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River Road Through Laos: Reflections of the Mekong

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**ASIAN STUDIES COMMITTEE
OCCASIONAL PAPERS SERIES NO. 10**

**RIVER ROAD THROUGH LAOS:
REFLECTIONS OF THE MEKONG**

**By
JAMES A. HAFNER
JOEL M. HALPERN
BARBARA KERESKY-HALPERN**

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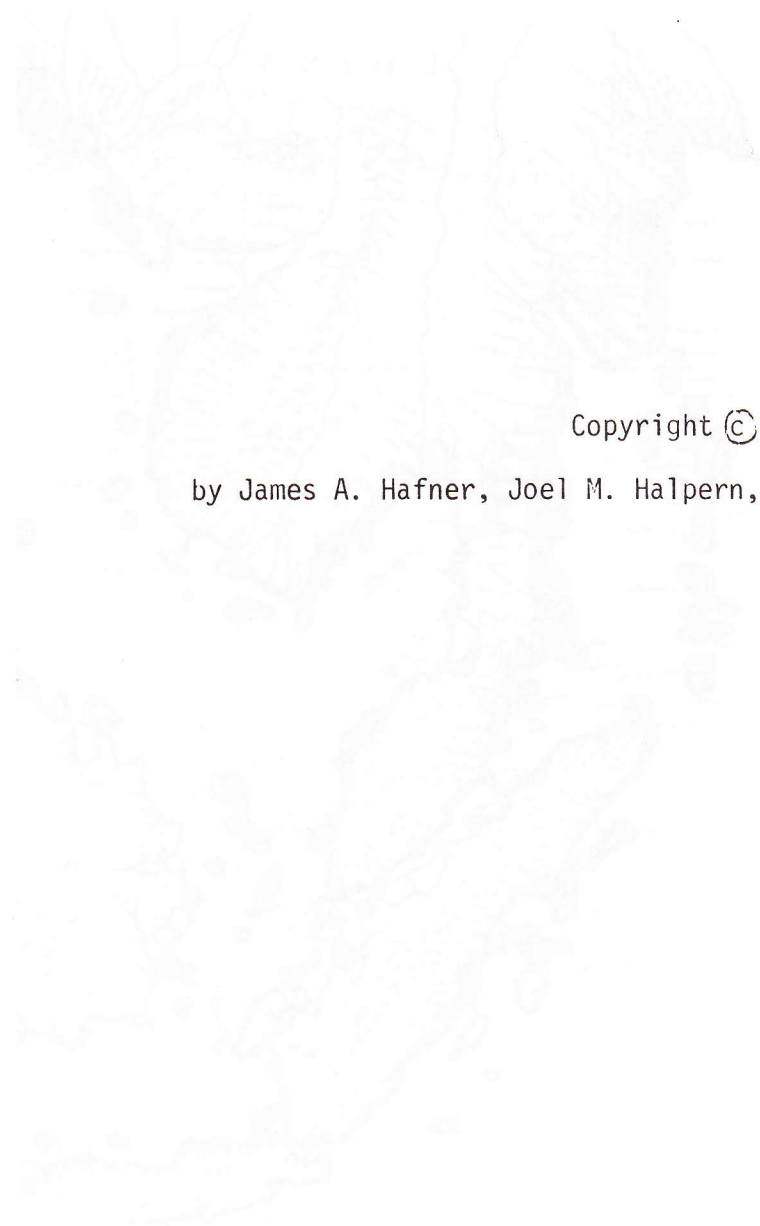
RIVER ROAD
THROUGH LAOS:
REFLECTIONS
OF THE MEKONG

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PREFACE

The world's major rivers have long held a fascination for man as adventurer, scholar, and political opportunist. Few accounts of the exploration and navigation of these rivers can match the elegance of Alan Moreheads' historical narratives of the White Nile and Blue Nile published over twenty years ago. These historical reconstructions of culture, environment, and geopolitical intrigues are liberally spiced with the exotic, bizarre, and individual personalities which lent color and depth to man's conquests in the Age of Reason. Similar accounts of the exploration of major river systems in Asia are unfortunately, largely missing from this literature. However, the major rivers of East and Southeast Asia have an equally colorful and exotic history. The Mekong River which links the Yunnan highlands and the South China Sea is in many respects the premier river system in mainland Southeast Asia. Much of its early history and association with human activity still remains obscure. As recently as 1860 little was still known of its course and sources, and what little knowledge did exist was colored by cartographic imagination. In 1866 the French mounted an expedition from Phnom Penh in Cambodia (Kampuchea) to survey the river, believing their route would lead to China and, "...so to fabled riches in that most populous of countries (Osborne, 1975)." Almost all accounts of explorations along the Mekong in the 19th and early 20th centuries are in French. However, Milton Osborne's , River Road to China : The Mekong Expedition 1866-1873. (Liveright, 1975) presents a valuable examination of the river and its early exploration by the French.

By the latter decades of the 20th century substantial exploration, charting, and development efforts on the middle and lower Mekong River had been initiated. The major thrust of this work has fallen to the United Nations Lower Mekong Basin development project which began in 1957. The scope and pro-

gress of this major international effort to 1970 can be gauged from, The Report on the Indicative Basin Plan, (United Nations, 1970), a benchmark planning document for this project. Despite major political and social disruptions throughout the basin over the last two decades, work in some areas continues and benefits are slowly being realized.

This effort has done much to broaden our knowledge of the entire basin, especially those sections downstream from Vientiane Laos. Above this point, however, the riverine environment and adjoining human landscapes are still poorly documented. The materials presented in this monograph are a modest attempt to add to that limited knowledge. While we make no pretense about the scholarly rigor of these materials, we do feel that they are unique and informative in their own right.

The initial selection seeks to present a skeletal portrait of the upper Mekong as encountered in the mid-19th century by French explorers. The travels of Henri Mouhot (1861-1863) and the more formal French Mekong Expedition of 1866-1873 under the leadership of Francis Garnier are given primary consideration. By contemporary standards neither of these efforts could be considered as 'scientific' surveys. And in the case of the French expedition, commercial and political motivations were clearly more central to its mission than any systematic study of the upper Mekong river. Yet, they added much to the meagre knowledge of the region at that time and provide one point of reference against which contemporary conditions can be evaluated.

Almost 100 years later, Joel and Barbara Halpern as newly trained anthropologists took-up positions as USAID field representatives in the royal capital of Luang Prabang, Laos. Their narratives of two river excursions from Luang Prabang on USAID business were originally prepared as an informal memorandum and personal correspondence, respectively. These narratives are presented

here with only modest editing so that the original context of their preparation can be appreciated.

The final selection is somewhat more empirical in its treatment of trade, transport, and local economy along the river from Vientiane to Luang Prabang. Based on research conducted by James A. Hafner for the United Nations Pa Mong Research Project in 1975, it portrays conditions in this isolated region of northeast Thailand and western Laos just months before the Pathet Lao government assumed control of the country. Much has changed in this area since then. The border following portions of the Mekong river has been sealed, the filtering of Lao and Hmong refugees across the river into Thailand has been ruthlessly suppressed, and large refugee camps in Loei and Nong Khai provinces of Thailand have become the home for many of these refugees. Despite these changes, the importance of the river as a resource has not been diminished.

We wish to thank the Asian Studies Program and the International Studies Program of the University of Massachusetts for providing the opportunity to more formally present these observations. We hope that despite their limitations as scholarly works, they will contribute to the fragmentary information on trans-border interaction and life along the upper Mekong river.

James A. Hafner
Amherst, May 1983

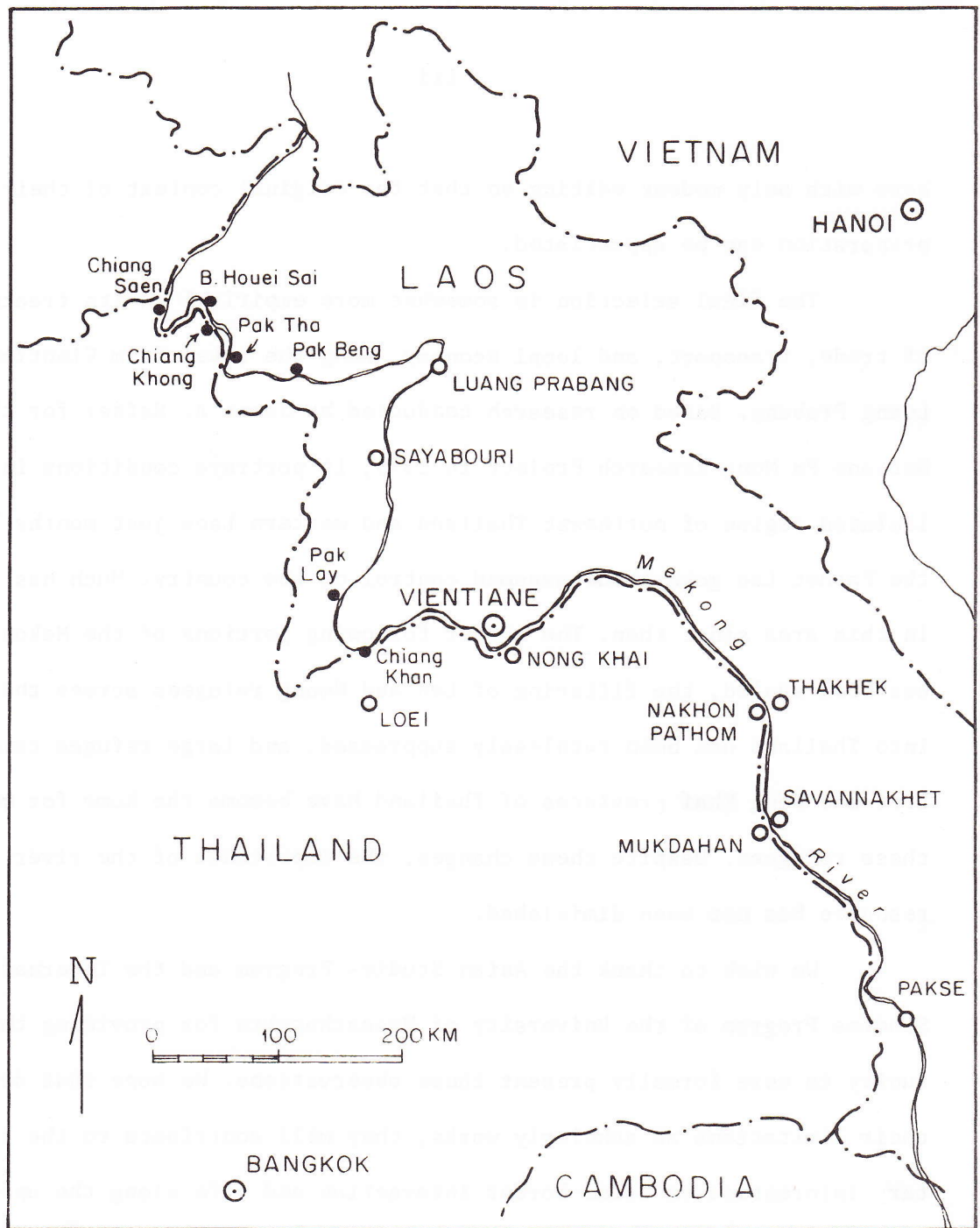


Fig. 1

THE MIDDLE AND UPPER MEKONG RIVER, LAOS AND THAILAND

I. RIVER ROAD TO CHINA: THE MEKONG RIVER
EXPLORATIONS OF THE 19TH CENTURY

The Mekong, which rises in the high plateau of western China, is in many respects one of the premier rivers of the world. Its length of over 4,000 km places it among the longer rivers in the world and the resources within its basin represent the single most substantial natural feature of mainland Southeast Asia. Until thirty years ago relatively little was known of the potentials for social and economic development which existed within this important natural resource. During that span of time, however, it has become the focus of one of the most important regional development schemes to be undertaken in this century.¹ Despite the disruptions of this scheme by recent political and military events in the region, it remains both a challenge for the nations it includes and the major hope for improvement of social and economic conditions in the future. Although there are fascinating and complex issues worthy of discussion in this context, it is not our intention to dwell on these issues. Our purpose here is significantly less ambitious. Since much of the contemporary emphasis on regional development in the Mekong Basin is on the middle and lower basin, our attention here lies with providing some insight into conditions on the upper Mekong.

The upper Mekong river above Vientiane is the least well known and studied section of this river system. Indeed, the history of the entire system is clouded by the absence of factual information until at least the 19th century. Only French colonial sources and scattered British accounts shed any light on this region, and these are notable by limited numbers and meagre information.

1

The most comprehensive discussion of the Mekong River and its basin is found in the, United Nations, 1970. Report on Indicative Basin Plan, A Proposed Framework for the Development of Water and Related Resources of the Lower Mekong Basin. Bangkok: Committee for the Coordination of Investigations of the Lower Mekong Basin (E/CN.11/WRD/MKG/L.340)

Despite these limitations, a reasonable impression of conditions in the 19th century can be gained from several important historical accounts: Henri Mouhot(1864,1866); Auguste Pavie(1898-1919); G. Simon(1896); Lagree and Garnier (1873). For sheer narrative excitement, however, Osborne's account of the French Mekong river expedition of 1866-1873 is the most comprehensive and enjoyable. It is primarily this work which we have drawn upon for the following description of the exploration of the upper Mekong River and the social and economic conditions in this remote region over one hundred years ago.

In the 19th century the upper Mekong region was a stage upon which the rival territorial claims of the Siamese and French for the fragmented Lao kingdom of Lan Ch'ang were being played out. Since the 16th century portions of this kingdom had been subject to intermittent attack and rule by both the Burmese and Siamese. But, by 1850 Siamese influence had gained the upper hand and they exercised suzerainty over the royal capital at Luang Prabang. By 1870 they were seeking the first opportunity to extend their nominal control over the entire region. Two years later an expedition of intervention was mounted which resulted in complete military occupation of the entire region north and east of Luang Prabang by 1885. Protest of this action by the Vietnamese government led to the establishment of a French vice-consulate in Luang Prabang, a position initially occupied by Auguste Pavie. His extensive knowledge of the country based on a series of geographical missions enabled him to rally the Laotians and their king in support of the French's protégé, Viet-Nam's, claim to the left bank of the Mekong. French inspired incidents and demonstrations of naval strength off the coast of Bangkok resulted in the signing of the Franco-Siamese treaty of 1893 which recognized Laos as a French protectorate. This skeletal outline of events leading to the shift of Laos into the French colonial orbit in Indo-China provides a broad general framework for the explorations of the upper Mekong which took place during

these years.

For the French colonizers who came to Indo-china in 1858, the remote and often barbaric areas outside of South Vietnam initially held little interest. They recognized that Cambodia was a petty kingdom whose king remained in power with the help of Thailand and that British interests were by far more serious threats to French positions in southern Vietnam. That British commercial and political involvement extended beyond the Indian sub-continent into Burma and the Malay archipelago served to further accentuate these concerns, although there is little historical evidence to support this potentiality. Interest in the Mekong nevertheless grew and especially what lay beyond its upper reaches. The value of the China trade was already well known and there growing British speculations about overland trade with China from Burma. And, although European and American travelers had visited numerous places around the edges of this unknown interior, scientific exploration of the interior had not yet taken place (Figure 2).

"One has only to read the traveler's accounts of the period to realize how great was the lack of knowledge. Even when all the available information was brought together, the unknown factors were greater than the known and the doubt and distortions greater than the certainties."

Nowhere is this better demonstrated than in Josiah Conder's engagingly titled book, The Modern Traveler, published in London in 1830. Here Conder drew upon the most modern, if not always the most complete, knowledge. Yet the picture he gives of Indochina bears striking similarities to that provided by Tome Pires and Father de Cruz three hundred years before. The sixteenth-century idea of all the great rivers of Southeast Asia flowing from a single source still deserved consideration in Conder's view. And he ventured agreement with another idea of the early travelers in the region; that the Mekong and the Chao Phraya, and possibly other major Southeast Asian rivers such as the Salween in Burma, formed a high inland lake during the flood period of the rainy season..... For Joseph Conder, summing up the import of his information on the Indochinese region, the future seemed rosy: 'Who can tell but that, in a few years,' he wrote, 'we may have a British factory in Touron [modern Da-Nang], steam boats plying on the Saigon River, or even ascending the unknown course of the Meiking, and that a joint stock company may be formed to work the gold

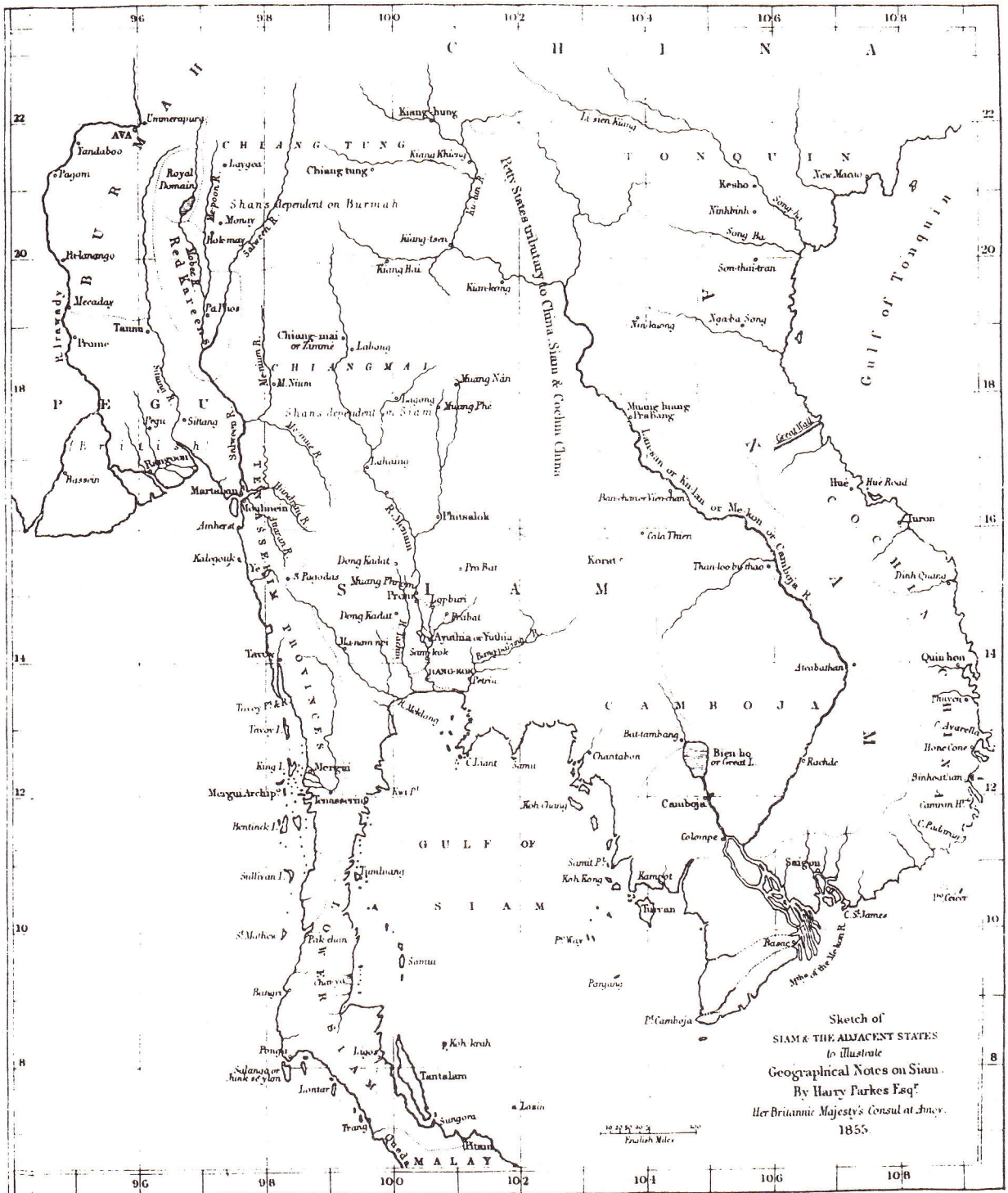


Fig 2

PARKES MAP OF SIAM AND INDOCHINA SHOWING THE ACCEPTED ROUTE OF THE MEKONG(ME-KON) RIVER TO CHINA IN 1855

mines of Tonkin!" The irony of Conder's point of view was that the men who did come to try and trade in Indochina and to explore the Mekong were French not British. And the double irony was that these Frenchmen were spurred on in their efforts by the quite erroneous belief that the perfidious English were poised to grab a position in Indochina when such was demonstrably not the case." (Osborne, 975; 23-24)

The entry of France into Indochina was seen by its promoters in Paris as opening new routes to prestige for *la patrie*, the presumed riches of China, and to insure protection for its priests and their growing volume of converts. The question was mainly one of how to reach the rich markets of China. Even after the French became established in Saigon in 1863, the Mekong remained an unknown quantity. Its course for some distance above Phnom Penh was well known, but the middle and upper reaches of the river were still virgin territory for French missionaries and explorers. Henri Mouhot, a naturalist and explorer was to add the next chapter to the knowledge of the upper Mekong.

The period Mouhot spent exploring in Thailand, Cambodia and Laos between 1858 and 1861 was surprisingly brief, but his efforts were not at all diminished in importance. In 1859 he traveled northward by overland routes from Phnom Penh to Luang Prabang and Pak Lay.

"On the 24th of June [1861] I arrived at Paklaie [Pak Lay]. The Mekon at this place is much larger than the Menam at Bangkok, and forces its way between lofty mountains with a noise resembling the roaring of the sea and the impetuosity of a torrent, seeming scarcely able to keep within its bed. There are many rapids between Paklaie and Louang Prabang, which is ten or fifteen days' painful travelling. I was tired of my long journey on elephants, and was anxious to hire a boat there, but the chief and some of the inhabitants, fearing that I might meet with some accident, advised me to continue my route by land.

In a letter which I wrote from Cambodia I described the Mekon river as imposing, but monotonous and unpicturesque: but in this part of the country it presents a very different appearance. Where it is narrowest the width is above 1000 metres, and it everywhere runs between lofty mountains, down whose sides flow torrents, all bringing their tribute. There is almost an excess of grandeur. The eye rests constantly on

these mountain slopes, clothed in the richest and thickest verdure." On the 25th of July I reached Louang Pragang, a delightful little town covering a square mile of ground, and containing a population, not as Mgr. Pallegoix says in his work on Siam, of 80,000, but of 7,000 or 8,000 only The mountains which, above and below this town, enclose the Mekon, form here a kind of circular valley or amphitheatre, nine miles in diameter, and which, there can be no doubt, was anciently a lake Were it not for the constant blaze of a tropical sun, or if the midday heat were tempered by a gentle breeze, the place would be a little paradise."

Mouhot, 1966; 144-147

Despite the rigors of travel, the clear barriers to river navigation which Mouhot's diary demonstrates, and its clear lack of any significant mention of commercial opportunities along the upper Mekong, French interest continued to mount.

Osborne observes that despite French optimism about commercial prospects in Cochinchina, especially Saigon and Cholon, it did not disguise the basic fact that the colony as a whole was a clear financial liability to the French state. The growth of the rice trade would not be really significant until the late 19th century and large commercial rubber estates in Cambodia and South Vietnam were not even conceived of at this time. For both the British and French commercial communities in the early 1860's, China remained the source for unlimited mercantile success. The huge interior population of China was cited endlessly as the basis for this commercial hope. And, while British interest in overland trade with China quickened, French advocates of expansion in Asia fretted over potential British competition and renewed their preoccupation with the commercial and navigational opportunities of the Mekong.

These concerns were finally put into action in July of 1866 when a French expedition left Phnom Penh to explore the Mekong River. Foremost among their objectives was to chart a route via the Mekong to China which would open the rich potential of trade and commerce for the French. The survey party was composed of Francis Garnier, a naval officer and 'prefect' of Cholon;

Doudart de Lagrée, the French representative in Cambodia and a graduate of the École Polytechnique; Clovis Thorel, a doctor and botanical expert; Lucien Joubert also a doctor; Louis Delaporte whose artistic talents contributed to the pictorial record of the expedition; and, Louis de Carne, a representative of the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Sixteen secondary personnel, 150 cases of supplies, 25,000 francs in gold bars, Mexican dollars and Thai coins, and one case of scientific instruments accompanied the principal survey party. From Phnom Penh the supplies were transferred to several 30-50' pirogues for the trip northward. Moving upstream the pirogues were poled forward or pulled by hand against the strong current. Since the river was already in flood by mid July, these methods were the only practical ways to move upstream against the rapidly flowing current.

The 'great idea' supposed the Mekong would run wide and free for most of its course, with untapped sources of commercial wealth set along its upper reaches. But nine months after leaving Phnom Penh and numerous delays, splitting of the party, and illness the expedition had only reached a point somewhat north of Khemmarat. Now in March 1867, with the entire French expedition re-assembled at Uthen, their passports for China finally in hand, few of the original expectations seemed matched by reality. It was clear, even to the constantly optimistic Garnier, that hopes for easy navigation along the river were illusory. Leaving Uthen on March 13, 1867, the expedition moved steadily along the river which continued in a roughly north-south direction. Despite their certainty that the river had its origins in Tibet, the river suddenly changed direction to the west and then southwest. This mis-direction, contrary to their expectations added to their depression and was compounded by an unchanging landscape.

"Garnier later reflected on his own psychological reaction to the situation. He recognized that novelty was an essential in an explorer's experience. Without it, the actual fact of progress along the route was not enough; "a day without a new emotional experience is a disappointment."

But ahead lay Vientiane, once important commercial city reported by Van Wuysthoff almost two hundred years earlier. Although this was unknown territory, two widely renowned French geographers (Cartambert and deRosny) had suggested just four years earlier that this region might be as rich as California.

On April 2, 1867 the party reached Vientiane. The city's almost total destruction by the Siamese forty years earlier was still much in evidence. Yet its main religious structures remained intact and were marvelled at for their architectural and decorative grandeur. But on April 4th the party returned to the river. The rainy season was less than six weeks away and they were faced with a section of the river almost totally unknown or charted. Van Wuysthoff and a sole Jesuit priest, Father Leria, had seen Vientiane in the seventeenth century and Henri Mouhot had travelled the banks of the river from Pak Lay to Luang Pragang. But from Vientiane to Pak Lay they faced almost one hundred miles over which no previous European had travelled.

"The unknown section of the river quickly turned a grim face to the expedition. Only a few miles above Vientiane the wide valley or plains that head spread out from the river's course for most of the distance between Khone and Vientiane were replaced by increasingly forbidding hills. And with the narrowing of the river's width came the familiar barrier of successive rapids. The floor of the gorge enclosing the Mekong was now, in Garnier's words, like some giant mosaic as different colored rocks projected unevenly above the dark waters of the river. Navigation through this region of rapids would have been impossible later in the year when the full flood swept down through the narrowing gorges."

(Osborne, 1975:93)

Under these conditions progress was slow and frequent portages, unloading and loading the pirogues, and hauling of the craft by heavy ropes became necessary. In four days the party was able to advance only a dozen miles.

Added to this painfully slow progress was the depletion of their supply of boots and shoes which had been torn to pieces on the many rocky portages required since their departure.

Continuing west and southward along the Mekong the party reached Chiang Khan, the southern limit of the principality of Luang Prabang; today a district center of Loei province in Thailand. The presence of Burmese traders in Chiang Khan again aroused their fears that British representatives were already active in northern Laos and had accomplished the survey of this territory which the French wished to control. From this region onward the expedition also entered a political framework with little if any similarity to the nation-state system common to Europe. Local rulers were no longer vassals or under the clear suzerainty of any distant power. The influence of the British also made issues of local support for supplies, guides, and porters a matter of serious concern.

Moving northward on April 14th the party made a final turn in the Mekong which would carry them northward to Luang Prabang. A chance encounter with a French geographer (Duyshart) leading a survey party for the King of Thailand provided them with little information about the region ahead. The following day the group reached Pak Lay, a secondary river town between Luang Prabang and Vientiane and the southern limit of Mouhot's earlier rudimentary reconnaissance of the river below Luang Prabang. The landscape adjoining the river here showed some signs of change. The climate seemed more temperate and the river narrowed with several channels separated by rocky outcrops or large sandbanks. Settlements no longer clustered along the river, although the surrounding hills remained in heavy foliage. As they pressed northward the hills were set back further from the river's edge and signs of human settlements began to reappear.

On April 29th the party rounded a bend in the river and found displayed before them Luang Pragang, the largest settlement they had seen since leaving Phnom Penh. The city lay on the eastern bank of the river against an ascending array of hills and mountains which retreated into the distance.

"Established as a political center of some importance by a dissident Lao prince in the early eighteenth century, Luang Prabang had benefited both from the destruction of Vientiane in the 1820's and from the fact that its status as a vassal of both Thailand and Vietnam was tempered by its distance from Bangkok and Hue. Dominated by a *that* on the top of a hill covered in dark foliage, Luang Prabang was a pleasing mixture of pagodas with glistening red roof tiles and whitewashed walls, a vast palace compound, and the houses of a population of some sixteen thousand. Perhaps most pleasing of all to the Frenchmen was not the happy scenic combination of an architecturally exotic city in a setting of natural beauty, but, rather, the fact that there was much evidence of trade in Luang Pragang. As Garnier noted in his journal, "This was the first time since leaving Phnom Penh that we found a market, in the sense that one normally gives to the word.

A market there certainly was, operating under the control of local officials each day. There was, in addition, a long line of open-air traders to be found beside the river....In terms of the principality, and even for regions beyond, Luang Prabang could with accuracy be described as an important commercial location. The goods that were sold, however, were hardly a basis for the colonial trade that men such as Lagree and Garnier, and La Grandiere back in Saigon, had hoped might flow down the Mekong. Mixed with flowers and fruits on the merchants stalls were cottons and silks, hardware and the distinctive lacquer of Chiang Mai. In short, the stalls the explorers saw were little different from those a traveler would find in Northern Thailand or parts of Laos today, a hundred years later."

(Osborne, 1975:100)

The members of the expedition enjoyed the relief provided by their month-long stay in Luang Prabang, resting, mapping the city, and making short botanical and geologic field trips into the countryside. For much of this time the city was celebrating an important Buddhist holiday which enabled the Frenchmen to observe local religious and social customs. However, with the rainy season rapidly approaching they faced three or four months of difficult traveling and the vexing decision about exactly where they should go. China lay ahead,

but the route was uncertain and the value of their travel documents questionable in this region of shifting political loyalties, and where the ethnolinguistic map seemed to change daily.

The physical toll of the journey had also begun to effect the health of its leader, Doudart de Lagree, and the expedition's consensus on what route should be followed. The fever which had plagued Lagree in southern Laos months earlier had now led to progressively serious amoebic dysentery. Indeed, a short distance from Luang Prabang was the site where Henri Mouhot had died some six years earlier in 1861 from 'the fever'. As the party considered their next move, three routes appeared to offer possibilities. By leaving the Mekong at this point and moving northeast they could avoid the hostility between Luang Prabang and Hue and still explore unknown territory. This choice was rejected as it would have violated the expeditions goal of exploring the Mekong valley as a route to China. A second alternative was to follow the Nam Ou, a tributary of the Mekong northeast of Luang Prabang, to China which was considered the most direct route. A final choice was to continue along the Mekong itself despite the evident conflicts which existed between Burmese and Thai vassals along the route.

On May 25, 1867 the party once again resumed its upstream travels, Lagree having decided that this route was less hazardous than he had earlier thought it might become as they moved away from Luang Prabang. Within four days they had reached their first major stop, the settlement of Chiang Kong (Figure 1). This distant outpost was under the control of the Siamese king at Bangkok and beyond the influence of Luang Prabang's authority. At this point the party had reached the boundaries of travel within Lao territory and the limits of effectiveness for the travel documents they had taken such pains to obtain in Phnom Penh months earlier. Over the next five months the expedition passed through territory controlled by the Burmese, entered

the Sip Song Panna region which was spread over what is today southern China and northern Laos, and finally reached their first Chinese settlement of Suu-mao on October 18, 1867. Here, whatever the disappointments of the past and the state of their health in the present, was the country Garnier had described as the 'promised land'.

In the years which followed the members of the original expedition slowly slipped from public view. Lagrée had died in China some six months after leaving Luang Prabang. The remaining members of the party, now under Garnier's direction, reached Saigon by way of Shanghai on June 29, 1868, two years and twenty-four days after their departure.

"Whatever the disappointments they had encountered in their survey of the Mekong, or their hopes for the future use of the Red River, it was the recital of the distances they had traveled that impressed those who greeted them in the French colony. And with good cause, for during their travels the explorers had mapped some four thousand miles that had never been surveyed previously. Garnier alone had mapped more than three thousand one hundred and fifty miles of territory. The course of the Mekong had been established and areas of southwestern China visited that had never previously been seen by a European. All this had been accomplished under conditions a modern traveler finds difficult to imagine.

Yet the idea of the rivers of Indochina offering a route into southwestern China remained alive. Decade after decade French planners pored over maps, still convinced that it ought to be possible to use the Mekong as a link with China: if only the rapids could be conquered, this great river would offer a way to the country that had been so very much in French minds from the earliest days of their colonial presence in Vietnam. In the eighties and nineties, and even into the early twentieth century, plans were made and, more rarely put into action. All to no avail. Highly powered steam launches could master some of the rapids, but the Khone Falls remained a major obstacle to passage from Cambodia to Laos. In Laos itself, navigation above Vientiane was made tortuous and slow by the rapids that had cost the French expedition so much effort. The best that could be done was to link the navigable stretches of river by other land-based forms of transport. When British naval intelligence produced a handbook on the Indochinese region during the Second World War, the information provided on the Mekong as a navigable route was succinct and to the point..... it still took longer to travel by river from Saigon to Luang Prabang than to travel from Saigon to Marseilles. The golden route to China did not lie along the Mekong"

Osborne, 1975:221

II. LUANG PRABANG TO PAK THA : A FIELD TRIP

Accounts of conditions on the upper Mekong river above Luang Prabang have remained very limited even in the final quarter of the twentieth century. Aside from some valuable but limited ethnographic studies done in this area, little English-language material has been formally published or is available. The following two reports on a field trip along the Mekong in 1957 offer some interesting insights into this remote region of western Laos.

INTRODUCTION

What do the following two accounts, written more than a quarter-century ago by two Americans in their mid-twenties, have to offer the contemporary reader? They were never intended for publication. The first is taken from an unsolicited and informal office memo written by a young community development officer of the American Aid Program in Laos (USOM, United States Operations Mission) seeking partial justification for his new position. The second was part of a letter home recounting a personal adventure.

Today we do not consider either of our writings particularly penetrating in terms of revealing deep insights into the cultures which then existed in Laos, but this is in retrospect. Many Lao refugees are now assimilating to American society, and a current photo of the former royal palace in Luang Prabang now labeled museum, those times of more than a quarter century ago seem almost as remote as the nineteenth century Mekong explorations described in the first part of this monograph.

The English language literature for the 1950's is very limited. More importantly, these notes do give a feeling for the region and for that period of history. We have purposefully restrained the editing so that our accounts appear as what they were--the notes of two people, quite young and new to Asia, unaccustomed to the ordinary inconveniences of tropical journeys in a primarily subsistence rural area. Anthropological investigation was not the purpose of the trip; rather it was an exploratory journey by a well meaning agent of an imperial power. The politics of our country, aside from the primary focus of the visceral anti-Communism of John Foster Dulles (then Secretary of State), did have a subordinate humanitarian dimension as manifested in the community development program. The mid-1950's were above all a halcyon period between the two Indochina wars, a time when the United States seemed omnipotent.

The passing out of U.S. Information Agency literature in the villages seems, from the viewpoint of the 1980's as irrelevant as was the colonial survival of the teaching of French to isolated Lao village children. It was somehow as if the French and American governments had the view that villagers could be made more fit to enter the modern world if they perhaps would become a bit more like us in their interests and knowledge, a mild version of the nineteenth century European theme of taming the heathen. Only in the 1950's Kingdom of Laos, called in some American Embassy documents, the Royal Kingdom of Laos, there was an official policy patina, or even a charade like stance, of dealing with a newly independent state emerging from French colonialism.

The Laotian schools and homes seemed to need pictures of a French chateau or the U.S. Capitol. There were also nicely printed maps of Laos for illiterate tribal peoples which emphasized new myths of unity and brotherhood. As for distributing seeds, tools and medicines as part of a Fundamental Education project or Community Development Program, such efforts, while perhaps well intended, now seem inconsequential apart from the symbolic. We were casual missionaries of the secular American creed enjoying the learning experience despite minor discomports. All this occurred before assassinations of officials, intermittent formal ground warfare, massive civilian bombings, large scale resettlement of hill and valley peoples near burgeoning cities, and, finally, a bloody refugee exodus accompanied by chemical warfare. These methods were used enthusiastically by both sides. But these events of intensive modernization were still to come.

Our trip resulted from an invitation to accompany the provincial Inspector of Education. The élan of the Inspecteur, who was a member of the minor nobility, does reflect a self-concept of a former colonial civil servant and current government functionary of status. He was then near retirement and his gentility strongly impressed us. At that time Laos had been formally independent for less than a decade, but the number of resident Europeans in the late 1950's, both French and American, was much greater than in the prewar colonial period. The American "presence" had only recently succeeded the French présence, and ours was the first official American aid post permanently established in northern Laos. What we witnessed was a time of incipient change, a prelude to the drastic transformations to come.

The villagers we met had been relatively unaffected by previous governments, although they were and had been tied into trade networks and were part of a tenuous administrative network. The needs of the state were limited, and the existing hierarchy of control based on social caste and ethnic inequalities functioned in a restricted way and so permitted cultural and social autonomy. At the same time the Japanese occupation, the First Indochina War, and the emergence of the independent Lao state had brought changes as had French colonial occupation in the past century. There were also the earlier wars and conflicts between the indigenous kingdoms, and the then existing polities in China, Vietnam and Thailand which were detailed in the earlier section. The cultures of the valley and hill peoples we met were never frozen in time.

What we glimpsed was not an idyll without problems but peoples whose lives had a consistency and a relative stability. They did then have an existence apart from the demands of the nation state which was still relatively embryonic in its functions. Inequality and exploitation were a part of that system but its demands were restricted. Our brief quasi-imperial efforts at modernization offered a foretaste of the illusion of modernity as an achieved goal which was to replace the integrated patterns of their lives. The community development program in Laos represented no more than a fragile American governmental commitment, embroidering the covering blanket of a myopic and doomed geopolitical strategy.

* * * * *

We left Luang Prabang on Sunday morning, April 28, 1957, in the company of the Provincial Inspector of Education, his brother who is also his deputy, and an assistant. Including the Inspector's cook and pilot, there were eight in the party. The pilot, pirogue and motor were supplied by the *Chao Khoueng* (Governor) of Luang Prabang Province. Our destinations were Pak Beng and Pak Tha, river towns above Luang Prabang on the Mekong. The Inspector was to administer examinations to students at these towns who had completed the course at the Groupe Scolaire, the first six years of elementary school. The up-river trip was uneventful except for the fact that there were a number of rapids and we had to make several portages. Even with only three men in the boat, two of them paddling furiously, a 25 h.p. outboard was just about equal to the task of getting the boat upstream.

The first night was very pleasant since we slept in the pirogue while the others slept in a bamboo lean-to on shore. The following day at about 4 o'clock we arrived at Pak Beng, a distance of approximately 135 kilometers from Luang Prabang.

Pak Beng, beside being the site of a Groupe Scolaire (106 pupils with 3 teachers) is also the residence of the *Tasseng* (district headman, also term for district), the site of a police and customs post, and a first aid station. As is the case with the other towns along this section of the river, almost all the teachers and other officials come from Luang Prabang. There are some 90 houses and about 600 people in this settlement.

The following day we visited the school where the Inspector distributed USOM (United States Operations Mission) notebooks and

pamphlets as well as USIS (United States Information Service) maps, posters, and booklets which I had supplied. These were given as prizes to the best pupils. The next two days were spent in administering the examination which had written and oral parts in both Lao and French. Only three of the nine candidates passed, chiefly due to difficulties with the French part of the examination. None of those who passed will go on to the collège (Junior High) in Luang Prabang since they are either too old or lack the money or both. Lao villagers join together to undertake such chores as building homes and schools. We had a chance to see this activity in Pak Beng. One night there was a "party" at which unmarried girls rolled cigarettes "to attract the men," followed later by singing and dancing of the *Lam Vong*. The following day all the men were helping to build a house. As with similar cooperative ventures in other areas, the women get together to prepare the food. Certainly this tradition should be helpful in undertaking Community Development projects.

Most of the Lao villagers here live mainly by raising rice, cultivating vegetable gardens and fishing. The latter seems to be very definitely a subsistence activity since in our travels along the river we often tried to buy fish but found it quite difficult to persuade the fishermen to sell some of their catch to us.

One of the villagers told me that he would most like to plant coffee but don't have enough capital. Another man has tried to raise ducks and chickens (almost every household keeps some for their own use) but said that it is difficult to transport them to Luang Prabang. As in most of the larger Lao settlements along the river there is considerable trade with the Khmu (aboriginal hill people). The

latter evidently produce larger surpluses of rice which they trade for salt and cloth. Lao women also weave fabrics which they sell to the hill people.¹

The Lao claim that the Lao Theng do not do any weaving but make bamboo baskets, mats and other items which they sell to the Lao merchants who in turn sell them in Luang Prabang. During our few days in Pak Beng we saw a fairly large number of Khmu and a few Meo who had come to trade or look for work.

As on my other trips I have tried to obtain a little basic economic information which may be of some use to the various branches of USOM (American Aid Mission in Laos) in planning their programs. What follows is some of the data that I was able to obtain in brief, casual interviews.

There are supposed to be some 33 villages in this *Tasseng* (7 Lao, 2 Meo [Hmong], 1 Yao [Mien], and 23 Lao Theng [Khmu]). According to a 1952 census there were 1313 Lao, 29 Mao and Yao and 363 Lao Theng. These figures are probably much too low, particularly for the mountain peoples. As I stated in my last report some Lao Theng villages may report only 10% of their population to avoid taxes, military conscription or other governmental controls. In addition to Pak Beng there is a school in another Lao village, Pak Neua. There is also one in a Lao Theng village a day's march from Pak Beng. Several Lao Theng villages have built schools but as yet the government has been unable to supply teachers.

¹Lao of the hills, a general term for aboriginal peoples; the pejorative *Kha* (slave) was also used. Many of these referred to in this account were Khmu.

Some consumer goods appear to be a bit cheaper in Pak Beng than Luang Prabang because they come directly from Thailand. (Salt is 8 *kip*/kilo, kerosene 350 *kip* for a 5 gallon tin, and 25 kilos of iron cost 700 *kip*. (exchange rate for the Laotian *kip* was 35 to the dollar in 1957). The Lao themselves also sell some rice, but from the conversations that I had it appears that the Lao Theng have the greater surplus or at least this is what the Lao claimed. Rice exported to Luang Prabang is sold for about 130 *kip* per *touque* (5 gallon tin) of husked, glutinous white rice. This amounts to about 16 kilos. The price of rice of course varies considerably from month to month and season to season. It is also slightly higher in Pak Beng than in the surrounding villages. The estimates that I received varied from 120-150 *kip* per *touque* of husked rice. Annual consumption is also very hard to pin down but I received several estimates in the neighborhood of 150-200 *touques* of husked rice per family of 4 (2 adults and 2 children) per year. This is where production is approximately equated to consumption.

Some of the merchants estimate that the Lao Theng households produce 1,000-2,000 *touques* of paddy per year (one *touque* of paddy weights about 10 kilos, and it requires 2 *toques* of paddy to make 1 *touques* of husked rice), of which they sell 600-800 *toques*. Although one Lao Theng whom I interviewed claimed that his household of 11 members produced some 400 *toques* of paddy and sold only 40. I would guess that this is something of an underestimate since the man was down on his knees in front of the Prince (the Inspector) and other Lao officials while I was interviewing him. I don't believe that this position is conducive to giving objective estimates. The Lao Theng

are paid about 30 *kip* per *touque* of paddy. Bamboo products made for sale by the Lao Theng are exchanged only for silver pieces, coins minted by the French for use in Indochina, since they will not accept paper money.²

The only example of Lao Theng working for Lao that I was able to get was given by the *Tasseng* who told me that he was employing three to clear his *hai* (slash and burn) fields. He was paying them at the rate of three kilos of salt per man per day. Since salt is about 3 *kip*/kilo this comes to about 24 *kip*/day.

One interview that I had with what seemed to be a fairly intelligent and literate Lao Theng was rather interesting. In reply to my question he said that there were three things he was interested in: The first was USIS publications "to know new things;" at the time, at my suggestion, the Inspector was giving him some maps of Laos and pictures of the King; the second was better tools for cultivating the soil and the third was medicines. He also expressed an interest in learning to grow new crops.

The following day we left for the village of Pak Neua about 15 kilometers upstream from Pak Beng. This village is the site of a "Fundamental Education Center" supported by USOM funds. The teacher holds classes for half a day and then supposedly spends the rest of his time gardening with the children, teaching them carpentry with his tool kit and distributing medicines. In the evening he holds

² Some of these products and their prices are: woven bamboo mat, 1 x 2 m. (20 *kip*), rice baskets (15 *kip*), low Lao table (50 *kip*), stool (20 *kip*), rice winnower (20 *kip*), rice cooling basket (5*kip*), shoulder carrying sack (60 *kip*).

adult literacy courses. The teacher told me that he loans the carpentry tools to the villagers to help them build their houses. I would guess that this would be their main use. Concerning the medicinal kit, his record book showed that he has treated about 80 people in the last 6 months, including Lao Theng. There may be others, however, to whom he has given just a pill or two and may not have written it down. He said that his supply of certain medicines has run out and that he had asked for replacements several months ago but that to date he hasn't received anything. By contrast the male nurse at Pak Beng said that he had an adequate supply of medicines, although whether he was just being polite or whether Pak Neua and Pak Beng are on different distribution systems I don't know.

The teacher said that for the past three years he has held literacy classes twice a week for one hour each at 6 PM, and that as a result of his efforts 12 villagers can read and write and 25 are able to read. Undoubtedly some of his efforts have had a little effect but I was not greatly impressed. I don't think by any means that the whole fault lies with the teacher, but as I'm sure you will agree both teaching and village work are each full time jobs in themselves, and expecting one man to do all may end in neither job being well done.

Another problem has been supply. This is not only in the case of the medicines but also with respect to the garden seeds which I understand were distributed last year. The Inspector, many of the village teachers, and the villagers themselves all expressed appreciation and all hoped that there would be some seeds forthcoming this year. The Inspector emphasized that they must arrive before August if they are to be of any value. He also offered to have them distributed

by the school teachers to villages that didn't have schools as well as those that did.

The prices at the Pak Neua store were only slightly higher than those in Luang Prabang (LP). For example, 25 *kip* for a spool of thread (20 in LP), 15 *kip* for Lux soap (12 in LP), 35 *kip* per lb. of Takoo sugar (30 in LP). Some of the other items carried in the store included ink, pencils, flashlight bulbs, Mic cigarettes, and "Evening in Hong Kong" perfume.

The fifth night of our trip we spent in Thai Lu village on the way to our final destination, Pak Tha. Located on the Sayabouri side of the river about 30 kilometers below Pak Tha, this was apparently the first time that this village had been visited by Lao officials. One of the clearest evidences of this was the almost complete absence of USIS posters of any kind (I only saw two portraits of the King in the whole village).

In contrast to the Lao villages there was no store of any kind. Also distinctive from the Lao villages was the fact that all the women and children and most of the men were dressed in locally woven cloth. The women wore colorful striped skirts and most of the men had indigo-dyed homespun. This does not mean to imply that they don't engage in trade of any kind, for a few men had factory-made shirts and pants, and in superficial glances around the village we also saw flashlights and mosquito nets. But, in general, it did seem that there were fewer trade goods than in the Lao villages.

Unlike the Lao bamboo houses, the Thai Lu homes were larger and made of wooden planks. In addition, either under the houses or in separate sheds they keep cattle. This is similar to the Meo but

unlike the Lao in this area, although the Inspector said that the Lao in Xieng Khouang and Sam Neua do raise cattle.

The village has a new wooden wat (Buddhist temple) with 8 monks, (including 5 novices) in residence. Since there is no school in the village the monks have taught some of the villagers to read. Some of the villagers also seem to be conscious of the outside world. The ex-headman asked us if on our return trip we could take him to Luang Prabang so that he could attend the Lao Buddhist ceremonies in celebration of the year 2500. According to the village headman there are 42 houses in the village with an approximate population of 330, or something over 7 people per household. This may be somewhat larger, I believe, than the average household size for a Lao village.

In talking to the village headman about his problems he told me that their land was very good for rice and vegetables only he didn't have any seeds. He was interested in growing tomatoes, cabbage, beans and coffee. He also said that there was good additional land for growing rice, only the water source was blocked and he would like equipment and information on how to irrigate his land.

Later the following day we visited another Thai Lu village on the Luang Prabang side which had 2 Lao merchants and a year-old school. The teacher showed us the products of his handicraft class (model pirogues, plows, harrows and pots). This class is held twice a week for a total of one hour. (There are 44 pupils in the school). The teacher asked us for gardening tools and medicines since the nearest infirmary was at Pak Tha, one day away poling a pirogue. As in the other villages the people here expressed a desire to increase coffee production and to have seeds to grow more varieties

of vegetables.

The same day we arrived in Pak Tha. This town is the seat of a *Muong* (an administrative division consisting of a number of *Tasseng* or districts). The *Muong* includes 20 Lao villages, 100 Lao Theng, 8 Thai Lu, and 9 Meo with a total population of about 15,000. As in Pak Beng there are 3 school teachers, police, a male nurse, a customs man as well as the *Chao Muong* (regional administrator) and other functionaries connected with his office. In addition there are 9 Lao and 4 Chinese merchants. One of the most impressive things about Pak Tha is the new Groupe Scolaire which was built last year at a cost of 346,000 *kip* in government funds. Made of wood planks set on pillars in concrete, it is much sturdier than the usual bamboo structures. The Inspector said that he had plans for new schools in Muong Sai and several other areas but was unable to do anything for lack of funds.

In discussing the problems of the area with the *Chao Muong*, he told me that the area of Moungh Pha had a surplus production of rice. This is an interior plain reached by poling up the local tributary of the Mekong for 1 day, then hiking 22 kilometers by trail. He has asked for 300,000 *kip* to build a road but to date the government has only offered him a token amount which he has refused.

I can testify personally concerning trade between Houei Sai and Luang Prabang since we returned to Luang Prabang by river barge. If we had waited for the Inspector we might not have returned to Luang Prabang for another 3 or 4 days. The barge was loaded mostly with rice, plus several sacks of garlic, which we slept on since they are more comfortable than rice. There were also about 200 crockery

jugs of "OK" Chinese fish paste, 50 lbs. each. In addition there were other items such as bamboo mats, dozens of empty kerosene tins and furniture. We didn't load or unload much cargo but did take on and discharge a number of passengers in the 4 or 5 stops we made during our two-day trip.

I feel keenly the inadequacies of this report. The reader should bear in mind that most of this information was obtained through the kind help of the Inspector or through local teachers whom he assigned to me as interpreters. Although he was extremely nice about the matter this situation is obviously far from satisfactory. Now that "the ice has been broken" as far as my going out in the field is concerned and I have personally secured the approval of the *Chao Khoueng* for a survey of villages in the vicinity of Luang Prabang, I would like to get started as soon as possible. Obviously this can be done only with a full-time interpreter. I hope that by the time this report reaches you either Aram Udol will have returned to Luang Prabang or arrangements will have been made for someone to take his place either temporarily or permanently if necessary.

Joel M. Halpern

BY PIROGUE UP THE MEKONG

Sunday a.m. April 28, 1957--After hectic preparations, including going to market to buy a Lao bathing skirt and racing To Ellis's (the local UNESCO education specialist) to leave the key to the house, we loaded our gear in the USIS jeep. Kam Sin (U.S. Information Agency employee) drove us to the embarcation point, an unspecified spot past the Palace (Luang Prabang was the residence of the Lao king). We had trouble locating it, but it didn't matter since we weren't able to get underway at 7, as was planned, but finally left at 9:45.

In the party were the Inspecteur of Education for Luang Prabang Province, his brother (one time Inspecteur of Education in Sayabouri), a man about their age who works at the school office, plus us and a cook, pilot, and young nephew of the Inspecteur who acted as an all round assistant--eight of us in all, in a long crude, black pirogue with a Johnson 25 HP motor.

The cook and the Inspecteur's assistant sat in the bow, and the boy sat with the pilot. We four had the most space--about 5' by 3½' in the middle, covered with dirty canvas and a woven reed mat. Later I got a jerry-can to put underneath, to sit on. All the gear was covered with a curved canopy of bamboo and dried banana leaves.

We made the trip from Luang Prabang to Pak Ou (a frequently visited Buddhist shrine) in two hours, stopping for lunch at the home of the Chef de Post. We had a cold spread, brought from home by the Inspecteur--cold pork, pork paste, a kind of spinich purée, paprika paste, rice, and a sweet made of tamarind cooked with

coconut milk.

Proceeding upstream we traveled a total of 7 hours the first day. The scenery in spots was marvelous--at one point we went very close to shore, avoiding the pattern of the current. Wet rocks glistened. Moss and long trailing ferns spilled from the crevices. Hundreds and hundreds of tiny white butterflies fluttered against the foliage. At many points we passed small sand deltas formed between rocky ledges which seemed to shimmer in the sun--then I realized that they were colonies of the same white butterflies clustering there, wings light and trembling. At three places there were rapids to be passed. The three workers stayed in the pirogue and the five of us got out and walked. The shore was weird, with huge grey boulders and shiny yellowish hunks of quartzite. It looked very artificial. The second portage was over a very steep sand incline, and the third again over rocks and a clear stream.

At about 5:30 we stopped for the night at Ban Hat Teu, which we never got to see since we ate and spent the night on the beach. Just as we arrived people were bathing in the river. We all welcomed the thought of a dip, and I forgot my queasiness about getting into muddy water in which people defecate and buffaloes wallow. I whipped out my bathing skirt, thankful that I had a couple of safety-pins with me, for in all the hurry there had been no time to have it stitched into a tube which is the proper way.

Joel was concerned about modesty, but with all the village looking on we managed to slip out of our clothes and underwear

and into our sarongs. By this time it was getting dark. We were hot and tired. Normally I suppose I would have entered that water hesitantly, but I just plunged in gratefully and enjoyed it tremendously. Getting dried off and back into our clothes was less of a problem, since it was now quite dark. In fact, it wasn't until the next day that I discovered my torso, towel and underwear were a bright pink from the dye of my sarong.

We ate supper on the beach; a muddy soup, boiled chicken and herb tea. I never thought I would savor drinking muddy river water, but I must admit the tea was really good. Villagers kept coming round the fire to light bamboo torches with which they then proceeded to search for cicadas on the sand. They eat them grilled without wings.

We were told that the others were going to sleep out on the beach in a shelter which some villagers then proceeded to construct by flashlight. We were to sleep in the pirogue. They fixed a curved leaf canopy on a bamboo frame and we arranged our sleeping bags over mats provided by the village on top of the slatted floor of the boat. It was really delightful--stars, breeze, no bugs--and once or twice a gecko cried on the beach. About 2 a.m. the cook climbed in to bail out the water accumulated under us in the stern. About 4 a.m. we woke up again, to the rocky cliffs on the other side of the Mekong, etched in grey with mist above them. There was a clacking noise and, leaning on my elbow and peering out of my sleeping bag, I could see on the beach dozens of villagers, mostly women with three or four long bamboo tubes hooked on the ends of their carrying rods. They were filling them with water; a few of the

villagers had metal pails. After coffee all the various gear was reloaded. Joel distributed some USIS material to the teacher, the Nai Ban (village chief), and a Meo family passing through. The Inspecteur delivered a lecture to the Meo man, who grasped the large map gingerly and began his long journey.

The river bank got rockier as we proceeded upstream. There were two more portages. On the left hand side was Sayabouri Province and on the right Luang Prabang. We stopped on the Sayabouri side after the cook had bought a large fish from a Lao fisherman sitting quietly in his canopied pirogue, shielded from the glaring sun by craggy black boulders. The village is called Ban Tha Luang. None of the men seemed to be home, they were away working in the forest, but small boys carried the cooking gear up the steep sand and mud embankment typical of all these river settlements. A merchant from some inland town arrived on an elephant with some goods for this village, including two red and blue mattresses. Joel insisted on photographing me on the elephant's back, to the amusement of a row of women and children who peered over the bamboo railing of one of the nearby houses. They were solemn at first but then burst into delighted laughter when I lost my footing en route and clutched the elephant's ear.

The sun got terribly hot, and they arranged a leaf canopy as a sun shield, first stripping long bamboo poles and bending them into shape, cracking the joints to form a framework. Bamboo is fantastically workable and strong. It is used for just about everything from houses to tongs for grilling fish. Fortunately, we only had another 2-4 hours and one more portage to go before

calling it a day.

At 3:40 in the afternoon we arrived at Pak Beng, our first main stop. The sun was broiling, and by the time the top of the embankment was reached our shoes were burning from the hot sand and our shirts stuck to our backs. There at the top, all smiling in fresh sport shirts, were the *Tasseng* (cheif of the district), the *Naiban* (village headman) and Director of the school, and some other local functionaries. There was "sambay-ing" (greeting with palms together at face level) all around in the glaring heat and then we were invited into the Director's veranda. It was sweltering although we had nice woven fans to flap in the air. After a while some coconuts were brought over and we drank the milk and gnawed at the meat. It was my favorite kind--old and chewy, not the "tender coconuts," the young variety we always got in India.

I was dying for a bath in the river. The Director's wife kindly sewed up the seams on our sarongs although she explained that they didn't go down to the river to bathe until the sun started to set. Good advice. Finally it was time, and we bathed, put on clean clothes, and felt refreshed. We were given a tiny partitioned-off part of the main room, where the others were sleeping, so that we had some privacy. In this as in so many other things the Inspecteur was very thoughtful. Over the mat floor two thin bumpy cloth mats were laid. We put our sleeping bags down too, for padding, and then sheets and foam rubber pillows that we had brought along and it wasn't half bad for an afternoon's rest. Dinner was a formal affair, with all the village notables present.

In addition to *kow neo* (glutinous rice), *kow tchou* (regular rice) was served for our benefit. There was also chicken and fish, herb tea and many Lao condiments.

On Tuesday morning we were taken by the *Tasseng* for a tour of the village, stopping to chat with a fat merchant who acts as trader with the Lao Theng mountain tribes. His wife was seated on a reed mat arranging red, orange, and cream colored hibiscus blossoms and buds into a conical arrangement on a base of banana stalk fastened with tiny bamboo splints. She spent a good four hours working on this floral piece and later mounted it in a round silver bowl. The Inspecteur was mightily pleased, and explained that this was for the *baci* (Lao ceremony for the well-being of the soul) they were tendering him that evening. For the *baci* we got dressed in the best clothes we had with us--not very good compared to the polished loafers, creased trousers and silk shirts the others wore. The Director of the School and his eldest son arranged the main sleeping room with mats and placed the flower arrangement on the low bamboo table surrounded by a coconut, rice alcohol, rice cakes, betel and flowers, and candles with loops of white cotton string on top, the same as we had seen for the wedding of our Thai interpreter.

Four village elders in old *sampats* (traditional Lao male dress of baggy knee-length pants) and with a few honorable stringy hairs growing from their chins, took charge. First some prayers were recited while we all sat with legs tucked under us and with hands pressed together. Then, one at a time, each elder plus the *Tasseng*, plucked some string off the coils and wound a small amount of it

around each of our wrists (the teachers were sponsoring the *baci* and I guess paying for the food). The Inspecteur was first, of course, as he extended one hand he raised the other to his cheek in a token attitude of respect and prayer (normally you use two hands held together in front). Each elder chanted wishes for his safe journey, health and prosperity, running his thumb and forefinger up and down the string before breaking it off and tying it around the wrist. Joel and I got similar treatment with shorter, less personal prayers.

The following day the Inspecteur decided that we should make an excursion to another village about 10 miles upstream where the school teacher was supported with USOM funds. It was the day of the oral examinations and he was very busy, and wanted us to be occupied too. The school was closed and the Director, one of the local police, and the pilot went with us. The other village, Pak Nuey, was up a very steep embankment. When we finally trudged up, we found that the *naiban* "was out of town." Several women including his wife gave us coconuts and made us sit and rest in a large new wooden house. We walked up to the school to see the teacher, a nice but very nervous young man of 28. The school was quite pleasant and clean, with even a glass of fresh flowers on the teacher's desk. Joel asked for a demonstration of his teaching skills--he gave a dictation lesson, after which the pupils exchanged notebooks and corrected one another's work. Joel thanked and complimented him.

We thought we were returning to Pak Beng for lunch, but they had something all prepared--fish and rice for us and vegetable

and rice for the others. Incidentally, glutinous rice is eaten by forming it into little balls in the hand (like small grenades) then dipping it in condiments or jam. After a little encouraging a village elder began to ask us questions including the standard "How long have you been married?" variety. He was also invited to eat with us. After lunch everyone promptly lay down on mats for a siesta. Joel was determined that if he were going to rest after lunch it would be in Pak Beng. After their many grunts and sour faces, Joel "persuaded" the pilot and the others to return. Later that day we congratulated the three of the nine candidates who passed the exam by taking a photo of each with the Inspecteur using our Polaroid camera for the purpose.

I was very tired and went to sleep at about 8:30. The grass mats are quite comfortable, the bamboo walls provide nice ventilation and I was thinking about this idyllic life--arranging flowers all day, going down to the river in a sarong to bathe, lazing about on woven mats. Joel woke me and urged me to get dressed quickly--there was a celebration going on for house-building.

Just the framework of the building was up on mats--between the posts sat a row of 14 maidens. They were all dressed up, most of them with unbecoming lipstick on their rather thick lips, and powder too. Two even had blouses made of nylon. Each had a tray in front of her piled high with tobacco and a packet of cigarette papers. A row of men formed opposite the girls. They were supposed to be the men, lured by the pretty girls and cigarettes, who would cooperate in building the new house. Some of those standing around were married men who later did work on the construction but who had no

part in the traditional courtship banter and singing which took place between the two rows. Everybody who played some sort of instrument was present. In the beginning, the girls were very reticent about answering the songs of the men.

When all the cigarettes had been rolled, and a few timid bachelors approached the girls, the musicians led by the *Tasseng*, who was especially lively that night, broke into a *Lam Vong*. (Lao dance in which the partners circle each other but do not touch.) The men invited the girls to dance in the very restricted area formed by the posts. The girls were shy to the point of being reticent, but finally they were entreated to dance. For the second dance Joel *lam vonged* with one of them and I with the Director of the school. The step I do is a city step and I noticed that the village girls watched every detail and later imitated it. At about 10 a.m. the following morning, the house was almost finished. They had been working on it for about 4 hours. All the men who had been there the night before having fun were now pitching in.

As in Serbia (where we had previously done fieldwork) and America, the women gathered nearby to prepare food in large quantities and serve the workers. We left Pak Beng after lunch with a good part of the village population (particularly the school boys) helping cart our gear down the steep sand slope. Our destination this time was Pak Tha, another administrative village about 100 kilometers upstream. There were more rapids to cross, and we apparently proceeded slower than expected. Rain clouds began to gather before we had completed most of the trip, and at 6:30 when night was falling,

we pulled up on the Sayabouri shore. As we drew closer, we saw that it was not a Lao settlement, but a tribal one, of Tai Lu. The Lu are tribal Tai, and are quite similar to the Lao in language and in many of their customs, unlike the Meo and Kha who dress quite differently, are physically different and speak completely different languages. In general, their way of life is similar and they are Buddhists as opposed to the Khmu and Meo who are animists.

This particular village had never been visited by government officials before, let alone by *fahlangs* (Europeans). A good part of the village was bathing nude in the twilight as we came ashore. They stood around gaping, not knowing what to make of the situation. The Inspecteur finally made the men understand that we were planning to spend the night. One house was selected, and one by one we trudged through the dark up a perilously narrow and eroded footpath. They had no candles, only small kerosene lamps made of evaporated milk tins that gave off a feeble orange light. Even so, we could see that the houses were made of wood--larger and sturdier than the Lao bamboo homes. The hearth inside was a bed of sand bounded by wood slats. A meal was hurriedly prepared and, as we sat on the dark porch eating and looking around, a steady flow of people came and went or hung around to stare. The women were all bare-breasted, in long brightly-striped characteristic Lu skirts. Their faces seem to be rounder with smaller mouths and more slanted eyes than Lao faces, and they looked especially exotic with the faint light illuminating the contours of their bodies and faces.

The men set aside a large central room for all eight of us to sleep in (Lu houses have only one room but a side of it is divided into sleeping compartments; in this way it is similar to Hmong houses). They couldn't understand why the Inspecteur insisted on two separate rooms, one for Joel and me and one for the others. In the end we all slept on the porch (too stuffy inside), Joel and me off to one side. At about four a.m. I woke to another strange noise--and rhythmic thump-thump, thump-thump. It was too dark to see what was going on--it sounded rather like a caravan of Meo ponies clopping by, but as dawn came I saw that it was teams of two girls each standing on the beam of foot-operated wooden rice huskers separating out the grain by pounding it.

Our big thermos jug with its spigot opening created quite a bit of interest, especially when we put in a Lipton's tea bag and two spoonfuls of sugar. I gave the empty sugar jar to a young girl and she marveled at it. Before we left Joel took many photos with the Polaroid to give as gifts. We would have liked some shots of these seemingly exotic people for ourselves too, but when they saw the camera the girls reappeared in flowered Lao-style blouses and bright lipstick which indicated that they weren't so isolated after all. They wear their hair in a special way, twisted into a flat top-knot with one loop of hair poking jauntily through the top. We also took a quick tour of the village including the large wooden pagoda on the highest part of the settlement--very new and garish, in imitation of the Lao.

Once more we got under way, stopping after an hour at a village which had been our destination the previous night. Here a school

had been established only half a year ago. It was a pretty miserable school, all bamboo and decrepit, even the desks were made of bamboo. On the little blackboard was: "Lecture française," *Titi a vu le rat* (and then the same line in cursive script). This seems to be a very unrealistic kind of education for an isolated village school. The Inspecteur lectured the teacher, a nice but sickly man, and the teacher gave Joel a model plow and harrow made by the pupils. Then we all drank fresh coconut milk on the veranda of his house and he accompanied us upstream several hours to Pak Tha, our final destination. His purpose in going there he said was to get some pills to cure his dysentery.

On the shore at Pak Tha, a rather muddy and pebbly one, not like the sandy, rocky one at Pak Beng, were the village notables waiting to greet us. We were taken immediately to the home of the school director, a very pleasant and seemingly capable fellow of 30 (who happens to be the elder brother of our Luang Prabang friend, the young chief of agriculture). His wife is also a teacher and, like the school Director in Pak Beng, they also have five children. A Tai Dam (Black Tai) servant does most of the work for them.

This time Joel and I were to sleep at the home of the *Chao Muong*, the chief of the region. His house, unlike the others, was of wood with whitewashed plastered rectangles. Our room contained two crude beds shoved together, an ancient cabinet and a kerosene lamp. It was quite filthy. Maybe other places we slept in were just as dirty but the dirt doesn't show up on the bamboo. Also, the bamboo village houses are well adapted to

the climate and provide ventilation which this house did not. After lunch we tried to take a siesta wishing we were lying on woven mats on a supple bamboo floor and not on a hard bed. There was no air. I lay in a pool of sweat, and black gnats plagued us. While I was fitfully dozing Joel went off to a nearby tributary of the Mekong where the water was a little clearer and submerged himself for over an hour--he was quite refreshed when he came back.

When I woke up someone suddenly announced that a river barge, heading downstream, had docked and did we want to return with it to Luang Prabang? In our present condition we agreed immediately, for the prospect of spending three nights here was not a happy one. The Inspecteur, who was very nice to us the whole trip, was a little disturbed although he didn't urge us to stay. Besides, the Vientiane office was not too happy about our being gone for 10 days, especially with the Findlays (U.S. Information Service Officer) having left and the two missionary families both out of town. Going with the river barge would get us home about two days earlier.

The cook gave us a basket of duck eggs and a bunch of bananas. Our gear was rounded up and toted down to the "grand pirogue." This was actually two ancient, peeling river barges made in Thailand long ago, lashed together with jungle twine, carrying cargo from the Thai border down to Luang Prabang. It had a 120 H.P. Grey Marine engine, a chicken wired-off corner where the owner slept, a place for the chief mechanic and two dank holds, filled with sacks of rice and garlic and hundreds of huge earthenware crocks, sealed and containing a label in Chinese, Thai and the letters "OK"--

they held a kind of fish paste which to our western noses stank ever so slightly. But like herb tea and coconut milk they are things you get used to, and after an hour in the hold we didn't notice the smell.

The name of the boat was "Hengly II," and its owner was a Chinese merchant from Luang Prabang. The Inspecteur accompanied us as we climbed in over the rice sacks, and after a half hour's animated discussion he announced that we would not depart for an hour or so because of "quelque chose tres mauvaise." I didn't know why he wouldn't explain the situation to us, that is until he finally elaborated that it was "une question d'amour."

Gradually the story came out. It seems the chief mechanic had induced a Thai girl to make the trip with him, and somehow the Lao village police found out. They objected because a Thai cannot enter Laos without proper papers which, of course, this girl lacked. The Pak Tha policeman, the Chinese owner, the mechanic and the Chao Muong sat down on the crocks of fish oil to settle the question. It was now 5 p.m., too late to get underway and the Inspecteur told us to come back up to the Chao Muong's house, that we'd not be leaving until the next morning.

I gave the now soggy bananas to the Chao Muong's boy and we decided not to get upset but just be up at 5 a.m. and ready to leave, at 6 as they had said. Well, we left the next morning at 9:45, this time with the basket of eggs and 5 coconuts lashed together. They had continued debating the question of the girl's entry the previous evening, and by morning the only solution was that the mechanic and the girl get married on the spot, thus giving

her legal right of entry. I don't know how this appealed to either of them--neither looked estatic but the girl signed a pudgy finger print to the document drawn up by the local judge and it was suddenly all legal. She was a plump rather dull looking girl with a permanent wave. The mechanic was an older man, with a greasy pompadour and bulging eyes.

This being a freight barge there were naturally no "passenger accomodations." A family of sallow Meo sprawled on the rice sacks in one hold and we tried to settle ourselves on the sacks in the other. These "holds" were roofed over but were not below decks so that both sides were open. After a while we decided to take our umbrella and sit up on the tin roof, but as I was hoisting myself up the crew shouted for me to get down on the double--it seems that it is forbidden for females to ride over the heads of men. To insure a good trip, the bow of each barge was adorned with a flattened tin can, into which a spray of fragrant yellow-white frangipani blossoms had been stuck, and balls of glutinous rice, offering to the *phi* (spirits), were placed nearby.

I soon discovered that garlic filled sacks are far more comfortable than sacks of rice and tried to settle down in the hold. After a few hours during which I was not too dissatisfied, there was a lot of wild shouting and running around. A tremendous fat man with dark skin and rolls of flesh oozing over his short black sarong appeared from the depths and hollered orders. He had an enormous head covered with grey bristles (all older men crop their hair short in what we would call a crew cut), and he had a thick neck. His eyes were hard and mean, or so it seemed--a perfect

Hollywood villain. I was scared of him. He was the Chief Mate, if there was such a thing on this barge, and he was very upset. One of the boards below the water level had evidently rotted, and the hold on that side was gradually filling with water. We pulled into shore and, shouting excitedly, the crew pushed me aside--and started hoisting out the 50 lb. crocks of fish paste to make the boat lighter. Joel came down from his perch on the roof and helped. The crocks were very awkward and heavy, and it was a job to tote them down the narrow plank gangway onto the muddy river bank. After a full three hours and forty minutes about 1½ tons of crocks had been removed and the rotten board patched--believe it or not, with a piece of one of the planks we were sitting on. The crocks were replaced, and we were on our way again.

As new passengers there was a Thai couple with their baby. They spoke a little English and she said "Yes sir" to everything I said. She informed me that they were on their way to Luang Prabang to work for USOM. I didn't tell them who I was nor that USOM in LP was a one-man operation, but tactfully (I hope) suggested that there might be more opportunities in Vientiane.

I was sorry about losing so much time, because our intention in taking this miserable barge was to arrive in Luang Prabang the following day. Since there is no schedule nor regular stops, there was no way of telling just when we would arrive. For the present, I had no intention of spending the night on the garlic sack, so I was hoping we would reach Pak Beng where we had spent three pleasant days, and where I know we could sleep at the school Director's house. While the sun was still fairly high we arrived

at the village which had the USOM-sponsored teacher. Going downstream Pak Beng was not even an hour away. I was furious to the point of tears when it became clear that we were not proceeding there but staying put for the night for no reason other than that the *naiban* of this village was a passenger and he was inviting some members of the crew to eat with him at his house. As *naiban* he felt that it was his responsibility to put us up, and so he did, on a corner of his porch.

In addition to being the village chief he is also a merchant, and his wife a seamstress. Their shop is of course their home. Off in one corner in a smoke-filled cubicle, I scrambled eggs and fried them in fish oil in a blackened scoop container. We had eggs and coconut and tried to get some sleep. But now the crew members, all spiffed up in Thai shirts, started arriving, and the *naiban* and his wife spread a Lao feast on their floor. For hours they all talked and ate, while a Coleman lantern swung from a peg outside. It had rained a lot the night before and after each heavy rain the air is filled with tiny winged termites. Now they were attracted to the light, in thousands. As they were singed their wings fell off, into people's hair and clothes. Since we lay near the light they fell on us too, and in our sleeping bags. But we couldn't ask them to blow out the lantern and close the party--besides the bugs don't bother them. Instead we got dressed, dumped the bugs out of our sleeping bags, and sat on a tree stump until the party was over. Then we hit the sack again, slept soundly until 5:30. We were to shove off at 6, and miracle of miracles we left at 6:10.

This time we made a big fuss with the Chinese merchant--no garlic sacks for me today--and he cleared a space for us next to his chicken coop cubby hole and spread a mat down. Using our sleeping bags, squashed flat as cushions, this was the height of luxury (although Joel preferred the roof where he claimed that sitting under an umbrella on a pile of "soft wood" was even better).

I opened a can of S & W lima beans, passed a spoon to Joel and we lunched in elegance. For most of the day I stood with my feet braced against the sides of the two barges--to get the breeze and enjoy a head-on view of the scenery. The landscape is truly beautiful--a strange combination of mountains and water with rocks and wind-tossed sand. Where there are villages there is the feathery green of bamboo and broad leafed banana fronds.

At every stop we plagued the crew with "How many minutes are we stopping here?" "How many kilometers to ---?" "Will we reach Luang Prabang today?" The standard answer was a grin and "*Bo hu, bo hu!* (I don't know)." They thought us mighty fussy to be so concerned over whether we arrived one day sooner or later. When at 4:30 we rounded a limestone cliff at Pak Ou and the Buddhist cave shrine came into sight, we knew we would get home before sunset. The Chinese merchant came around to collect fares (400 *kip* each for our first class accommodations). The crew peeled off sarongs and shorts and stepped into wrinkled trousers and white shirts; they put on sneakers or rubber sandals, combed their hair and tucked a crochet-trimmed handkerchief into their pockets--they were ready for the town.

For the last time we heaped our gear together: two sleeping

bags, a Coleman stove (which we never used); a large duffle bag filled with cameras and film, first aid kit, toilet articles, damp sarongs and towels, model plow and harrow, our remaining coconut; a battered canvas suitcase, a thermos jug; and canvas sack containing immediate needs--flashlight, matches, soap, toilet paper, sunglasses, money, notebooks, pencils, can opener, and pen knife. Joel scrambled up the embankment to get Kam Sin and the USIS jeep to take us to the Ellis's to pick up our own jeep. I got a coolie to cart our stuff up. Joel had an 8-day red beard, and we both had a sunburn. When we got home, though, the first thing we did was light the kerosene refrigerator; you can live without ice-water if you have to, but, boy it's easy, to get used to it again.

Barbara Halpern
May 5, 1957

EPILOGUE

Re-reading this account, intended as a personal log to be sent to friends back home, has caused me some dismay. Today, 26 years to the month after I wrote it, I am struck by the naiveté and ethnocentrism of a fledgling anthropologist-wife. However, in the spirit of accurate reporting, I decided to present these observations as originally noted, and I hope that we may be forgiven our preoccupation with creature comforts in return for a certain sensitivity to peoplescapes and landscapes. The Mekong trip was uncomfortable. But today I remember most vividly the butterflies

and the children's smiles, and I have learned from the Lao and others that time, an American compulsion, is not so important after all.

NOTE:

Data from these field notes were used in the monograph of J. Halpern, Economy and Society of Laos, Monograph Series No. 5, Southeast Asia Studies, Yale University, 1964.



Fig.3 - Our Mekong pirogue (the Inspecteur standing;
B. Halpern seated).



Fig.4- Mekong barges



Fig. 5- Poling to beach the pirogue



Fig. 6 - A novice monk paddling stern



Fig. 7
Tai Lu villagers



Fig. 8
A Khmu boy

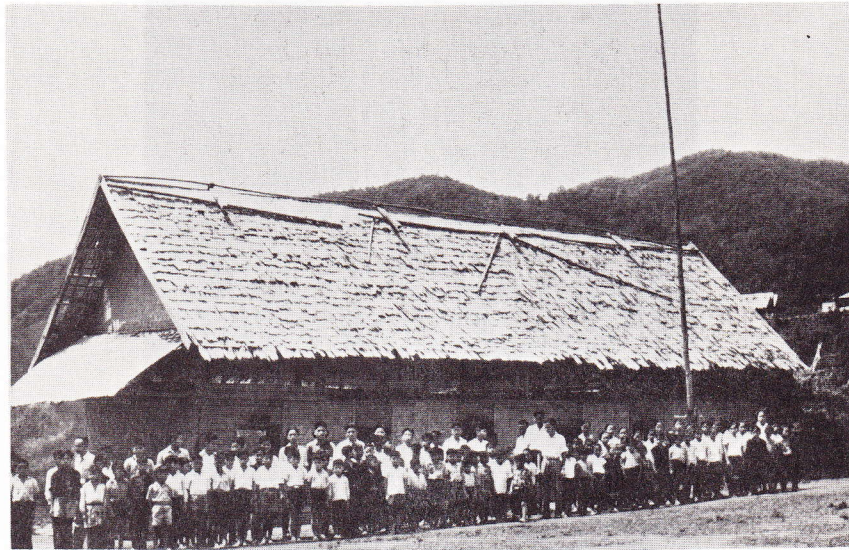


Fig. 9 - Lao village school waiting to welcome the Inspecteur

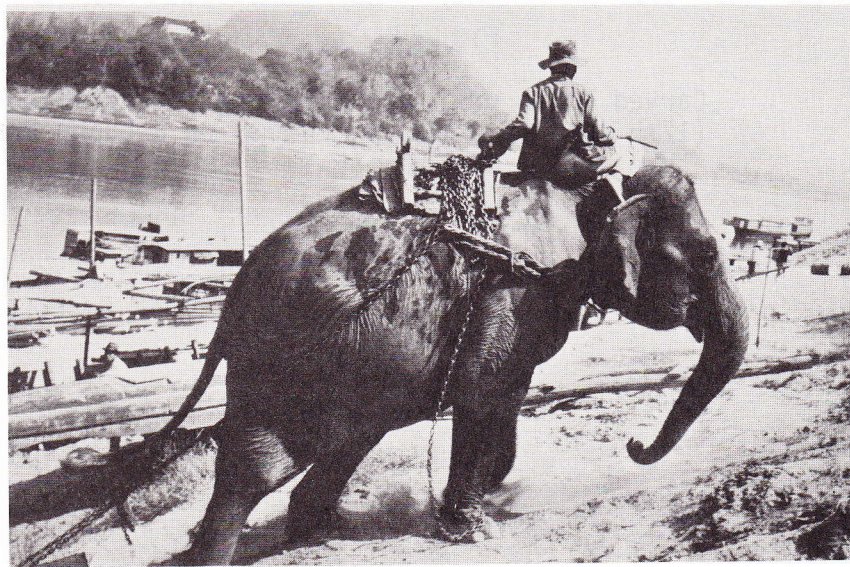


Fig. 10 Hauling teak logs up the Mekong embankment at Luang Prabang



Fig. 11

Carved doors depicting fahlangs, or foreigners
(17th century Dutch explorers) on a Luang Prabang
pagoda

III. TRADE AND TRANSPORT ON THE UPPER MEKONG

A chronic problem throughout developing Southeast Asia is the presence of distinct geographic areas which have remained isolated from the mainstream of national economic and social development. Apart from their relative physical isolation, these areas often have high levels of poverty, low per capita income, a weak production base, poorly developed resources, and are ineffective in articulating local needs with regional and national centers of economic and political power (Hemmi & Atsugi, 1982). The term 'by-passed' areas has recently appeared in the development literature to refer to geographic entities which share these characteristics.

The causes for this 'by-passed' condition are generally seen to result from some form of physical isolation, historical patterns of settlement, and the policies pursued by the countries in which these areas are located. Whatever the causes, by-passed areas pose important if not unique challenges. In many instances, development strategies have had too strong an urban or regional bias which has neglected the special conditions associated with an areas by-passed status. Elsewhere, appropriate efforts have not been made to devise strategies specific to the integration of local systems into a wider regional or national network. And, as in the case of the upper Mekong region, isolation and political boundaries have abbreviated natural functional relationships which otherwise better integrate these areas. These failures have aggravated the problems of by-passed areas by encouraging out-migration, social unrest, and even active resistance to existing political authority. The upper Mekong region which includes portions of northeast Thailand and western Laos can be easily placed in this context.

A complete examination of these problems is somewhat beyond the scope of

this limited discussion. Indeed, such a study would require substantially more data and research than is currently available. However, some understanding of the by-passed status of the upper Mekong can be gained by focusing on the questions of accessibility and interaction. Transportation and trade patterns are important aspects of this issue. Between 1974 and 1976 several separate studies of this region were undertaken by the United Nations Mekong Committee and the offices of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). Some of the results of those studies as they concern the upper Mekong region will be reported on here. This information is presented in the form of three brief profiles of (1) river transportation between Vientiane and Luang Prabang; (2) secondary trade and marketing networks in the Muong Phieng-Nam Pouy area of Sayaboury province; and (3) trans-river trade in the Loei-Pak Lay sector of the river. Integration of these studies has been difficult due to the differences in their methodologies and objectives. However, some general conclusions can be drawn which bear on the by-passed status of the upper Mekong region. These observations will be discussed in the conclusion.

River Transport on the Upper Mekong

Despite French colonial ambitions for the Mekong River and the more recent development efforts of the United Nations, navigation the full length of the river is still an elusive reality. Commercial and resource development in the middle and lower basin is relatively advanced and the river is an integral part of that development. However, that portion of the basin crossed by the upper Mekong remains isolated physically and economically underdeveloped. From Vientiane to Ban Houei Sai the river winds through a landscape of forested uplands, small areas of subsistence and permanent crop agriculture, and a widely dispersed lowland Lao and upland minority population. To date little use has been made of the river as a natural resource for irrigation, power

generation, and industrial activity in this region, although considerable potential does exist. The most important function of the upper Mekong river at present is as a transport artery linking the Vientiane Plain with western Laos and Luang Prabang, the royal capital. This role was further accentuated in 1974-1975 when overland travel by highway was frequently disrupted by military activity.

River traffic on the upper Mekong is defined by a number of economic and hydrologic variables. The most important economic controls are associated with the annual agricultural production and harvesting cycles. Rice, cotton, and corn(maize) are the main agricultural crops produced in this region, although smaller amounts of perishable food staples are also grown for local markets. Cotton and rice harvests in the late fall months stimulate the most active cargo flows on the river. Water levels and their effects on navigation conditions are also important for river transport. Mobility on the river is best during and immediately after the rainy season(June-October) when water levels are high. During the spring months traffic is generally lower and is subject to various navigational hazards including shifting of the navigation channel, exposure of large sandbanks, the presence of bedrock outcrops, and dangers due to snags and other obstructions(Figure 12). The use of shallow-draft boats over much of this stretch of the river often enables traffic to continue even when water levels are at their annual low point.

Transport services on the river are provided by primarily owned vessels which fall into three broad classes; (a) long-haul commercial barges, (b) short-haul passenger and produce ferries; and (c) small local shallow draft boats. The large commercial barges may reach 60 feet in length, are usually motorized, and have covered cargo holds below and above decks (Figure 4,13). These vessels handle the great majority of long-haul cargo shipment between Luang Prabang



Fig. 12 - The Mekong river at low water near Pak Chom



Fig. 13 - Cargo barge at Chiang Khan

and Vientiane. In the recent past as many as 75 vessels of this class operated between Vientiane and Luang Prabang. By 1975, Pathet Lao control of sections of the river above Pak Lay had reduced, but not stopped barge operations between these two cities. The usual length of the outbound leg of the trip was ten days with frequent stops along the route. In 1975 there were twenty 'scheduled' check-points for barge traffic, all on the Lao side of the river. Cargo flow on the Thai side of the river between Nong Khai and Chiang Khan did not exist at all at that time. The smaller 30 ft. short-haul passenger and produce ferries tend to operate between Sayaboury (Tha Deua) and Luang Prabang, Pak Lay and Chiang Khan, or along the river adjoining the Thai province of Loei. Occasionally one of these boats would go up-river from Sanakham/Chiang Khan to Pak Lay or even Sayaboury, but this was infrequent. Since the gradients of tributary rivers joining the Mekong in this area are steep and channels narrow, only local boats travel along these streams. Local boats, however, are common along all stretches of the river. They are most active in ferrying passengers between adjoining towns, across the river, or to other nearby points along the shore.

Transport and duty fees along the river are extracted at many locations by different individuals and for different purposes. Shippers of cargo on large barges paid about 20 *kip* per kilogram of cargo for the trip from Vientiane to Luang Prabang. They were also required to pay an Exit fee from Vientiane of 500 *kip* and Customs fees of 250 *kip* per ton on outbound cargo. Check-point fees were also collected at each stop ranging from 200 *kip* to 'contributions' of cigarettes, soap or assorted cargo. These fees were usually collected by civilian or military police who tended to double the fees for boats passing check-points north of Luang Prabang which originated from Pathet Lao controlled areas. Duty at these points was also collected on separate pieces of cargo, especially livestock.

Passenger traffic along the river is far more obvious even to the casual observer than is the movement of cargo by boat. The effects of civil disorder in Laos have clearly had a dampening influence on cargo and passenger flows on the long-haul routes. During the first six months of 1975 the mean volume of passenger traffic between Luang Prabang and Pak Lay was estimated at 100 people per day (Figure 14). It was not uncommon on this route for armed Pathet Lao military units to travel on the same boats which carried civilian passengers and cargo. Between Pak Lay and Sanakham, opposite Chiang Khan, only five passenger ferries operated in 1975. The aver-

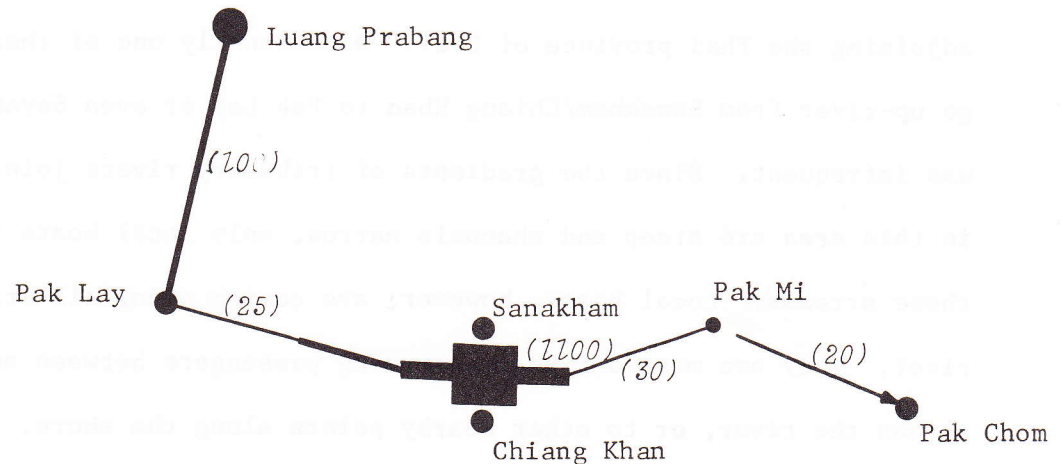


Figure 14 - Average Daily Passenger Flow by River, 1975

age passenger flow eastward toward Chiang Khan dropped to about 25 per day until the immediate Sanakham-Chiang Khan area was reached. The interaction between these two towns is reflected in a daily passenger flow of over 1,100 people. This active cross-river movement was associated with Lao-Thai trade, occupational travel, daily marketing, recreational and social visits, and visits to Chiang Khan's health center. These segmented patterns of passenger traffic also demonstrate the effective range of these separate urban market systems.

Despite the obvious limitations which this data presents for any substantive analysis of river transport, it is apparent that considerable use is made of the river for local and regional commerce, social interaction, and general communications. In a region so poorly served by land transportation, the river provides the only low-cost and reliable route over which these activities can take place. Although the United Nations has been somewhat overly optimistic about the Mekong Rivers' position as the main national communications artery for Laos, it is clearly of importance on a local and regional level. More effective river-highway linkages in the future may better integrate these two transport modes and facilitate the level of mobility which will be necessary to expand the limited scope of development in this area.

Secondary Trade Networks in Sayaboury Province

Trade and marketing networks in many developing nations often reflect the level of urban development in those countries. In Southeast Asia urban hierarchies are dominated by large primate cities with few if any intermediate-sized market centers. The primate city becomes the central focus of trade and marketing and articulates these activities with local markets or through a structured hierarchy of smaller regional market centers. While Vientiane is the dominant node in any trade network functioning in the government controlled areas of Laos, many regions depend on a single local center for the exchange of agricultural produce and distribution of consumer goods. In western Laos, the city of Luang Prabang is the major regional market center. Its hinterland has not been precisely defined, but encompasses areas as far west as Ban Houei Sai and southward to Pak Lay on the Mekong river. Arrayed below this center is a network of small local and village markets which focus and articulate regional trade activities. The provincial capital of Sayaboury is one such center for

trade generated in the upper Mekong region between Pak Lay and Luang Prabang (Figure 15). In this analysis we focus on trade and transport activities in the Muong Phieng-Nam Pouy area of Sayaboury, a tributary portion of Luang Prabangs' hinterland.

Directly west of the Mekong River below Luang Prabang is a narrow valley centered on Muong Sayaboury. This flat lowland is surrounded by heavily forested uplands with elevations generally exceeding 2,000 ft over much of the area. The valley is accessible from Vientiane via the Mekong river and from Luang Prabang at the small river town of Tha Deua. Except for access to the Mekong via two small tributary streams cutting laterally through the eastern uplands, east-west movement within Sayaboury is limited. Movement over the roughly 90 kilometer length of the valley is aided by national highway no. 1 which ends south of the village of Nam Pouy below Muong Phieng. Dry-season travel beyond this point to Khene Tao on the Lao-Thai border was possible in 1975, but only on a very limited basis. Most economic interchange flows northward through Sayaboury and Tha Deua to Luang Prabang or down the Mekong River to Vientiane and a few points in Thailand. The major population centers in this region in 1973 were Luang Prabang and Sayaboury with 43,924 and 13,775 people respectively (Laos, 1973). Population density in both provinces in 1971 was between 10 and 11 people per square kilometer, although Sayaboury had less than one-half the 409,000 population of Luang Prabang. These figures are based on partial census data and should be seen only as relative estimates, not precise measures. The majority of the lowland population in Sayaboury is Lao and the higher elevations are settled primarily by ethnic Hmong.

Information on agricultural production in Sayaboury is very limited. Such basic measures as land under cultivation, area by crop, and average size

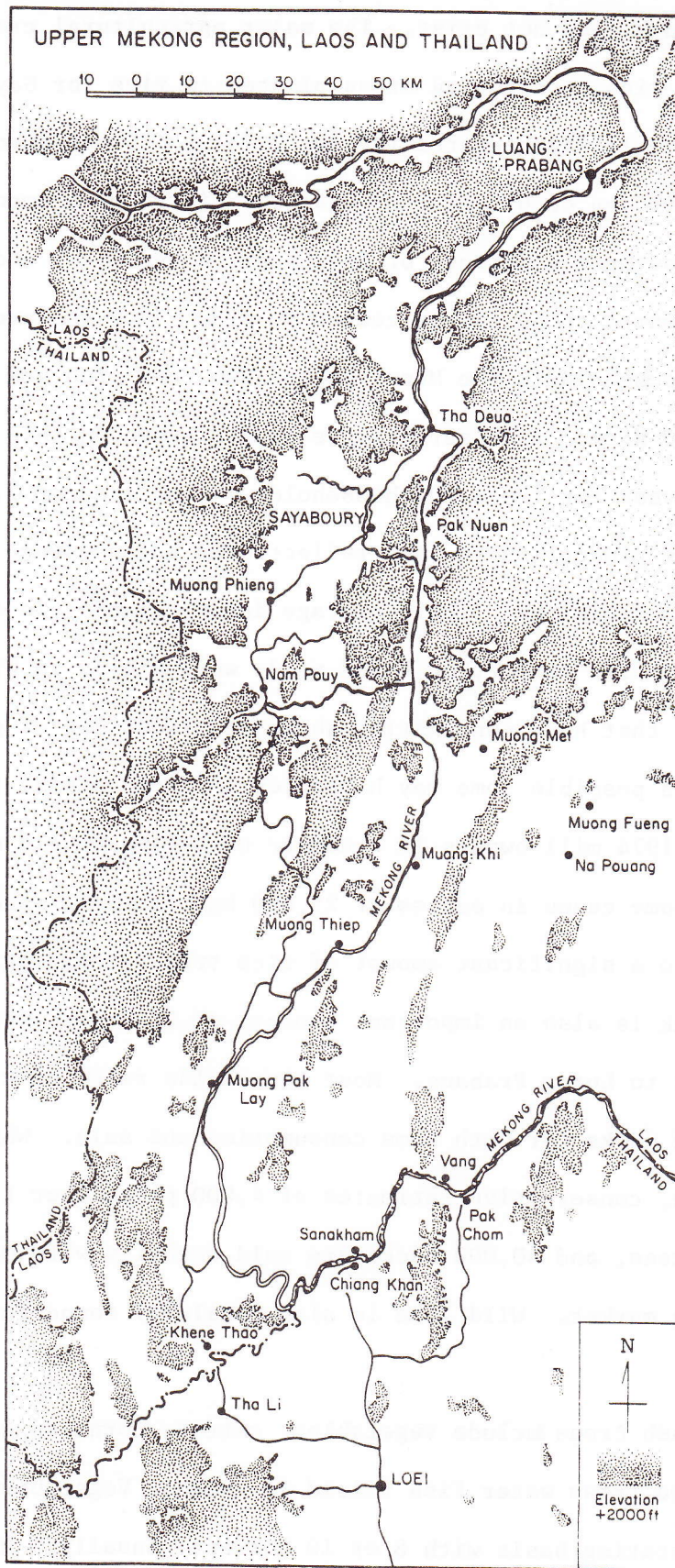


Fig. 15

of farm holdings does not exist. The major agricultural crop over much of the region is rice. Estimated areas planted to rice for Sayaboury province in 1973/74 were 14,986 hectares (USAID, 1974). A break-down of this figure shows that 9,405 ha or 63% of the total was distributed among the three central and southern districts of Sayaboury, Khene Thao, and Pak Lay. Rice surpluses appeared to be fairly common in mid 1970's and average annual production per household in the Muong Phieng-Nam Pouy area was estimated at 600 *kalongs* (6,000 kgs). A conservative estimate based on this figure would place the total harvest for the 1,200 households in the area at 7,218 tons. The volume of rice production is also reflected in the presence of 21 rice mills of small and medium size. Their average daily capacity is about 20,000 kg per mill with estimates that 2,000 kg of paddy were milled in 1974. These calculations suggest that home consumption absorbed almost 70% of paddy production, although it is possible some may have been shipped outside the region for milling. In 1974 mill owners in a number of villages held sizeable stocks of rice, in some cases in excess of 25,000 kg, in their warehouses. In general, this points to a significant amount of rice trade occurring within this area.

Livestock is also an important product of this area with large amounts being shipped to Luang Prabang. Most households raise some pigs, buffalo, chickens, and ducks for both home consumption and sale. While it is difficult to be precise, conservative estimates of 4,000 pigs, over 1,000 head of buffalo, 100,000 chickens, and 40,000 ducks are sold annually with most moving to the Luang Prabang market. Wild game is also regularly found in even the smallest markets.

Other cash crops include vegetables, cotton, corn, sugar cane, garlic, pineapple, and fresh water fish raised in ponds. Vegetables were regularly grown on a rotating basis with 8 or 10 harvest annually. Most of the Hmong (Meo) families around Nam Hia were planting 2 kg of seed each year and vegetables

were a common sale item in even the smallest markets. Cotton is grown throughout the region and is the only agricultural crop which regularly reaches markets outside of Laos. Large amounts move by river to Loei province in Thailand. Corn is raised by many of the Hmong households at the southern end of the basin. The *Tasseng* of Nam Pouy noted that eighty households in his village harvested between 300-400 *kalong* (3,000-4,000 kgs) of corn in 1974 which is used for livestock feed, or sold at market. A moderate regional drought in 1973-1975 which extended into Loei apparently reduced corn and cotton production substantially. Sugar cane is widely grown and sold in Sayaboury market for home processing and consumption. Garlic and pineapple are less widely grown, although both crops were present in the Sayaboury market. Fresh-water fish ponding is only a small-scale activity and sales are limited to local consumers since refrigeration for shipment is not available.

Fixed markets exist in many towns, although only Luang Prabang, Sayaboury, and Muong Phieng have permanently-roofed structures. Aside from the daily morning market activities, these facilities also act as centers for wholesale exchanges and redistribution between local village sellers/merchants and the major markets at Sayaboury and Luang Prabang. Nam Hia and Nam Pouy have roadside markets where produce is displayed on the ground and a few permanent stalls sell consumer goods, prepared food, cloth, and soft drinks. In 1975 participants in the early or morning markets in smaller towns ranged from several dozen to over 50 in the larger towns. Local market sellers are primarily farm women and local merchants. In the larger markets activities may continue at a 'brisk' pace until noon or mid-morning, but little activity continues into the afternoon. The Sayaboury market is primarily a 'morning market' and may have as many as 200 sellers offering meat, eggs, fish, poultry, noodles, rice, vegetables, and assorted jungle produce.

The general movement of produce and the directional flow of trade in this region is toward Sayaboury where redistribution to Luang Prabang occurs (Figure 16). A secondary element of this trade moves eastward to the Mekong river where it utilizes the long-haul cargo barges for re-shipment northward to Luang Prabang or to Chiang Khan in Loie. Pak Lay is the southern limit of trade networks servicing Luang Prabang by either road or water. Despite the absence of any significant growth in commercial agriculture in the region, marketing networks appear to be structure in terms of a hierarchy of lower-order centers tributary to larger markets through which trade is channeled to Luang Prabang. However, not all commodities flow through this system without disruptions. In 1974-75, rice was available in only small amounts in Sayaboury market. The *Chao Khouang* had discouraged rice trade beyond the provincial boundaries through a concern for local shortages. Flows from Muong Phieng were only possible in single lots of 170 kgs if a license had been obtained. Shipments to Luang Prabang by road had been prohibited and consignments from Vientiane moving up-river by barge were taxed at 2,000 *kip* per load. There were frequent reports in Pak Lay that Pathet Lao agents were buying rice in Sayaboury regularly, and at prices above those being paid in Luang Prabang. These buyers were also paying 200-400 *kip* for each burlap rice bag. Nevertheless, there was no evidence that external shipments of rice to Luang Prabang from Vientiane were disrupted anywhere along the Mekong river.

The one major exception to intra-regional trade flows via road or water to Luang Prabang concerned cotton. In the absence of any agro-based industries in the Sayaboury region, local market demand and prices for cotton were low. The major cotton merchant in Sayaboury purchased over 100 tons of cotton in 1973/74, shipping most of the fibre southward via river to markets to Chiang

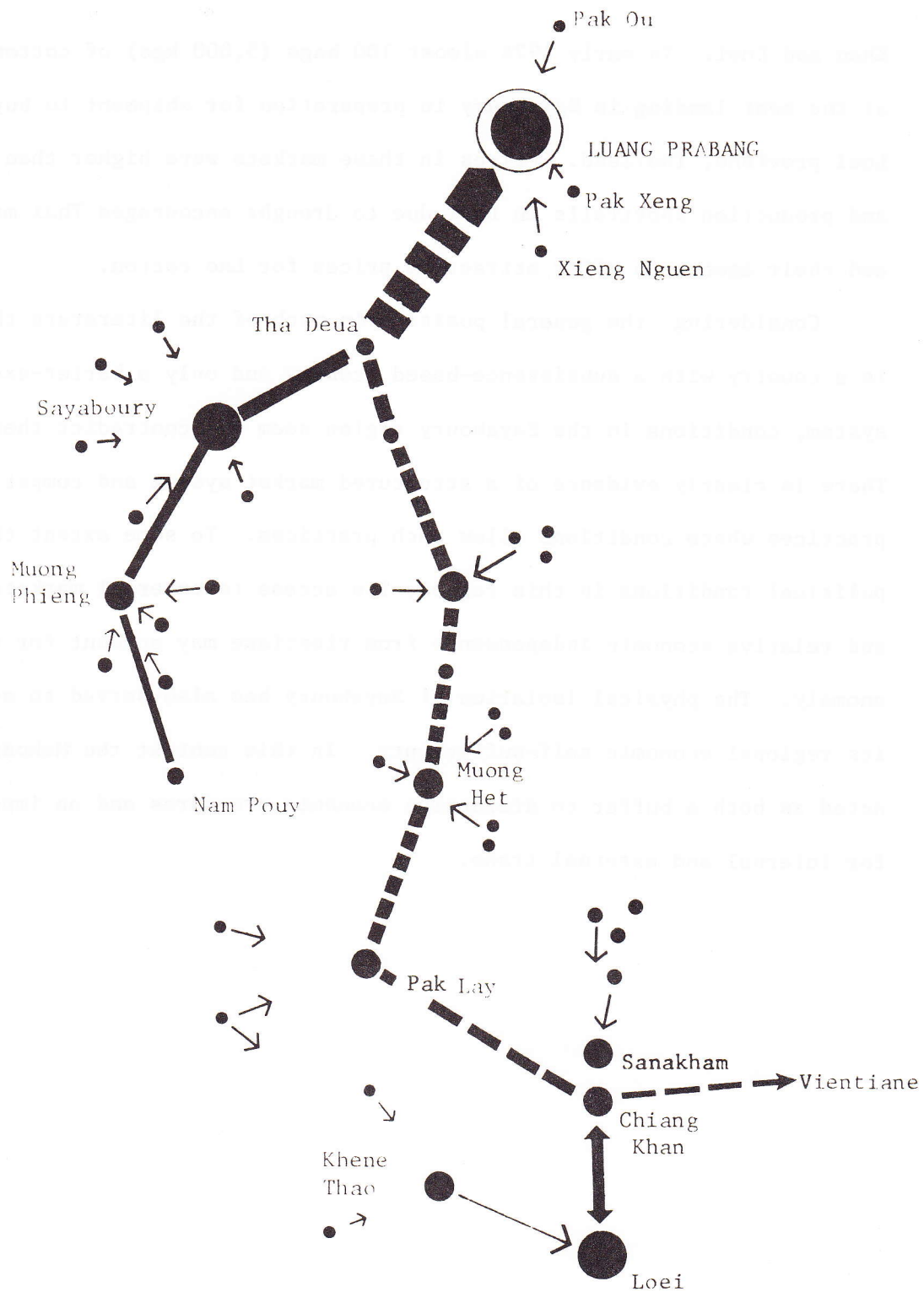


Figure 16 - TRADE FLOW IN THE LUANG PRABANG-SAYABOURY-LOEI REGION OF THE UPPER MEKONG RIVER, 1974-1975

Khan and Loei. In early 1974 almost 100 bags (5,000 kgs) of cotton was observed at the boat landing in Sayaboury in preparation for shipment to buyers in Loei province, Thailand. Prices in these markets were higher than in Laos and production shortfalls in Loei due to drought encouraged Thai mill owners and their agents to offer attractive prices for Lao cotton.

Considering the general position in much of the literature that Laos is a country with a subsistence-based economy and only a barter-exchange market system, conditions in the Sayaboury region seem to contradict these impressions. There is clearly evidence of a structured market system and competitive trade practices where conditions allow such practices. To some extent the unstable political conditions in this region, its access to external markets in Thailand, and relative economic independence from Vientiane may account for this seeming anomaly. The physical isolation of Sayaboury has also served to accentuate its regional economic self-sufficiency. In this context the Mekong river has acted as both a buffer to disruptive economic pressures and an important avenue for internal and external trade.

Trans-river Trade in the Pak Lay-Chiang Khan Region

Trans-river interaction along the upper Mekong has until recently, been a fairly common phenomena. Although the international border follows the river upstream from Vientiane for almost 160 kilometers, it has never been an effective barrier to economic and social interaction. In the 19th century the Thai river towns of Nong Khai, Sri Chiangmai, and Chiang Khan regularly articulated local, regional, and long-haul trade between Laos, northeast Thailand, and through Bangkok to international markets. The Loei valley was until rail lines linked Bangkok with Nong Khai, an important alternative overland route between Laos and Bangkok. Trade goods reaching Chiang Khan by boat were moved overland through Loei to Petchabun where they were transhipped to barges on the Pasak River for transport to Bangkok. The completion of rail lines to Nong Khai early in this century diminished the importance of this route for long-haul trade. In the 1930's, Pendleton(1953) noted that the river upstream from Vientiane was of little use for commerce or transport because of the extensive areas of rapids. Only special power boats or motorized dugouts with pontoons could ascend these rapids to points along the upper Mekong River. These observations suggest what is also apparent today. Trans-river trade and regional transport in this region is effectively limited to areas above Loei province. The economic and market centers in Loei have, consequently, assumed somewhat greater importance for trade and social interaction in the upper Mekong region. These centers are also the gateway for Laotian products seeking markets outside of the restricted marketing network of western Laos. We consider here several aspects of Laotian-Thai interaction in the area between Pak Lay and Chiang Khan.

Despite the suggested importance of Loei for regional trade with areas of western Laos, this province is symptomatic of the 'by-passed' condition of

many geographic areas in Thailand. No year-round hard surfaced highways connected Loei with any of the adjoining provinces in the northeast or upper central region of Thailand until ten years ago. Even today, road shipment westward through Dan Sai to Petchabun is a lengthy and often seasonal activity. This inaccessibility has been further accentuated by the regions' physical isolation. Extensively forested uplands with elevations exceeding 1,000 meters border the central Loei valley on three sides. This relief barrier is somewhat less continuous in the south and southeast. The uplands have traditionally been lightly settled and exploited primarily by subsistence shifting cultivators and some commercial logging operations. Since 1960 there has been a rapid growth in population (above 3% per year) which has contributed to an increase in forest clearance, soil degradation, the removal of timber resources for firewood, charcoal, and building, and serious problems of deforestation.

The regional economy of Loei has depended upon a mixture of upland subsistence agriculture, increased cash cropping of cotton, maize, and kenaf, and irrigated rain-fed rice in the lowlands. In 1974/75 the mean annual gross income among rural households was *Baht* 18,799 (US\$ 938), somewhat above the national poverty line (Meesook, 1979). However, if this figure is factored by variations in household size, almost 45% of the population falls below the poverty line. The only 'urban center' in Loei is the capital city of Muang Loei which had a population of 12,750 in 1975, double the size of Chiang Khan. Because of chronic problems with water supplies and drought, rice shortages have become frequent throughout the province and Loei is a net importer of this food staple. The local manufacturing sector is limited to the activities of nine commercial cotton gins and five lumber mills. Almost the entire output of these facilities is shipped outside of the province.

While Loei city is the main market and distribution center in the province, a number of other small towns are of varying importance in trade linkages with Laos (Table 1). Chiang Khan and Pak Lay are the two largest second-order market centers in this trans-river region of Thailand and Laos. Both have roughly equivalent trade areas or hinterlands, yet Chiang Khan is clearly superior in the size of its service area population, the number of individual firms located within its market, and the variety of business types or services these firms provide. There is little overlap

Table 1. - Market Centers in the Pak Lay-Chiang Khan Region

Town	Population (1974)	Trade Area (sq. km)	Trade Area Population (est.)	Number of Businesses	Business Types
Chiang Khan	7,030	1,960	52,121	107	24
Pak Lay	3,500 ^e	1,965	10,566	35	10
Khene Thao	1,200 ^e	1,256	12,809	23	9
Sanakham	2,000 ^e	962	14,960	15	7
Tha Li	1,100	962	23,151	34	13
Pak Chom	1,515	707	17,248	20	12

e = estimated

in the trade areas of these two centers and clustered within their hinterlands are most of the smaller or third-order centers. The effective economic reach of Chiang Khan extends over much of the upper Loei valley, westward beyond Khene Thao toward Pak Lay, eastward past Pak Chom, and for a considerable distance northward toward Na Pouang in Laos (Figure 15). The definition of each town's economic influence in spatial terms is based upon analysis of trade patterns, the distance populations come to use specific services in each center, and the origins of traders in daily markets.

The cotton and timber trade focused on Chiang Khan provides two examples of the interdependence between Lao producers and Thai markets. In 1974 the nine cotton mills in Loei province processed over 8,000 tons of cotton. Over 3,500 tons of this total originated from producers or merchants in Laos. Chiang Khans' single cotton mill handled 71% of all cotton reaching Loei from adjoining areas of Laos; Pak Lay and Sayaboury were the primary sources of this trade. As was noted earlier, Lao cotton reaches Chiang Khan almost entirely by cargo barge, usually within one or two days. Shipments are made on privately owned barges of the cotton broker or mill owner rather than the commercial long-haul barges operating between Vientiane and Luang Prabang. Despite the modest but respectable processing capacity for cotton in Loei, there are no manufacturing industries which utilize cotton fibre, seed or oil. Consequently, almost 100% of local mill output is sent to buyers in Metropolitan Bangkok. This weakness in the local industrial structure diverts an important volume of raw materials which might otherwise create benefits through increased local employment, generated income, and multiplier effects in related services. This failure to more effectively organize local resources is a frequent characteristic of by-passed areas. The inability of these areas to attract investment/development capital also means that the benefits of local resource exploitation accrue to investors in more distant and larger economic centers such as Bangkok.

A large share of the timber industry in Loei is also focused on the upper Loei valley and Chiang Khan. Two of the largest lumber mills and a storage yard are located in the town on the banks of the Mekong River. Logs reach mills in several districts in Loei from legal leaseholds and illicit logging operations. The Chiang Khan mill tends to handle large amounts of illegally cut timber from within Loei or logs shipped down-river from operations in Laos.

In 1974 the largest of Chiang Khan's lumber mills handled 10,300 m³ of timber. Almost one-third of this amount originated from the mill in Sanakham and other points along the Mekong River in Laos. Logs cut illegally in Thailand, primarily from Chiang Khan and Pak Chom districts, are hauled to the river by elephant, floated to the saw mill in Sanakham, and then reshipped to Chiang Khan as rough-finished lumber. This procedure avoids the scrutiny of Thai forestry officials who check butt-markings on logs for their origin, reduces milling costs by using cheaper facilities in Sanakham, and enables Thai timber to be returned under low import fees. The shipment of rough-cut lumber and logs to Chiang Khan from Laos also emphasizes the limited demand in regional Lao markets and the high costs of transporting timber to Vientiane. The milling facilities and marketing networks in Loei province enable Lao timber to reach many of the larger urban markets in northeast Thailand, and at mill prices higher than could be earned in Laos.

Local markets in the Pak Lay-Chiang Khan-Khene Thao region also depend upon several Thai centers for the distribution of consumer goods. The primary distribution center serving the Lao population in this area is Chiang Khan (Figure 17). Pak Chom, Sanakham, Pak Lay and many smaller villages are directly tributary to Chiang Khan in the distribution network for consumer and manufactured goods. In this hierarchy of market centers, Chiang Khan is in turn dependent upon Muang Loei and to a lesser degree the large provincial centers at Udorn and Khon Kaen. Villages near Khene Thao and Bo There are, however, linked more directly to Muang Loei and Tha Li for distribution of consumer goods. The better road connections in this area through Tha Li to Muang Loei exert an important influence on this pattern. The position of Vientiane in the distribution networks for consumer goods to Laotian communities in this area is one of secondary importance. The

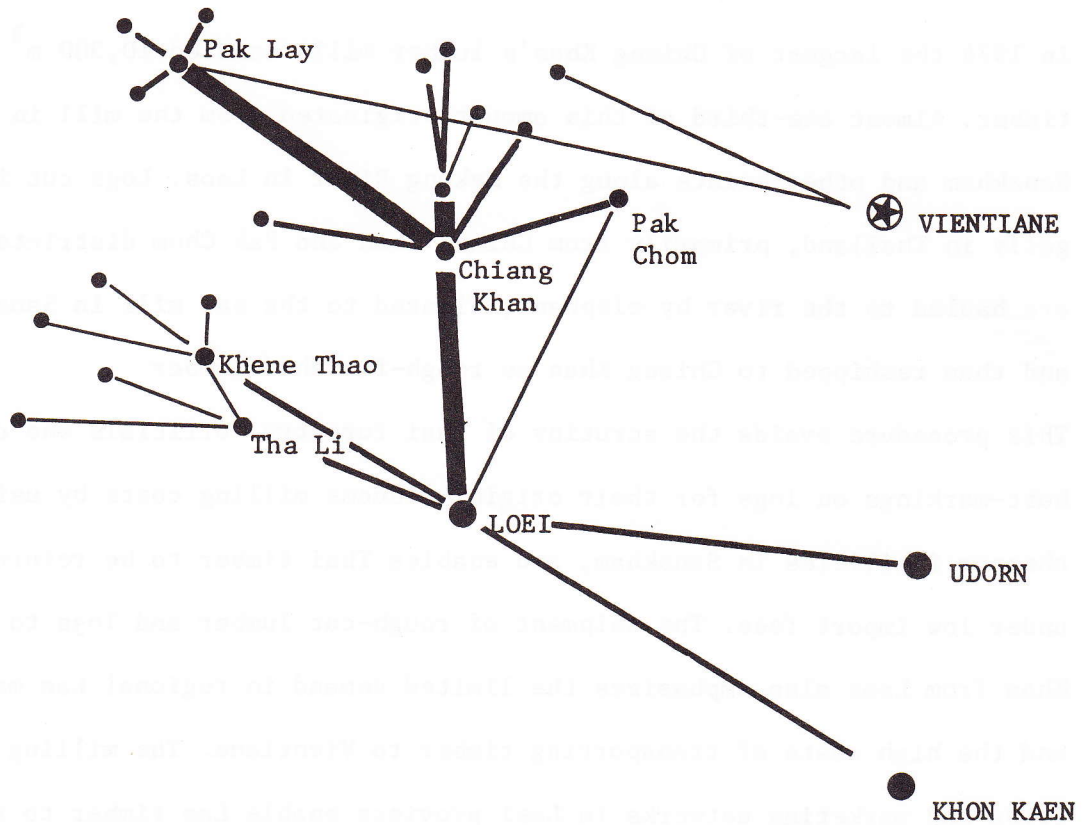


Fig. 17 - DISTRIBUTION NETWORKS FOR CONSUMER GOODS
MARKETED IN THE PAK LAY-CHIANG KHAN REGION

reasons for this are not particularly complex. Long-haul transport via the Mekong is irregular and there are no significant Lao towns along the river between Vientiane and Pak Lay. Chiang Khan consequently, presents a market center of intervening opportunity for most of the Lao population in this area. And finally, both Thai river towns and those close to Khene Thao are better linked to regional marketing networks in Loei. They are therefore, able to offer a greater variety of goods and services and at more competitive prices than can be obtained from Vientiane.

A final measure of rural-urban interaction in this region can be illustrated by the patterns of town visits or market trip behavior among the rural population. The reason(s) for market trips indicate one aspect of the importance of towns in this area's central place system. The frequency of visits also reflect the degree of rural-urban interdependency in the trans-river region of the upper Mekong. Sample surveys among non-resident transient populations in each of four towns were conducted in 1975 using random interview techniques. Despite the superficial quality of these surveys they substantiate the importance of Thai towns in meeting various social, commercial and medical needs of large numbers of Lao in their hinterlands (Table 2).

Table 2.- CONSUMER TRIP BEHAVIOR IN LAO AND THAI TOWNS, 1975

Trip Purpose	Khene Thao		Pak Lay		Chiang Khan		Tha Li	
	% total	Mean Frequency	% total	Mean Frequency	% total	Mean Frequency	% total	Mean Frequency
Social & recreation	83	1/month	23	+1/month	39	+1/week	32	+1/month
Medical	0	0	18	+1/month	8	1/month	1	1/month
Marketing ^(a)	0	0	13	+1/month	3	1/month	4	1/month
Consumer goods	0	0	32	+1/month	50	1/week	21	1/week
Other ^(b)	17	1/month	14	-1/month	0	0	42	1/week

a- selling agricultural crops, forest products, cottage industry products
b- in-transit to other points

Social and recreational purposes were the most common reasons for town visits to Khene Thao, the smallest market center with few if any commercial services. In fact, visiting market towns is very much a social event and is

often an element in most trips made by rural households. Pak Lay and Chiang Khan are clearly more important commercial and market centers and draw populations primarily for the use of these services on a more frequent basis. Tha Li is an intermediate market center for Lao populations in Khene Thao, although many continue beyond this town to Muang Loei where more commercial and marketing opportunities exist. The health centers at Pak Lay, Chiang Khan, and Tha Li also provide important reasons for town visits. In 1975 Chiang Khan and Tha Li medical centers served 4,872 and 2,886 patients respectively. Over one-quarter of these patients were Lao nationals who chose to use these facilities rather than those further north in Pak Lay. Lao patient volumes at Chiang Khan were highly seasonal, peaking during the dry months of March-May. Better mobility on the Mekong river during this season may be the primary reason for this pattern. It is also important to note that despite the marketing functions provided by each town, trips for this purpose were relatively unimportant. To some extent this fact emphasizes the general subsistence nature of the rural economy on both sides of the river served by these centers.

Conclusions

The upper Mekong region as outlined in these brief discussions is in many respects consistent with notions of by-passed areas in economic development. The region is physically isolated due to topographic conditions which have emphasized north-south rather than lateral east-west mobility and interaction. Poorly developed land transport facilities have accentuated conditions of inaccessibility. Development of the regions human and natural resources also lag behind other regions of central Laos and northeast Thailand.

The articulation of local economic and social needs with regional and national centers of power is weak and incentives for developmental investment are generally absent. Benign neglect by central administrations and planning authorities have tended to accentuate rather than diminish these problems. Despite these barriers to development and integration, the international border along the Mekong river has not until recently, been a major obstacle to economic and social interaction.

Intra-regional trade , transport, and social interaction between the Pak Lay-Sayaboury region and market centers in Loei province has distinct historical foundations. Today, evidence of these linkages still exist in the trade in agricultural commodities, forest products, and more limited marketing activities. Laotian populations have regularly made use of commerical and medical services available in Chiang Khan, Tha Li, and Muang Loei. The dependence of Lao merchants and producers on Thai lumber and cotton mills in Loei province demonstrates the strength of this modest level of intra-regional economic integration. The lack of any substantive agricultural production among both Lao and Thai rural households has, however, diminished potentials for stronger economic ties.

The Mekong river remains a potentially important integrating factor in this remote corner of the upper Mekong basin. Unfortunately, the utilization of the river as an international waterway is for the immediate future in doubt. The tide of political change now presents the most immediate obstacle to the achievement of any substantive development progress in the upper Mekong region. Whether political accomodations among nations in the Mekong basin will cause a return to development programs planned for the basin is problematic. The priorities within these programs still place the upper Mekong region at the periphery

of basin-wide development initiatives. Short-term remedial attention to the problems of this by-passed area may, therefore, result not from international but from national efforts. Under these circumstances the upper Mekong region of both Laos and Thailand may continue to remain on the very periphery of national development space.

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