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Coutts Trotter F.R.G.S.

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# THE SCOTTISH GEOGRAPHICAL MAGAZINE.

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## THE SIAMESE FRONTIER.

By COUTTS TROTTER, F.R.G.S.

(*With a Map.*)

THE recent sudden attack upon Siam by the French,—unexpected probably by most of our readers—followed by the immediate surrender by Siam of a considerable portion of her territory, may render acceptable a few notes on the regions more immediately concerned.

In speaking of the territories occupied by France or under her protectorate, we are apt to think of Tongking, Annam, and Cochin-China, which together on the modern map form the eastern and south-eastern border of the great Indo-Chinese peninsula, as to some extent separate countries. Practically, however, it is more correct to consider them as one, inhabited by one dominant race, the Annamese, which is akin to the Chinese, and which, having been for very many centuries under the influence of China, and for some time directly under her control, retains a close resemblance to the Chinese in manners, customs, and institutions. When first known to history they were located in Tongking only, under the name Giao-chi, a term having the signification of *divergence*, which is said to be explained by the phenomenon that the grass on the Chinese side of the frontier bends its heads to the north, and that on the Tongking side to the south.<sup>1</sup> It would be well if all Indo-Chinese frontiers were as distinctly defined. From Tongking the race gradually spread southwards along the strip of country between the mountains and the sea familiarly known now as Annam or Cochin-China. Here they came in contact with a people famous in mediæval times, the Champa, who seem to be akin to the Malays, and also—as we are probably justified in believing—derive part of their blood from the Indian immigrants to

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<sup>1</sup> Colquhoun interprets the name to mean “bifurcated toes,” the big toes of the Annamese being widely separated from the others—a peculiarity still found among the hill tribes.

whom the vanished greatness of Cambodia is attributed. The Champa were gradually driven southward, and are now found only in scattered communities, but they still retained their place on the maps of last century. The Annamese then, still pressing further south, conquered and annexed those deltaic provinces of the kingdom of Cambodia, embracing the mouths of the Mekong, which were afterwards annexed by the French, and now form their colony of Cochin-China, or, more correctly, Lower Cochin-China (La Basse Cochinchine).<sup>1</sup> The kingdom of Cambodia has been in decadence for centuries, and dependent alternately on Annam and on Siam; in the present century it fell finally under the influence of the Siamese, who in 1810 annexed the provinces of Tonlé Repau and Mulu Prey, and soon after Battambang (Angkor being already in their power), and would have reduced the whole kingdom to dependence but for the "protection" accorded it by the French, who, however, by the treaty of 1867, left Battambang and Angkor definitely in the possession of Siam.

The race now inhabiting Cambodia is composed of various elements grafted on the original population. The authors of the vast and magnificent buildings at Angkor and elsewhere can hardly have been other than Indians, but their numbers were probably small. There is a large Shan element. The typical Cambodian is said to be bigger than his neighbours, and to have altogether a less Mongoloid appearance.

It may be worth while here to recall the relationship in which these different states or provinces constituting *l'Empire Indo-Chinois* stand to the French and to each other. Thus Tongking is not a French colony in the ordinary sense, but an integral part of the kingdom of Annam, which in 1884 accepted a French protectorate; the foreign and general policy of the kingdom being controlled by the French, while the different departments of the State, with one or two exceptions, as Public Works, Customs, etc., continue to be administered by natives, though French official residents are quartered in all the provincial towns. Cambodia is in like manner a protected kingdom, under perhaps more direct French control than Annam. Cochin-China is a colony, with a separate governor and full administrative apparatus on the French model, and has pursued on occasions a very independent line of its own, even to the extent of annexing provinces from the two protected kingdoms, and denouncing the follies of the administration of the protectorates in its official journal.

With the exception of these territories under French influence, the rest of the Indo-Chinese peninsula, up to the mountain ranges which enclose Annam, is mainly occupied by the Thai or Shan race, of which the Siamese, though not the oldest, is now the most considerable branch, and politically stands in marked contrast to the others in the capacity it has shown for comprehending and maintaining the imperial idea. There have been, and are, Shan States of considerable extent and

<sup>1</sup> The name Cochin-China has been thought to be a corruption of Ko-cheng-ching, i.e. "the ancient Cheng-ching" (the Chinese name of Champa), but it may have been merely given by Europeans from the similarity of the position on the peninsula to that of Cochin on the Indian coast.

power, as Chieng Mai and others in the north, and Vien Chang and Luang Prabang to the east, and the three mentioned enjoyed a prosperous independence during intermittent periods of some length; but as a rule they have never maintained their independence long, and the lesser ones have generally been satisfied with more or less precarious federation.

The mountain range, or, to be more exact, the broad belt of mountainous country, which separates Annam from the more plain country to the westward, is inhabited by various independent and so-called savage tribes, having considerable natural capacity, but at a low stage of culture. Their presence, and the nature of the country they inhabit, sufficiently explain the small degree of influence which Annam, even in her most prosperous days, has exerted over the country to the westward, since no such influence could be permanently exercised without first reducing to order the intervening mountaineers, with their very difficult country, averaging in breadth some 50 to 180 miles. And this has in fact never been done. The country between these mountains and the Mekong is occupied by the Laos, members of the Thai or Shan race, who acknowledge the supremacy of their congener, the King of Siam, though the actual marks of allegiance shown are slight. Still these have for the last seventy years or so been growing more definite. In the great State of Luang Prabang, for instance, whose territory extends both east and north from the Mekong, there is a resident Siamese Commissioner, whose authority now overshadows that of the local ruler.<sup>1</sup> And, in a smaller way, officials representing the central Siamese power are found throughout the various Laos districts east of the Mekong, their authority being often extended over the hill-tribes in their neighbourhood. Mr. Archer states that one is established at Muong Ahin in the valley of the Nam U, in about 22° N. latitude. A great part of the country east of the Mekong is, however, very imperfectly known. In some parts the mountain and jungle region inhabited by the independent tribes is very extensive, reaching nearly to the river. These tribes offer many features of interest. As a French writer puts it, they are hardly "sauvages," but rather "barbares." They have little or no power of combination, living in little groups of villages, each autonomous; but they weave, and work in iron, and cultivate the soil—wastefully indeed, burning down the forest to make a clearing. They are desperately superstitious, many of their customs and beliefs, *e.g.* the great common dwelling-house, the dread of spirits, sacrifices, and ordeals, recalling similar practices in the Pacific and elsewhere. These last, however, seem throughout the peninsula more or less to underlie the later Buddhism. They punish evil-doers either by fines, or in grave cases by selling them as slaves, so their criminal classes instead of their being a burthen are a profit to them. These tribes are probably capable of indefinite improvement, but except on the outer fringe of their domain are still very little known. Some of the wide gaps in our knowledge have been filled by French explorers, chiefly officials, and very capable and accomplished observers. These

<sup>1</sup> A French Consul also resides there, under an exequatur from the King of Siam—a direct admission of his sovereignty.

gentlemen are very naturally desirous to find evidence of any rights or claims on the part of Annam over this country; indeed, this seems sometimes to have been the chief object of their researches, but the evidences discovered amount to very little. Certainly since the reduction late in the last century, by the Siamese, of the state of Vien Chang, with which the Annamese had temporary relations, there seems to have been but little active movement on the part of Annam beyond the mountain barrier. Vien Chang rebelled and was finally destroyed by Siam in 1828, and about that time some parts of the region known as Tran Ninh were in dispute between Annam and Siam, but were finally yielded to the latter power. Some subsequent efforts of Annam to extend her influence in the direction of Luang Prabang were extinguished by the inroads of the Haws from the Chinese frontier. All this is in accordance with the evidence of the best maps, including those published in France up to a recent period, as for instance in Reclus' *Géographie Universelle*, and in that attached to Francis Garnier's great work, which was produced in 1886. With some comparatively slight differences as to the northern frontier of Cambodia, they all draw the western frontier of Annam along the crests of the watershed. And it may be added that all the French authorities most conversant with the question,<sup>1</sup> when writing from the sublunary standpoint of political geography, admit frankly, if reluctantly, the validity of the claims of Siam on both sides of the Mekong. The claims then of France, gravely urged now as of right, to the Mekong as frontier (with a reservation in favour of the mountain ranges still further west) must be held as founded on some higher, antecedent, indefeasible right, lying deep in the eternal fitness of things,—a point of view which we as geographers do not feel competent to discuss.

Some topographical information, interesting perhaps rather as showing what might be than what was, is given as to a former trade route leading from the upper waters of the Se-bang-hieng, an eastern affluent of the Mekong, across a low pass in the mountains to another river which debouches near Hué, the land portion of the route being only about 30 miles long. The actual road, however, is no longer in existence, and the extent to which it was ever used is very doubtful.

The endeavours of the French authorities to divert towards Saigon the trade which now goes to Bangkok and Chantabun, will no doubt be renewed under more advantageous conditions now that their influence in the Mekong valley is to be so largely increased. According to a fair and candid *résumé* by M. Gallois<sup>2</sup> of the narratives of the French travellers above alluded to, confident hopes are entertained that the traffic of at least the eastern half of the peninsula may be attracted by the three parallel outlets afforded by the French territories, viz.—1. That in the north, from Yunnan, by the Song Koi or Red River to Hanoi and Haiphong; 2. In the centre, by the new route recently examined leading

<sup>1</sup> We need only mention the name of M. de Lanessan, the present Governor-General of French Indo-China.

<sup>2</sup> *Annales de Géographie*, Juillet, 1893.

from the middle Mekong up the Se-bang-hieng river, and across the mountains to Hué and Tourane; and 3. In the south, from the lower Mekong and Cambodia towards Saigon.

This question of the probable future course of the trade of these countries is of special interest to us, seeing that of the trade of Siam, which was valued in 1890 at exports £3,209,000, and imports £2,631,000, at least three-fourths is with British territories, while nine-tenths of the carrying trade is in British hands. As is well known, the French authorities, endeavouring to persuade the trade of the eastern and central Siamese provinces to take the line of the Mekong, have seen with much dissatisfaction the increasing importance of the central Siamese emporium at Khorat, and the commencement of a railway thither from Bangkok. If, following on recent changes, any direct or indirect interference with the course of trade takes place, our commercial interests might be seriously compromised, and we should have reasonable grounds to protest. The result of the proposed opening of the middle route across the mountains to Tourane would be of considerable interest. If the route is as free from serious obstacles as it is said to be, the chief immediate economical objection which occurs to us is the extreme paucity of population in the districts which would be tapped by it; and it should be always borne in mind that obstacles to navigation in the Mekong must always prevent that river, so far as we can see, from becoming a highway for traffic.<sup>1</sup>

To return to the question of the Mekong as a frontier. It is a matter of common observation that a river is one of the worst possible frontiers, especially as between two powers of very unequal strength. A stipulation has been added by the French in this case that Siam shall maintain no armed force within 16 miles of the frontier line. Under all the circumstances of the case the results, if not the intention, of such a stipulation must be patent to everybody. As regards the Mekong, again, it may be observed that the population of both banks is homogeneous, and that it does not anywhere form the boundary between great states; while its remarkable windings and angles make it exceptionally unfit for this purpose. Of the mutilations which the drawing of this frontier would arbitrarily inflict, for instance, on the State of Luang Prabang, we do not propose to speak. But higher up the river our own territorial rights, as well as our interests, will be found to clash with this very unscientific frontier. This was clearly pointed out last year by Lord Lamington in an important paper read before our Society.<sup>2</sup> The great Shan State of Kiang Hung, formerly tributary both to Burmah and China, and also the territories of Kiang Kheng, the suzerainty of which was another part of our Burmese inheritance, lie partly on the left bank of the river. As regards the former, it is understood now to be under the control of

<sup>1</sup> Impediments to navigation already commence at Kratieh, and continue thence up to Stung Treng. Thence to the Khong rapids it is pretty free, and from above these rapids to the mouth of the Semún river (about 90 miles). Above this it is interrupted again until above Kemmarat, whence there is a long navigable reach (some 230 miles) up to Nongkhai. Above this point it can hardly be said to be navigable at all. No doubt something has, and much more might, be done to supplement these deficiencies by canalisation.

<sup>2</sup> *Magazine*, vol. viii. p. 135.

China, while Kiang Kheng was lately ceded by us to Siam on condition of its not being surrendered to "any other" Power. The eastern limits of Kiang Kheng probably coincide with the line of hills which form the divide between the Mekong and its tributary the Nam U, but Kiang Hung, the metropolitan state of the confederacy known as the Sipsong Panna, has relations even further eastward. Probably, however, we should be satisfied to accept this hill region as our frontier of influence. It would have this great advantage that it is crossed by not more than one or two available passes. We venture to think that this would be quite as desirable and permanent a frontier as any "buffer" state; but if the latter arrangement is preferred it would seem equitable that the buffer be found, or created, to the eastward of this mountain barrier.

It should be remembered also, that the cessation of our influence in the above-mentioned territory on the left bank would seriously jeopardise the trade now passing through it towards Burmah, and would almost necessarily mean the abandonment of any such scheme as that so long and perseveringly advocated by Mr. Holt Hallett of a railway connecting Moulmein, by way of the Siamese Shan States, with the Chinese province of Yunnan, the object of which is to establish direct trade relations between a British port and the trade of South-Western China. Now it would be quixotic not to expect that this scheme would be opposed to the uttermost by any influence which the French authorities could bring to bear, seeing that it stands in direct rivalry to their own scheme for attracting the very same trade by the route already referred to down the Song Koi or Red River to the Tongking ports. This scheme, though its feasibility, as regards the facilities of the Red River for navigation, has been questioned by some experts, is considered by its promoters to be of the highest importance; but they have also an alternative scheme, viz., having annexed Luang Prabang, to bring one or more lines from the north down to that very important point, and to establish there an emporium of trade; and obviously such a scheme as Mr. Holt Hallett's would be as antagonistic to this as to the Red River route.

It will no doubt be readily understood that there are various points of interest connected with this question of frontiers, and with the Siamese question generally, which, as bearing on current politics, the writer is precluded from discussing in these pages.

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### THE NEW MAP OF PERSIA.

By JAS. BURGESS, C.I.E., LL.D., F.R.G.S., ETC.

LAST year the Royal Geographical Society published a new Map of Persia, prepared, under the superintendence of the Hon. George Curzon, M.P., by W. J. Turner. It was every way desirable and appropriate that the great English Geographical Society should undertake the preparation of a new map of such a country as Persia: indeed, its subsidy from Government could not be better employed than in works of a like character.