

Marie de Rugy, *Aux confins des empires: cartes et constructions territoriales dans le nord de la péninsule indochinoise (1885-1914)*, Paris: Editions de la Sorbonne, 2018, 312 pp.

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This book is the result of recent doctoral research conducted by Marie de Rugy at the Université Paris I Panthéon-Sorbonne under the direction of Héléne Blais and Hugues Tertrais. It is a particularly interesting and pleasantly readable work that bears all the traces of a thorough and carefully performed erudite investigation of cartographic practices at the intersection of imperial history, history of science and *histoire croisée*.

The central question is how the simultaneous British and French territorial expansion in the north of Indochina in the period 1885-1914 resulted in specific territorial constructions of the conquered territories, where various representations met in very different ways, depending on the position of the actors involved in the conceptualization and on their sometimes extremely divergent motivations—from ministers, diplomats and colonial administrators to explorers, missionaries and topographers in military service.

As a consequence of the third Anglo-Burmese War, Upper Burma was annexed to the British Raj in 1885, while around the same time the French established the protectorates of Tonkin and Annam within the Union of Indochina, which further included the territories of Cambodia and Cochinchina, annexed some decades earlier. The imperial dimension of the cartography of the “border zones” in northern Indochina during the transition from the nineteenth to the twentieth century is evident: it is all about defining the territorial demarcation of the newly acquired territories and setting up an overall mapping of annexed lands—often qualified as

“unknown” by both the British and the French—in order to better administer them and exploit both the land and the local populations.

The author wisely assumes that one should not address the mapping of northern Indochina as one single large colonial project. Her objective is to understand the complexities of geographic processes in a variety of areas, from the simple sketches made during reconnaissance missions to the final topographic maps, which she rightly regards as being always “unfinished” and therefore provisional, though they are often considered to be “finished” products at the time of production.

The book is based on the assumption that maps have limited power, even in the colonial context, “if one accepts to go beyond discourses so as to observe the modalities of their production and their different uses” (p. 15). The author’s careful attention to the evolutionary character and multiplicity of geographical practices in complex imperial spheres is one of the many strengths of this study.

Another asset of this research is the constant attention given to the interaction between colonial cartographers and the local inhabitants in the gathering of general and specific information about the annexed territories, the collection of topographical data, and the eventual production of new maps. Maps are explicitly considered as social and cultural constructions that must be deciphered. The author succeeds in demonstrating that multiple spatialities (*spatialités*, i.e. views of spaces and their uses) and the resulting representations and practices of these spaces came together in a colonial context. In this way she successfully avoids the pitfall of binary thinking in which European and native views of space are diametrically opposed. The author, on the contrary, sees forms of “mixing” of spatialities, especially in borderlands. That makes the choice of the case of northern Indochina all the more relevant.

A strong point is the methodological choice to “cross-examine” imperial systems (“*croiser les différents systèmes impériaux*”), that is, to systematically and critically conduct a comparative study of the British and French colonial worlds, with a focus on a wide range of dynamics, in particular the circulation of knowledge and practices. In this way a series of meaningful confrontations are integrated in this study, in particular between the Société de Géographie de Paris and the Royal Geographical Society, both of which have left their mark on the exploration of Indochina, in particular via the systematic mapping of the large rivers systems, in the hope of getting a definitive answer about the location of their sources. The study has a clear and logical structure. In Chapter 1 in particular, the issue of hydrography and the combination of economic and scientific preoccupations in the exploration of river basins is addressed in a very detailed way. A series of interesting expositions deal with the Pavie mission (1879-1895), which in terms of the size of the expedition and the quality of its scientific

production had no British counterpart. In Chapter 2, attention shifts to the institutional history of the geographic services, which aimed at a regular mapping of the annexed territories and developed a specific policy for that purpose. Chapter 3 examines the numerous collaborations—including those of intra-imperial nature—but also pays attention to institutional competition. Chapter 4 plunges deeper into the action on the field, investigating the practices of topography and triangulation. This chapter is extremely rich in its analysis of the technical work done by the topographical brigades. Chapter 5, on the other hand, focuses on the local sources of information that were crucial for the production of accurate maps, while it explains at the same time the complexity and limitations of the interaction. The discussion about the difficulties with topographical naming offers very interesting reading material in this context. The surveys among the local population were of great scientific importance, but local maps were also useful for the colonial administration. Chapter 6 deals with the use of Asian maps by Europeans. Chapter 7 investigates a particular issue: colonial roads, their representation on maps and their role as producers of territories. Chapter 8 is devoted to frontiers, borders and limits. Chapter 9 deals with administrative logic and territorial anomalies.

Intensive and critical research has produced a particularly solid study, which moreover offers a great deal of inspiration for similar research about other colonial settings. For example, it would be very interesting in the future to extend the line of comparative research through cross-examination to the cases of, on the one hand, the Congo Free State—the field of action of Belgian colonial cartography, the history of which is still barely discussed in scholarly literature—and, on the other hand, imperial Brazil, where the impressive series of topographical operations in the border areas, led by the astronomer and cartographer Louis Cruls (1848-1908), demand a new synthesis. There are undoubtedly many similarities and differences in the “colonial” cartography of these territories of the same period (1885-1914). The connecting elements with the Indochina case are, firstly, the delimitation of boundaries between competitive powers and, secondly, the decisive role of major rivers and other communication routes (such as railways) in cartographic practices.

In this beautifully produced book, which contains a separate section with fine reproductions of the main maps, Marie de Rugy has exposed the complexity of colonial cartography, with all its technical and human challenges, in a particularly critical way, thereby demonstrating the relevance of a comparative approach. Her research takes a fresh look at questions about centrality and periphery in cartographic matters.