenting' and unlike Japanese behaviour elsewhere in Laos and Asia generally, the Vientiane prisoners were not brutalised. Indeed, Rochet considered that 'After three months. . .the Japanese are still trying to find out what they are supposed to do with us!'¹⁷⁷ With no specific orders from Tokyo on how he

was to occupy and administer Vientiane, the Japanese commander, Sako Mansori, improvised: he dismissed and detained all French officials, with the exception of the mayor and police commissioner who were required to act as intermediaries between the occupiers and the defeated French community.¹⁷⁸ Rochet reports, however, that the French managed to circulate in town without papers and to meet in the hospital foyer which had become a salon. The *kampeitei* meanwhile were comfortably installed, well away from danger, and apparently busy plundering the country for their own profit.

But eventually, on 10 August 1945, news leaked out that the Allies were bombarding Tokyo, that there was some new kind of bomb and that the Emperor of Japan had capitulated. Japanese capitulation immediately triggered demonstrations by the Vietnamese and a counter march by the Young Lao Movement. The Japanese then decamped, filling available trucks and ox carts with some of their possessions and either burning or throwing the rest into the Mekong. By 13 September the last Japanese soldier had left. Japanese authority over all of Laos had been handed over to the Royal Lao Government. The period under Japan, brief as it may have been, was instrumental in nurturing the Lao nationalist movement and, by showing Laotians and other colonized peoples throughout South-East Asia that their imperial masters were not invincible, it put independence clearly on the agenda.