



THE MEKONG EXPLORATION COMMISSION, 1866–68: ANGLO-FRENCH RIVALRY IN SOUTH EAST ASIA

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This article is an expanded version of a lecture he gave to the Society on 23 March 2005 about the Mekong Exploration Commission, the subject of one of his most recent books, *Mad about the Mekong: Exploration and Empire in South East Asia*. His latest book is a history of the Spice Route.

The political map of mainland South East Asia seems unnecessarily complex with more miles of international frontier than any other region of comparable size except Europe (where frontiers now count for less) and West Africa. Nor do the attenuated configurations of Burma (Myanmar), Thailand, Laos, Vietnam and Cambodia owe much to physical geography. Their borders are the product of political advantage as perceived in the context of Anglo-French rivalry in the South East Asian subcontinent in the late 19th century. Such things as natural features, ethnographic realities and economic logic received scant attention at the time. Each imperial power aimed simply to deny to the other as much territory as possible, with the important proviso that, whereas to the French an eventual contiguity of the imperial spheres seemed logical, to the British it was unthinkable.

This tussle for South East Asia, a mixture of African ‘scramble’ and central Asian ‘great game’, was triggered by a singular, little celebrated, but highly instructive expedition – the 1866–68 French naval initiative known as the Mekong Exploration Commission. Denied an eastern empire in India by the British and then in China, again mainly by British competition, the French under the imperially adventurous Louis Napoleon had in 1859 grabbed the little port of Saigon in what was then called Cochin-China. Some adjacent territory reaching to the Mekong delta had followed, and in 1862 a shaky protectoral status had been extended upriver to Cambodia, then an endangered and much smaller kingdom than it is today. In 1866 this toehold on the subcontinent was the extent of the French colonial presence in the region; it was already proving a military and financial liability; and the case for a complete withdrawal was therefore being actively canvassed in Paris. But in Saigon it was resisted.

Warm-blooded patriots like Lieutenant Francis Garnier advanced a spate of optimistic forecasts and extravagant proposals, foremost among which was a scheme to open navigation with inland China by way of the great river whose nine-mouthed delta gaped to the sea on the little colony's doorstep.

The Mekong would provide a rationale for the French presence in a region that Garnier and his colleagues invariably called *Indo-Chine*, a novel coinage that distinguished South East Asia from those other imperialist arenas of India and China while endowing it with something of the prestige of both. The river could do for Saigon what the Yangtze was doing for Shanghai or what the Mississippi might have done for the former French possession of New Orleans. As a highway of commerce with the markets of inland China, and as a slipway for extracting the minerals and forest produce of the intervening lands, it would furnish an entrée into continental Asia, so redeeming the fortunes of the struggling colony in Saigon and endowing France with the potential for an eastern empire of its own.

Few were quite as sanguine as Garnier in all this, but thanks to the advocacy of the Ministry of Marine in Paris, grudgingly and without fanfare the Mekong proposal was adopted. In two minuscule steam-driven gunboats, with an inordinate quantity of liquor, flour, guns and trade goods, plus all the trappings of a major scientific expedition, the Commission cast off from the Saigon waterfront and headed upriver into the great green unknown in June 1866.¹

A river route to China

Then, and since, the Commission's remarkable exploits have occasionally found a place in histories of exploration.² Its six French principals and their 20-man escort were gone for two years. They suffered continually from malaria, spasmodically from dysentery and leech infections, and were ultimately reduced to destitution. Their leader died; others would never recover. Yet they were the first – those who survived – to map the course of the river over some 2000 kilometres, to explore its tributaries and hinterland over perhaps another 5000 kilometres, and to penetrate into China's Yunnan province by way of the river. There, trying to outflank a local war, they struck the still unexplored upper reaches of the Yangtze in western Sichuan and returned down it to the China coast. The president of London's Royal Geographical Society would hail the Commission as "one of the most remarkable and successful expeditions of the nineteenth century". Lieutenant Garnier, who had emerged as leader after the death of *le Commandant* E.-M. L. de G. Doudart de Lagrée, was awarded the Society's Patron's Medal in 1870; and in 1871 he received from the International Geographical Congress a special award whose only other recipient was Dr Livingstone. In effect Garnier was rated with Livingstone as the greatest explorer of the age.

Less attention, however, has been paid to the expedition's political objectives and its far-reaching conclusions.³ Garnier, a naval officer like most of his colleagues, and the prime advocate of water-borne trade with China as



Figure 1 South East Asia and the Mekong

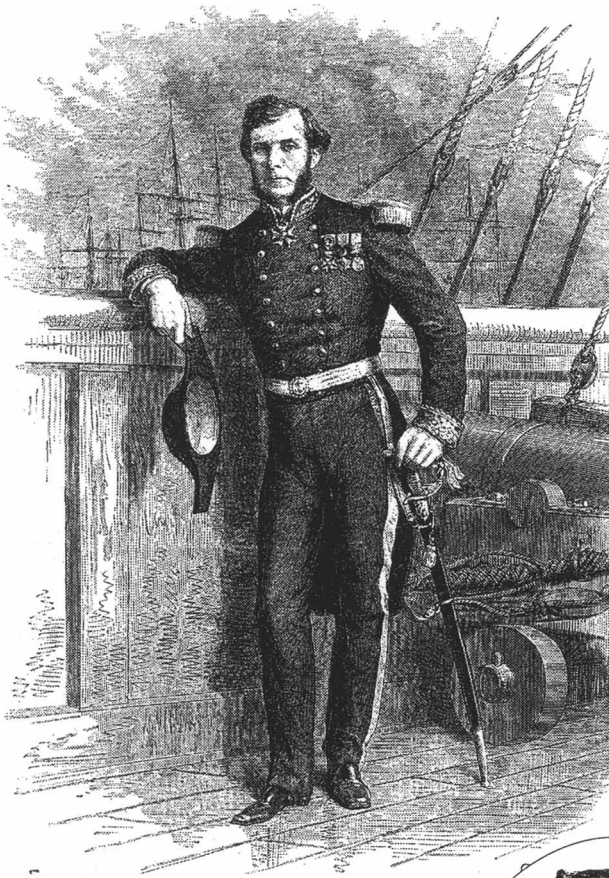


Figure 2 *Le Commandant* Doudart de Lagrée (top) and Lieutenant Francis Garnier

well as the man responsible for the Commission's hydrographic survey, appears to have become obsessed by the river itself. As he would write:

For my part I attached a special importance to continuing to track its winding and bizarre course. Ever since we had entered regions untouched by European enquiry, each meander of the Mekong as added to my map seemed an important geographical discovery. Nothing could distract me from this abiding concern . . . It came to possess me like a monomania. I was mad about the Mekong.⁴

He interpreted the imprecision of their instructions as a brief not just to investigate the river's commercial potential but to pursue it to its rumoured source in Tibet. Neither in his official report nor in his personal narrative would he concede what was soon glaringly obvious to his colleagues, namely that, though vast and voluminous, the Mekong was in fact hopelessly, indeed sensationally, unnavigable.

At the time controversy raged over the source of the White Nile in East Africa; two years earlier Burton and Speke had nearly come to blows over Lake Victoria, and the Bakers had since announced their discovery of Lake Albert. Garnier was aware of this and appreciated the geographical premium that attached to tracing a major river in its entirety. Though of diminutive stature, he nursed the outside ego of the true explorer. But he also realised that conceding the unnavigability of the Mekong would mean stripping the expedition of its avowed purpose. *Le Commandant* Doudart de Lagrée would then be justified in aborting the whole exercise; and if he did not, if the expedition continued regardless, its more contentious and acquisitive character would be exposed. The myth of the Mekong's navigability had, therefore, to be maintained, regardless of all evidence to the contrary.

In the event, the evidence emerged within a week's direct sailing from Saigon. Through the delta the expedition had steamed up to Phnom Penh and there, as if to postpone the moment of truth, had turned aside to cross Cambodia's Tonle Sap, or Great Lake, and explore the monumental wonders of Angkor. This diversion, the first of many, was portrayed as an opportunity for the expedition's members to get acquainted and test out their instruments. Angkor Wat, rediscovered only a decade earlier by Henri Mouhot, was measured and sketched; and though it was located in the province of Siem Reap which was then, like neighbouring Battambang, under Thai rule, appeals were launched both for French scholars to take an interest in the site and for the French government to demand its restoration to Cambodia. Thus was the first of many tricoloured markers firmly planted in the South East Asian interior. Thirty years later the 'restitution' to Cambodian rule, and so French protection, of the 'alienated provinces' of Siem Reap and Battambang would feature prominently in the colonial carve-up.

Having whiled away a couple of weeks on this excursion, the Commission returned to Phnom Penh and a second send-off. The approximately five tons of stores and equipment were reloaded aboard a single gunboat, and on 7 July all

stood to attention for lusty cries of “Vive l’Empereur” and a final salute. “A few moments later we sailed alone on the vast river”, writes Garnier.⁵

Thirty-six hours later they were back on shore and reloading again. Just above Kratié, with the rains falling, the river rising and the current running at around ten knots, they had encountered the first rapids. The gunboat’s little engine could make no impression on them and they were obliged to transfer to pirogues. These were long canoes customised to take the baggage and stabilised by lashing platforms of bundled bamboos along the gunwales. The platforms also provided a walkway from which the boatmen could propel their craft against the torrent. They did so by punting, their poles being fitted with grappling irons by which purchase was obtained on the rocks and trees that everywhere protruded from the raging flood. Already it was obvious that the Mekong was more suited to white-water adventuring than merchant shipping.

Indeed arguably the whole idea of a river route to China had been a *canard* from the start. *Le Commandant* Doudart de Lagrée, when originally invited by Admiral de Lagrandière to command the expedition, had apparently burst out laughing; “and so”, he reported in a letter, “had the Admiral”.⁶ Such unexpected levity over a solemn and dangerous commission suggests that both men knew rather more than they cared to reveal. Doudart de Lagrée had just spent three years in Cambodia as the French Resident. He had already

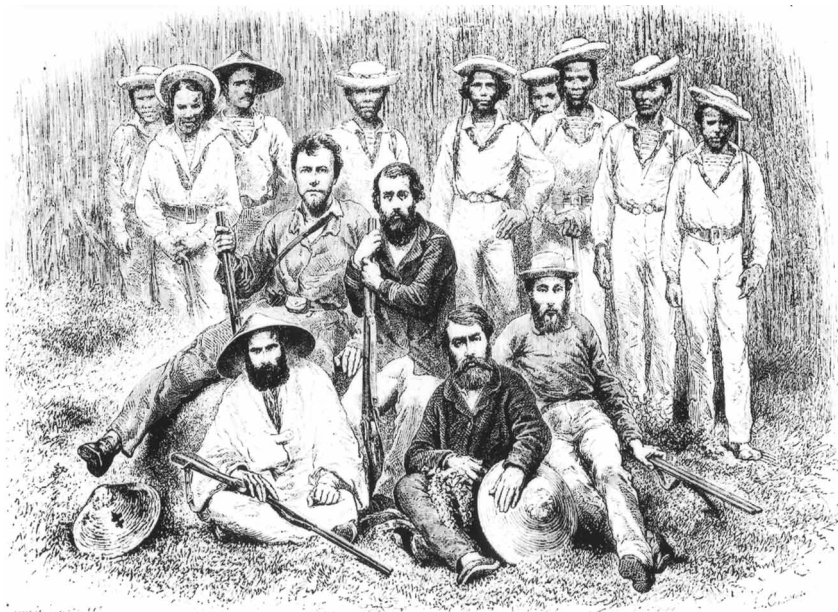


Figure 3 Survivors of the Mekong Exploration Commission (Garnier in centre, De Carné front left, Delaporte front right)



Figure 4 Manoeuvring a pirogue through flooded forest

been upriver to Kratié at least once, and he knew of French prospectors who had penetrated further. He must also have been deeply suspicious of the absence of any river trade whatsoever coming down from the Lao states beyond. Some obstacle more formidable even than the Kratié rapids was expected.

It materialised in the shape of the Great Falls of Khon on today's Lao–Cambodian border. Here the river meets a wall of rock heavily camouflaged in forest that extends right across the flood-plain for 16 kilometres. Above the barrier the water backs up to form the lake-region known as Siphandon ('Four-Thousand-Islands'). Below it, hundreds of escaping cascades explode through the wall's numerous crenellations and crevices in an arc of spectacular if widely separated falls. The noise is deafening, the impression primeval. As far as the eye can see, eruptions of spray hang over the forest canopy marking yet more falls. Though seldom over 50 metres high, during the monsoon the Khon Falls discharge more mud and water than Niagara and Victoria combined. Not even pirogues could be hauled up through this maelstrom. The Commission landed at the tail of an island and trugged glumly up to its head above the Falls, there to re-embark in other pirogues.

The truth at last began to force itself on the most sanguine among us [wrote Louis de Carné, the expedition's young political officer]. Steamers can never ply the Mekong as they do the Amazon or the Mississippi; and

Saigon can never be united to the western provinces of China by this immense riverway . . . However magnificent, [the river] seems to be only an incomplete masterpiece.⁷

Yet Garnier was unconvinced. By an extraordinary coincidence the expedition's most incorrigible navigationist had missed this spectacle altogether. He had slipped into a malarial coma a week before they reached the Falls, been carried up them in a litter, and had not regained consciousness until several days afterwards. Even much later when he returned to inspect the Falls, he refused to accept defeat. Somewhere in the tangle of rock and jungle there must, he insisted, be a channel that could at least be made navigable. Perhaps it would need clearing or blasting, perhaps some system of winches would be needed, or perhaps a canal with locks would have to be constructed alongside. Whatever the solution – and there must be one – it would require French ingenuity and so a French presence. The Khon Falls, like Angkor, were accordingly earmarked for early acquisition; and while the river might never lend itself to the lazy barge traffic of the Mississippi, mastering the navigation of its middle reaches would become a matter of intense national pride.

In search of a pretext in Laos

At Bassac, now called Champassak, in lower Laos the expedition halted for a couple of months. Recuperation was in order and Bassac, a charming village in the post-monsoon season, was duly commended as the ideal site for a colonial sanatorium, a future Vichy *sans bains* for *Indo-Chine*. It was also well placed for exploring two of the Mekong's major tributaries and assessing the mineral potential of the Bolovens plateau. Both gold and silver deposits were confirmed. Better still, one excursion party discovered an active slave trade.

In the late 19th century slavery was the one human rights abuse that any civilized nation felt entitled to suppress – and by force of arms if necessary. Here was the best of all pretexts for at least a temporary intervention. The plight of the slaves, who belonged to the ethnic minorities scattered through the mountains on the Lao–Vietnamese border, troubled the expedition's personnel, especially de Carné who took a genuine interest in the non-Lao tribes. He nevertheless felt obliged to mention that, hauled in chains downriver, the unfortunate captives were then being openly sold in the markets of Cambodia, a country that rejoiced in French protection. Until this scandal could be eradicated, France could hardly affect moral indignation to justify an advance against the slave-dealers in unprotected Laos.⁸

Technically the Lao states, which then extended along both sides of the river as far as Burma (where they were known to the British as the Shan states), were not in fact unprotected. From Bangkok the Thai, or Siamese, crown had extended its suzerainty over most of them in the early 19th century. The expedition was itself now travelling with Thai authorisation and at Thai expense. This did not prevent Garnier and his colleagues claiming that Bangkok's rule was both illegal and unpopular. Lao princes, from the chief of Bassac to the king of Luang Prabang,

further upriver, were advised that, should they care to resist Thai pretensions, they might count on French encouragement and support. In Laos, as in Cambodia, the Thais were portrayed as aggressors. Their encroachments into the Mekong basin had no international sanction, according to Garnier, and ultimately only French intervention would secure their withdrawal.

The position was actually far more complex than this. Vientiane, the Lao capital, had been sacked by the Thais in 1827–28 but had previously owed a shadowy allegiance to the Annamite emperor in Hué as much as to Bangkok. Luang Prabang, on the other hand, the largest of the Lao states whose authority still extended throughout most of northern Laos, paid occasional tribute to Beijing and even Burma as well as Bangkok. Meanwhile some of the Luang Prabang *muangs* (dependent districts) were also in a tributary relationship with Hué. These latter were of particular interest to the French. Anticipating the day when Annam and its emperor might be added to France's responsibilities in Vietnam, the Commission ranged far to the east of the Mekong in search of just such encouraging evidence of an inheritable superiority. On the basis of these researches, 20 years later Bangkok's authority would be forcibly contested in eastern Laos and the doubtful claims of Hué, by then under French protection, vigorously pressed.

Mischief-making in Burma

Luang Prabang, with its gilded palace and numerous *wats*, was the nearest thing to a town that the expedition encountered in South East Asia. After six months

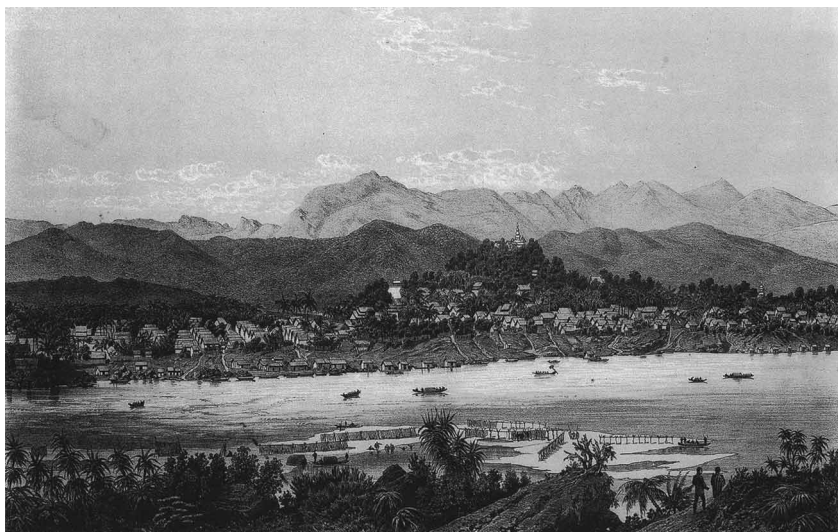


Figure 5 Luang Prabang in 1867

of hair-raising adventure among the river's endless cataracts and whirlpools, they beached their pirogues on a nearby strand and then, bathed and brushed, donned full dress uniforms and clanking swords. The formality of their arrival failed, however, to impress the Lao king, who remained cool to French overtures. His councillors did recommend a shortcut to China by way of the Mekong's Ou tributary; it was the route used by all overland traders and *le Commandant* was keen to take it. But Garnier would have none of it. The main river was still, he insisted, their priority, regardless either of its navigability, the fearsome gorges and rapids that reportedly lay ahead, or the imminent onset of their second monsoon.⁹

Le Commandant backed down. A distant and diffident figure who suffered from a chronic laryngitis that obliged him at all times to whisper, Doudart de Lagrée was being increasingly sidelined. Garnier, moreover, had his own agenda. If he was indeed "mad about the Mekong" it was partly because its vagaries were taking them not just north but west, towards the Shan states of Burma. Most obligingly the river, which Garnier was already claiming as France's exclusive preserve by virtue of the Commission's precedence on it, was conducting them not straight to China but weaving its way across the region, brushing ever more territory and now beckoning them onto the threshold of the Burmese kingdom of Ava.

Technically the expedition had no right to trespass into the territory of Burmese feudatories like the Shan states. A request to Ava for letters of accreditation had met with silence, and the British, long established in Lower Burma, regarded Ava as within their own exclusive sphere of influence. Garnier sought to test this. He doubted British claims to Ava's loyalty and he was unconvinced by Ava's claims to sovereignty over the Shan states. If the river passed through the Shan states, and if the expedition was able to follow it without being stopped, his point would have been made.

At Chieng Khong, in what later became known as the Golden Triangle, the monsoon broke and the Commission finally left Thai jurisdiction. No information whatsoever could be obtained about the state of the river ahead, nor was it easy to find boatmen willing to transport them and their now much reduced baggage. After just a day's paddling in canoes they were deposited on the Burmese bank and informed that they must now walk. Garnier, disbelieving, checked ahead. The river was indeed impossible for boats. Here began the 100-kilometre Tang-ho rapids on whose sharp black rocks the rising torrent was splintering massive trees and pulverising the steep hillsides out of which they had once grown. Despite the prospect of long sodden marches, they resigned themselves to abandoning the river. They would see it again but never sail on it again. During the monsoon months not even canoes could reach China via the Mekong.

The ensuing weeks in the switchback hills of the Shan states brought the expedition to its nadir. The rains were relentless, the trails knee-deep in mud, and the carriage charges, whether for ox-carts, mules or men, exorbitant. Their liquors were long since exhausted; likewise their trade goods. Cash reserves were so low that bedding and clothing were bartered for food; boots

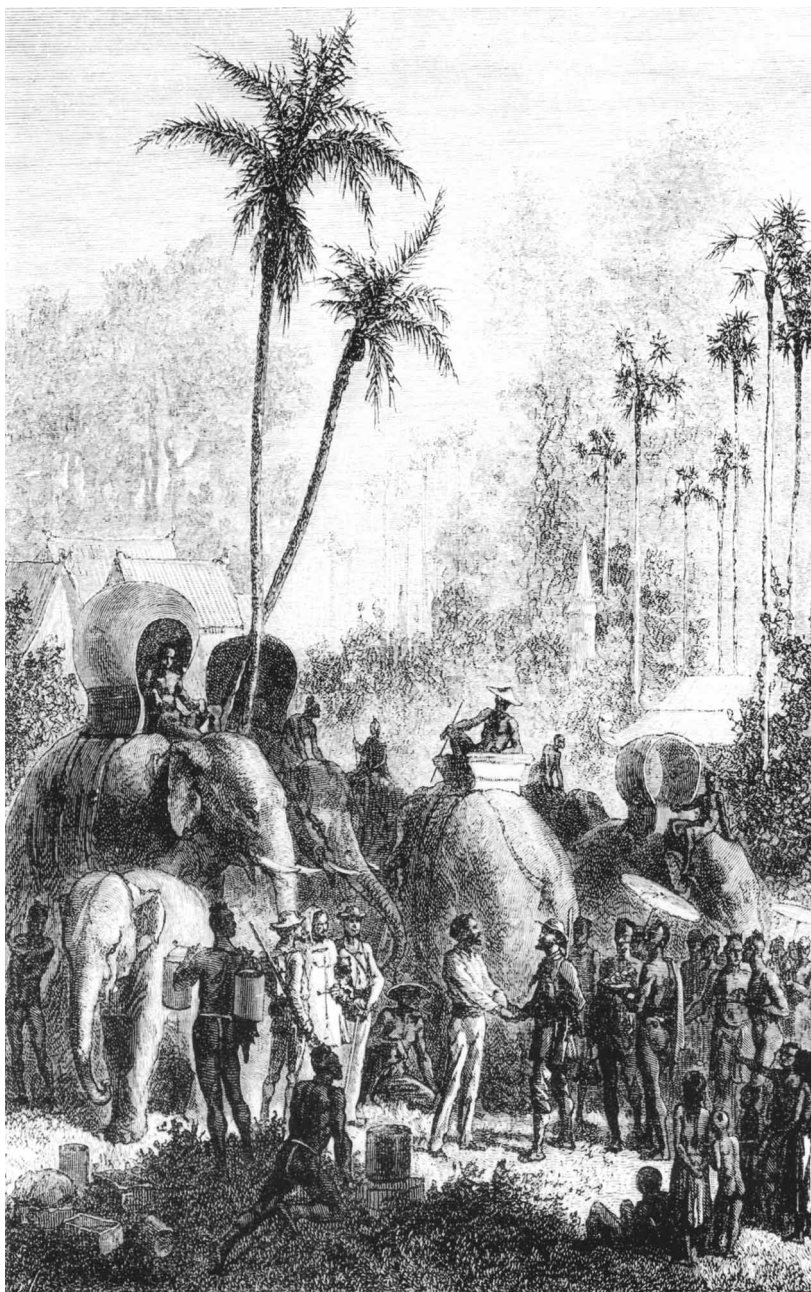


Figure 6 Doudart de Lagrée returning from an overland excursion on elephant-back

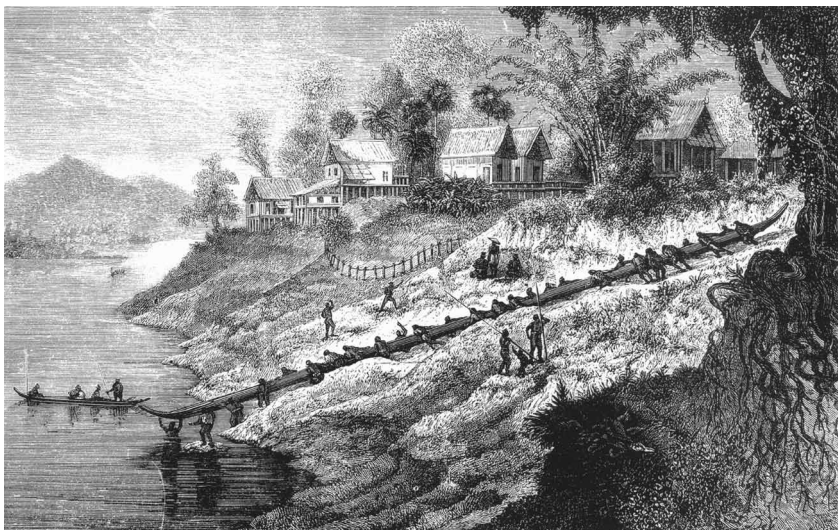


Figure 7 A racing pirogue being launched near Luang Prabang

they managed without, either walking barefoot or being carried on stretchers. So incapacitated by infected leech-bites was Louis Delaporte, the expedition's artist, that he could barely stand; Doudart de Lagrée was already suffering from the liver complaint that would kill him within a couple of months; de

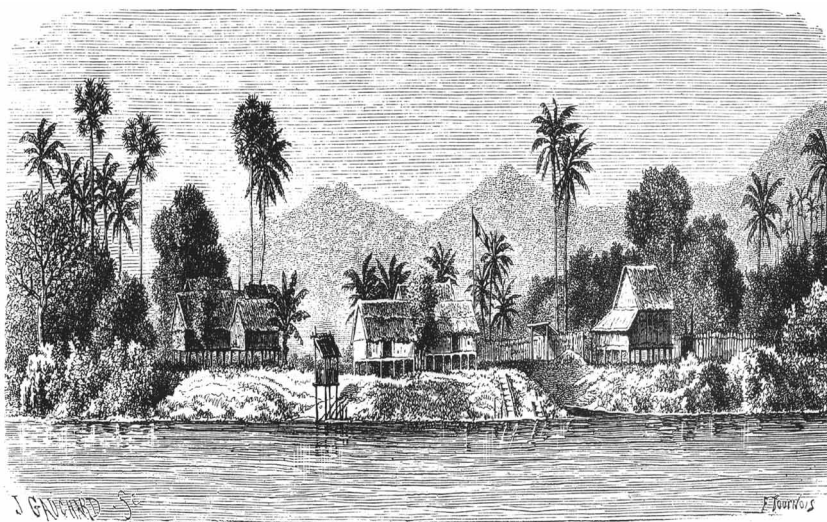


Figure 8 The expedition's camp at Khong Island below Bassac

Carné, wracked by the dysentery from which he too would die, was indistinguishable from a bearded ghost; and Garnier was experiencing alarming bouts of malarial dementia. Worse still, the Shan states were by no means autonomous nonentities. Each had its Burmese Resident who invariably endeavoured to hold the Commission hostage pending orders for their disposal either from Kengtung, the Shan capital, or Ava itself. Garnier's gamble had fallen flat. Burmese sovereignty was universally acknowledged. In effect the Shan states were already spoken for, and any future French *Indo-Chine* would here have to stop at the Mekong – or perhaps even short of it, for two of the Shan states extended along both banks of the river.

Close to despair, the expedition was saved only by its Chinese passports. These had been obtained from the Imperial court in Beijing and collected by Garnier during a breakneck return to Phnom Penh after the halt at Bassac. The authorities in Yunnan had since been alerted to expect the appearance of “foreign mandarins”; in China their credit would be good; and French missionaries in Yunnan also stood ready to assist them. As the expedition bargained its way towards the Chinese frontier, the value of this accreditation increased. Chieng Hung (now Jinghong), the last of the Shan states, had both a Burmese and a Chinese Resident. Sight of the Commission's Beijing paperwork produced a hushed silence and the promise of immediate carriage across the frontier.

The Red River and the aftermath of the Expedition, 1868–82

Entering China was by no means the end of the Commission's travails. Ahead lay six months of blundering through a wintry and war-torn Yunnan that only exacerbated their various ills. *Le Commandant* died; and a madcap attempt to regain the Mekong landed the rest of the party in a brief detention. What was thought to be the most redeeming discovery of the whole expedition was made almost by chance. Traversing barren uplands on the way to Kunming, Yunnan's capital, the road abruptly plunged into a deep and sun-drenched valley through which flowed what the Chinese called the Yuen-jiang. By patient enquiry and a little guesswork, the Commission deduced that this Yuen-jiang could not be the Yangtse because it disgorged into the Gulf of Tonkin. It must therefore be the headwaters of what the Vietnamese called the Red River. Moreover by all accounts, from above the Chinese border right down to Hanoi and Haiphong at its mouth, it was open to shipping. In effect, the Red River, and not the Mekong, was the long-sought river-route to China; Hanoi, rather than Saigon, held the key to the continent.

Far-reaching consequences would follow from this revelation. In the 1870s French interest would abruptly switch from Cochin-China in the south of Vietnam to Tonkin in the north. On the basis of information obtained from the Commission,¹⁰ Jean Dupuis, an enterprising arms-dealer, pioneered the Red River trade up into China in 1872, and then ensconced himself in Hanoi, defying Vietnamese orders to desist by flying the French flag (he had received

some official encouragement from Paris), forming a private army, and fitting out a second river flotilla.

Ostensibly to restrain Dupuis but unofficially to exploit this opening, in 1873 a small French expeditionary force was despatched from Saigon to Hanoi by sea. It was only 100 strong, perhaps because this was as many men as a mere Lieutenant might command. Now 32, but still alarmingly headstrong, Francis Garnier had been given what he interpreted as *carte blanche* to extend his blueprint for *Indo-Chine* by pencilling-in northern Vietnam.

At first all went well. The Hanoi citadel was captured and, just three weeks after his arrival, ‘Le Grand Mandarin de France’, as Garnier now styled himself, was pleased to announce that “the province of Hanoi is completely pacified . . . entire administration in our hands . . . brigandage suppressed . . . people sympathetic”. The Red River route to China was declared open to traffic; 400 men (i.e. his own plus Dupuis’) had secured a land of “two million souls”.¹¹

Despite grave doubts in Paris and menacing protests from the Annamite emperor, this extraordinary feat might well have been allowed to stand. That it was not, and was in fact strongly repudiated, resulted from Garnier pushing his luck a little too far. In gratuitous pursuit of some ineffectual attackers, he led a flying column far beyond the reach of Hanoi’s guns, encountered other assailants, became separated from his men, got stuck in a ditch, and was there cut down. The news triggered a general uprising; the French forces were besieged within a few fortified positions; and the “two million souls”, rather faster than they had been secured, slipped the colonial yoke.

Such a disastrous episode did nothing to endear overseas escapades to the French public or to strengthen the hand of the colonial party in Paris. Garnier’s reputation was hopelessly compromised and with it, for a time, the findings of the Mekong Exploration Commission. In 1868 the Commission’s triumphant return, first to Saigon and then Paris, had not gone to plan. A row had broken out when his colleagues had accused Garnier of claiming the credit that should have gone to Doudart de Lagrée; de Carné, on his deathbed, had then penned a narrative of the expedition that was not entirely consistent with that being prepared by Garnier; and all this had happened against a backdrop of national emergency that made the Commission’s achievements, and its differences, seem increasingly irrelevant. When war with Prussia finally broke out in 1870, Paris itself was besieged. Explorers like Garnier had dutifully rallied to the defence of the motherland, then participated in the post-settlement recriminations.

Anglo-French rivalry and the return to the Mekong, 1883–93

Coming so soon after this defeat in Europe, the Hanoi fiasco effectively put paid to French ambitions in Asia for a decade. Some further reconnaissance of those Lao districts east of the Mekong that bordered Annam (and were possibly tributary to it) was undertaken in the late 1870s, but it was not until 1882–83 that operations were resumed in earnest. A second and much more determined

advance was then made into Tonkin; Annam and its emperor were taken under French protection; and the recommendations of the Mekong Exploration Commission in respect of the Lao states were dusted down, reviewed and eventually adopted.

Numerous considerations prompted this revival of an unashamedly forward policy. In the 1870s much of Tonkin had been overrun by armed bands of Chinese irregulars fleeing imperial reprisals in their homeland – the so-called Ho, Haw, or ‘Flags’ (because they fought under red, white or black banners). It was in fact from one such band that Garnier had met his ignominious end. Although under the terms of the subsequent French withdrawal from Tonkin the Red River was supposed to be kept open for trade, the presence of these gangs kept it closed. Some pacification of Tonkin was thus essential if the long-sought trade with Yunnan was to develop; yet far from suppressing the Ho, the Annamite emperor in Hué encouraged their depredations and cited his ancient allegiance to Beijing as an excuse for evading undertakings given to the French. By the early 1880s the Ho were even pushing west into the Mekong basin. The Lao states appealed to their superior in Bangkok but received only spasmodic protection that did as much to provoke the Ho as to deter them. Clearly the situation in Laos, too, was ripe for French intervention. As foreseen by the Mekong Exploration Commission, the Lao princes needed a stronger champion.

For the now resurgent colonial party in France (an alliance of manufacturing interests, missionary-minded clergy and empire-minded statesmen), as for those in Saigon who still revered the memory of Garnier, all this constituted provocation enough. But an added irritant was provided by the British. From Burma, they too had been exploring the possibility of opening a trade corridor into western China, in this case by way of the Irrawaddy river and an overland trail, or possibly a railway, to Yunnan. The appearance of the Mekong Exploration Commission in the Shan states had added urgency to these plans, and they had received some unwelcome publicity from the 1875 murder of Augustus Margary while spying out the route. If France did not move quickly, there was a real danger of her being both pre-empted in the markets of western China and outflanked in the middle Mekong basin. The nightmare scenario, first evoked by Garnier during the Commission’s upriver journey in 1866–67, of finding a Union Jack fluttering over Luang Prabang had returned to haunt his successors.

Upper Burma, otherwise the kingdom of Ava, was still under Burmese rule in the early 1880s; but Ava’s authority was being progressively undermined by the British in Rangoon in much the same way as Hué’s authority was being undermined by the French in Saigon. When in 1883, with French troops re-established in Hanoi, the Annamite emperor was finally forced to accept French protection, King Thibaw’s despotic days in Ava were numbered. Reports that he was seeking a French alliance were the final straw. Ava was overrun by the British in 1885 and Thibaw’s kingdom annexed. The Anglo-French tit-for-tat continued – and the imperial pincers edged closer – when in the following year the British installed a representa-

tive in Chiang Mai in northern Thailand and the French ordered a vice-consul to Luang Prabang.

The man chosen for the Luang Prabang post was Auguste Pavie. Previously based in Cambodia, whence he had extended the telegraph link to Bangkok, Pavie lived simply, travelled light and, though without much education, had become an authority on the region. Garnier had been one of his heroes since he first arrived in Saigon. Like the Mekong Exploration Commission, he too cherished the dream of *Indo-Chine Française* and over the next eight years, in Laos and then Bangkok, would do more than anyone to realise it.¹²

Luck also played a part. Soon after Pavie's arrival in Luang Prabang, the Ho descended on the town, sacked it, and sent its king and many of his subjects fleeing downriver. Pavie joined them and was able to offer some assistance when their overladen pirogues and rafts were sucked into whirlpools and dashed to pieces in the rapids. He shared the king's short exile and, when the Ho withdrew, returned as a trusted advisor. Luang Prabang remained under Thai suzerainty but henceforth looked increasingly to Pavie and France for its protection. With the king's blessing, Pavie and his subordinates undertook an exhaustive survey of the Lao states, establishing direct contact with the French forces in Tonkin, exploring every conceivable trail between the Mekong and Vietnam, and reaching the Chinese border to the north and the Cambodian to the south.

In the south, particular attention was given to the great Falls of Khon. Pavie subscribed to Garnier's theory that they ought to be navigable. Empty pirogues reportedly passed over them when the river was in flood, and in 1890 Pavie himself actually descended them in a small canoe dangling from cables. The news caused a sensation in Saigon. It looked as if the river might yet serve, if not as a trade route to China, at least as the main artery of *Indo-Chine*. Further trials were urged and contracts were placed for a fleet of Mekong steamers.

Through the rapids below the Falls a channel was marked and partially cleared in the late 1880s. Then in 1891–92, with engines roaring and boilers near bursting, a succession of small steam-craft addressed the least formidable of the Falls. All failed. Specialised steamers were undoubtedly the answer, but they would have to be very specialised, in fact portable. In late 1893 two such vessels, small gun-sloops, reached the tail of the island up which the Mekong River Commission had once climbed. The sloops were there disassembled, loaded on bogies for which a short railway was laid, and hauled up the island by hand for reassembling on the river above. It was a triumph of sorts, and the two vessels rendered good service on the middle Mekong, alarming the British when one of them reached the Shan states, and being followed up the Falls, in bits, by others. The track up the island, all seven kilometres of it, was eventually awarded a locomotive (hauled upriver from Saigon) and was extended with a fine stone bridge and loading gantries at either end. The only railway ever built in Laos, it lasted until the Second World War when it succumbed as much to the jungle as the Japanese.¹³



Figure 9 A flooded trail in the Shan States



Plate 1 Landing stage on the Tonle Sap at Siem Reap near Angkor



Plate 2 Papheng, one of the unnavigable Khon Falls



Plate 3 Rail-to-boat gantry above the Khon Falls



Plate 4 Dry season; the Mekong at Xieng Kok in the Shan Hills



Plate 5 'We entered the forest in Cambodia and would not be out of it until . . . China' (de Carné).
The Nam Ngum tributary near Vientiane.

The denouement 1893–1907

All this activity around the Falls, and the ubiquity of Pavie's commissioners and patrols elsewhere in Laos, drew vigorous protests from Bangkok. The French responded in kind, blaming the Thais for Ho depredations and challenging all Thai rights east of the Mekong, especially in those regions that had once supposedly owed some allegiance to Hué. But when in 1893 Pavie was transferred to Bangkok as France's resident minister, he privately conceded that France still had few claims on Laos that would withstand scrutiny and none that the Thais could not match. A more aggressive approach was called for, and to this end in April 1893 Pavie again represented French grievances and added for the first time a claim to French suzerainty over the entire east bank of the Mekong. He accordingly demanded that all Thai representation there be withdrawn.

Objections from Bangkok were expected, but from London they were feared. The British had much the largest commercial stake in Thailand as well as the strongest diplomatic representation there. From the former royal nanny (Mrs Leonowens of 'The King and I' fame) to surveyors like James McCarthy (whose triangulations seemed to shadow Pavie's explorations rather closely) numerous Britons had for some years found influential employ in Thailand. The French recognised that London had a strong interest in the country; and had Lord Rosebery, foreign secretary in Gladstone's new government, realised what was at stake, he would surely have remonstrated in the strongest terms. In fact, ill informed about the implications of the Mekong as a frontier, especially in regard to the Shan states in the north, and supposing that a clear-cut demarcation must be preferable to a disputed one, he did nothing. Paris interpreted this as a green light. In April 1893 small detachments of French troops moved into Laos to occupy the Falls region and to ease out Thai officials elsewhere. Bloodshed was largely avoided, but at the Falls a Thai counter-attack claimed several fatalities and brought the capture of a French officer. Further north a French civil official was murdered by the Thai garrison that he was escorting to the river.

These incidents led directly to the crisis of July 1893 known as the 'Paknam affair'. The French demanded redress and, tearing another leaf from the report of the Mekong Exploration Commission, added to their list of grievances the Thai occupation of the former Cambodian provinces of Battambang and Siem Reap (including Angkor). Meanwhile Pavie, now in Bangkok, reported that the Thai army was mobilising; the Thais appealed desperately to the British to intercede on their behalf; and the British, while urging restraint, summoned a couple of gunboats to Bangkok to reassure the Thais and to protect British nationals. Citing reciprocal rights on Bangkok's Chao Phraya river, the French then ordered two of their own gunboats to Bangkok. Possibly as a result of a misunderstanding, they were fired on by Thai batteries at Paknam ('river's mouth') and returned fire. The engagement lasted only half an hour but 18 were killed, mostly Thais, and a French merchant vessel was incapacitated.¹⁴

The French gunboats continued upriver to Bangkok. Pavie then formulated his demands as an ultimatum, and when these were not met he declared a blockade of

the river. Since British shipping accounted for 90 percent of the country's external trade, the blockade seemed aimed more at London than Bangkok. Rosebery so interpreted it; the gung-ho colonialists in Saigon would lift the blockade, he surmised, only in return for "a coterminous frontier with India [i.e. Burma]". And Pavie may so have intended it, for the acquisition of Thailand, the richest prize in South East Asia, would, as he put it, "round off" *Indo-Chine Française* and elevate it into something comparable with British India.

But in Paris more sober counsels prevailed. On London's insistence, guarantees of Thai sovereignty had already been given; a confrontation with the British over so distant and hostile a land was unthinkable; and so was the expense of running it. Pavie had gone too far. Retraction, though, could bring dividends. Under the Franco-Thai agreement of August 1893, the blockade was lifted in return for all Thai rights on the east bank of the Mekong being renounced, a 25-kilometre-wide zone down its west bank being demilitarised, likewise Battambang and Siem Reap, and a Thai port, Chantaburi, being handed over to the French by way of surety. In effect France had obtained the whole of what is today Laos, plus the potential for further additions in Cambodia and on the Mekong's west bank. Meanwhile an obscure crisis in the far north, where among the Shan states the French and British empires had quietly collided, promised to silence any British objections.¹⁵

In South East Asia, as in central Asia, the British priority was to avoid sharing a land frontier with another European power. Tibet and Afghanistan, whose northern border had just been rearranged and demarcated, served as the essential buffer between India and tsarist Russia; Thailand was supposed to provide an equivalent between India–Burma and French Indo-China. Belatedly, though, the British had realised that Thai territory did not extend as far north as supposed. Between it and China, where the Mekong Exploration Commission had so nearly come to grief and where some of the Shan states actually straddled the river, the British dependencies inherited from Ava and the French dependencies now claimed along the east bank of the Mekong actually overlapped.

With a view to remedying this situation, an artificial buffer had been attempted. In 1893 Chieng Hung (Jinghong), the most north-easterly of the Shan states (where the Mekong Exploration Commission's Chinese passports had once provoked such awe) was ceded to China; and immediately south of it another Shan state was earmarked for Thailand. Together they would constitute what the French ridiculed as *le tampon*. But both straddled the Mekong and before the latter state could be demarcated an ugly stand-off developed. A British party, which had raised the flag at Mong Sing on the east bank of the river, was challenged by a French force sent to occupy the same spot. Moreover the French were able to produce evidence that as recently as 1892 Mong Sing had formally acknowledged Thai suzerainty. Realised sooner, this would have suited the British nicely, but since all Thai territories east of the Mekong had just been accepted as French, the British were now trespassing.

Briefly in 1894 the Mong Sing affair stirred international opinion, although the confrontation on the upper Mekong hardly rivalled the later Fashoda crisis

on the upper Nile. It was eventually resolved by an Anglo-French agreement of 1896 under which the British withdrew from Mong Sing to the east bank of the river in return for cast-iron guarantees of the sovereignty and independence of a Thailand comprising the whole of the rich Menam-Chao Phraya basin. This met British requirements of an internationally defined state that might fulfil its role both as a buffer and a market, while leaving the French free to prise off more peripheral districts.

They did just that. Rosebery likened the process to stripping an artichoke of its outer leaves while the heart of the vegetable remained off-limits. At a Franco-Thai convention in 1904 the 25-kilometre exclusion zone on the west bank of the Mekong was swapped for the transfer to French Laos of two west bank districts, one being a long slice of territory opposite Luang Prabang and the other being Bassac, Garnier's projected spa, plus more territory round the Falls. This was followed in 1907 by a Franco-Thai treaty under which the French finally restored to Bangkok a place in south-eastern Thailand called Kratt, or Trat (which had earlier been exchanged for Chantaburi). In return Thailand finally relinquished its now enfeebled hold on those 'alienated' Cambodian provinces of Siem Reap and Battambang. Forty-one years after the Mekong Exploration Commission had identified Angkor as a site worthy of French protection, it received just that when it returned to Cambodian rule. Appropriately the greatest Angkorian scholar, conservator, and collector at the time was Louis Delaporte, who had been the Commission's draughtsman and whose illustrations of its journey, published and pirated in countless works, remain its most evocative legacy – along with all those straggling South East Asian frontiers.

NOTES

1. Garnier (1873) is the official report of the expedition and includes one volume devoted to maps plus some of the illustrations produced by Louis Delaporte. Garnier (1885) is Garnier's posthumously published narrative (including additional material from Delaporte); much of it had been previously serialised in the magazine *Le Tour du Monde*. De Carné (1872) is the only other narrative.
2. For example, Severin, Timothy, *The Oriental Adventure*, London, 1976.
3. A notable exception being Osborne (2000).
4. Garnier (1885); transl. Bangkok 1996, vol. 2, p. 20.
5. *Ibid.*, vol. 1, p. 51.
6. Quoted in Gomane (1994).
7. De Carné (1873); transl. Bangkok 1995, p. 99.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 83.
9. Garnier (1885); transl. Bangkok 1996, vol. 1, pp. 305, 313.
10. Dupuis had met the returning Commission on the Yangtze at Hankow and had obtained news of the Red River from Dr Joubert, the Commission's geologist.
11. For the first advance into Tonkin see especially Taboulet (1956).
12. For Pavie see his own many-volumed works, especially *Mission Pavie* (1901) and *A La Conquête des Coeurs* (1947).
13. A good description of riding this short railway is in Bassenne (1912, 1995).
14. The Paknam encounter was closely observed and described by Warington Smyth (1898).
15. Tuck (1995) contains an excellent account of the Anglo-Franco-Thai negotiations and the Mong Sing affair. The remainder of this article is heavily indebted to it.

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