Ambiguous Commodities, Unstable Frontiers: The Case of Burma, Siam, and Imperial Britain, 1800–1900

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INTRODUCTION

At the turn of the nineteenth century in Southeast Asia, the Kingdoms of Burma and Siam were largely stable, independent polities: powerful in relation to their neighbors, self-sufficient in terms of food, and possessing little reason to believe that these parameters would be changing within the clearly foreseeable future.[1] A century later, Burma as an independent entity had disappeared off the map, and Siam—at least in terms of its official foreign trade—was an economic satellite of the British Empire. Burmese teak now floated downstream to British Rangoon, while Siamese rice was carried to the world in the hulls of British ships. The Burmese monarchy had been disbanded; 93 percent of all official Siamese imports and exports were in the hands of London's merchants.[2] How did these transformations occur, and why? Were the processes of domination geared toward the economies, politics, or "geobodies" of these two countries, or toward an integrated combination of all three? What role did material objects of trade themselves play in this process, objects that were often deemed illegal as they passed through unstable, liminal spaces along the frontier?

This paper approaches these questions through the intertwined threads of boundary-formation, political maneuvering, and quasi-legal commodities. I show how an initial British priority of protection for India and the sea-routes to China gradually evolved into a demand for open markets, and finally, into territorial dominion. Burma's geography, in one sense, put her at a disadvantage

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[1] See Victor Lieberman, "Secular Trends in Burmese Economic History, 1350–1830, and their Implications for State-Formation," *Modern Asian Studies* 25, 1 (1991), p. 22.

[2] George Curzon, "The Siamese Boundary Question," *The Nineteenth Century* 34, July (1893), pp. 53–54.

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from the start: too close to British Bengal on the one hand and the markets of China on the other, her fight for survival (economic and political) was partially conditioned by factors beyond her control. The frontier histories of Burma provide us with what Hastings Donnan and Thomas Wilson have called a "spatial and temporal record of relationships," in this case between local peoples, interested states, and the commodities that connected them.[3] Siam, by contrast, drew leverage from her position as an evolving buffer between Imperial Britain and France, though the price for this integrity was increasing economic domination by the former. The agency and acumen of Siamese leaders (especially King Mongkut and his son, Chulalongkorn) resisted this rising tide, but both monarchs were fighting against a shift in the trajectory of imperialism that was too strong to turn away for long.[4] Britain settled for overrunning the official foreign trade of one polity, while stopping at nothing but the total subsumation of the other. The exigencies of European competition, in concert with the strength of indigenous action and response, dictated the pace of aggression.

The present essay will be particularly concerned with how evolving borders, goods in transit, and power functioned at the frontiers of these two polities. Though the piece offers an examination of geopolitical and trade phenomena writ large, special attention is given to how these changes manifested themselves at the "edges" of these two kingdoms. The reason for this is simple: it was at the margins of these burgeoning states (at "empire's end") that the most significant challenges to centralized coercion and control occurred. As such, this article moves away from standard explanations of the period, such as those of Michael Adas and Fred Riggs, that have focused on the central rice basins of Burma and Siam.[5] It also diverges from important historiographical interpretations (such as Thongchai Winichakul's and Thant Myint-U's) that have highlighted cultural and intellectual changes in mainland Southeast Asia's courts.[6] London's will was always more easily enforced in the lowlands; this paradigm held true for the Siamese and Burmese regimes as well. In the borderlands of what is today called the "Golden Triangle" (Southwest China, Northeast Bur-

[3] Hastings Donnan and Thomas Wilson, eds., *Border Identities: Nation and State at International Frontiers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 5.

[4] For several important contributions to the literature on British Imperialism, its evolving nature and its effect on Southeast Asia, see Raymond Dumett, ed., *Gentlemanly Capitalism and British Imperialism: The New Debate on Empire* (London: Longman, 1999); P. J. Cain and A. G. Hopkins, *British Imperialism: Innovation and Expansion, 1688–1914* (London: Longman, 1993); and Anthony Webster, *Gentlemen Capitalists: British Imperialism in Southeast Asia, 1770–1890* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998).

[5] See, for example, Michael Adas, *The Burma Delta: Economic Development and Social Change on an Asian Rice Frontier, 1852–1941* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1974); and Fred Riggs, *Thailand: The Administration of a Bureaucratic Polity* (Honolulu: East-West Center, 1966).

[6] The most important work here is Thongchai Winichakul's indispensable *Siam Mapped: A History of the Geo-Body of a Nation* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1994); but see also Thant Myint-U, *The Making of Modern Burma* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

ma, Western Laos, and Northern Thailand) these contestations over power and dominion were always more vigorous. Centralized control over the flow of people and goods was less certain here, and was often difficult to enforce. This essay makes use of many of the period sources available on borders, "illegal" trade, and state-formation over the course of the nineteenth century to track these commodities and boundary undulations.[7] Britain's imperial attempts to modulate and influence flows of goods and the formation of territorial space serves as the spine of this piece.[8] As such, the movement and definition of products, people, and the frontier itself are critical to the narrative of this unfolding story.

The contention of this article is that politics, "illicit" commodities, and frontiers in this region influenced each other organically and systematically over the course of the nineteenth century. Britain's interests in mainland Southeast Asia were predicated on all three of these phenomena: geo-strategic concerns (especially with regards to France); access to productive markets (especially in Southwest China); and a concern for where the problematic—and profitable—boundaries of commerce and influence might lie. Likewise, Burmese and Siamese policies were heavily dependent on these three factors as well, with the pathways of indigenous action often dictated by these same issues. As "commodities" such as opium, munitions, and trafficked human beings spilled across area frontiers, imperial and local actors alike were linked through their passage. The "social lives of things," in Arjun Appadurai's elegant phrase, conditioned the social, economic, and political lives of a range of interested parties.[9] These movements of people and objects helped create the region's frontiers by identifying certain landscapes as either politically troublesome or economically desirable in the delineation of local boundaries. These same movements also helped determine the eventual outcome of continued sovereignty in Siam, and wholesale subjugation in Burma, at least as much as decisions made in the centralized royal courts. This article examines these transvaluations, shifting flows, and contested frontier conceptions of space over the course of an imperial century.

[7] Many, but no means all; I am limited in this particular arena to documents in Western languages. Wherever possible, I have used translations of indigenous viewpoints on these issues (treaties, interviews, and diplomatic correspondence in Thai, Burmese, and Chinese).

[8] This imperial angle is only one way among many to approach the problem of goods in transit across this unstable frontier. The literature on "border studies" or national boundaries has now become large and sophisticated enough that practitioners can choose among modalities for analysis in sculpting the story of any particular frontier. For several different ways of doing this, see Michiel Baud and Willem van Schendel, "Towards a Comparative History of Borderlands" *Journal of World History* 8, 2 (1997); Dennis Rumley and Julian Minghi, eds., *The Geography of Border Landscapes* (London: Routledge, 1991); and J. R. V. Prescott, *Political Frontiers and Boundaries* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1987).

[9] For what Arjun Appadurai calls the "paths and diversions" of objects, temporally, spatially, as well as through social meanings, see his, "Introduction: Commodities and the Politics of Value," in A. Appadurai, ed, *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), pp. 16–29.

ENGLAND AND SIAM: FRONTIERS AND THE ECONOMICS OF COERCION

Political Frameworks

For our purposes, the very beginnings of serious British commercial interest in Siam in the nineteenth century can be traced to events occurring on that kingdom's frontiers. The growing Residency of Bengal in Eastern India had begun to come into territorial conflict with Burma along their shared border in Arakan: primarily the result of a British foreign policy that focused on the "territorial integrity" of Bengal, Siam was, in turn, eyed as a potentially useful ally on the eastern Burmese flank. Concomitantly, the success of the Penang Colony (founded 1786) necessitated a new look at Siam's southern dependencies, which now stood dangerously close to the largest British naval base between India and China. Siam's borders and border possibilities were not the only factors in a widening strategic equation, however. Penang's small merchant community also began to take an interest in trying to penetrate the enormous China Trade carried out in Bangkok, between the aristocracy and nobility of Siam and fleets of ocean-going junks from China.[10] Much of this Sino/Siamese commerce was, in fact, technically "illicit"—predicated on creative interpretations of "ballast" accompanying official cargoes.[11] Yet the parameters and limitations of Siamese trade for Europeans were obvious to all when the first British diplomatic mission returned from the kingdom empty handed in 1822. Siam was willing to trade with the West, but only with the latter as a minor partner.[12]

Four years later, the Burney Treaty, concluded between England and Siam in 1826, set the precedent of commercial relations between the two countries for the next three decades. Free trade was granted, but only on the provincial surplus not needed to feed Siamese populations, while British merchants were limited to Bangkok, and could be expelled at the discretion of the King. The export of rice was forbidden, and the import of munitions—highly lucrative but problematic—was to be channeled through the Court. Heavy duties were placed on sugar, pepper, and earth oil, while the "farming" of many items of trade was handed to individuals, creating de-facto monopolies. Teak, bullion,

[10] See generally Jennifer Cushman, *Fields from the Sea: Chinese Junk Trade with Siam during the Late 18th and Early 19th Centuries* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993); see also Townsend Harris, *The Complete Journal of Townsend Harris* (New York: Doubleday, 1930) (I), p. 781.

[11] These cargoes were technically considered to be "tribute" from Siam to China, and patronage in the other direction. Merchants and officials who conducted these exchanges, however, often used valuable items like porcelain as "ballast" for the ships, which could be quietly sold for profit once the "official" goods had been off-loaded. See Sarasin Virpahol, *Tribute and Profit: Sino/Siamese Trade, 1652–1853* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983), p. 123.

[12] One of the reasons for this early Siamese attitude was the entrenched interests of Chinese merchants and those of the powerful Bunnag family at the court. Both stood to lose everything by the entrance of a significant new trading presence. See John Crawfurd, *Journal of an Embassy to the Courts of Siam and Cochin-China* (1822) (Oxford: Oxford University Press Historical Reprints, 1967), pp. 170–74.

and salt continued to be banned for export. No mention was made in the treaty of the increasingly sensitive situation developing on Siam's western frontiers, where British merchants—in opposition to London's wishes—had already precipitated several incidents. Though trade slowly grew, feelings of local English frustration were also dangerously on the rise for the next several decades.

The accession of Mongkut to the throne in 1851 pulled this situation back from the brink of impending disaster for Siam. Mongkut, and a faction of the influential Bunnag family that had helped him gain the throne, correctly gauged the increasing aggressiveness of European imperialism in the mid-nineteenth century. Together, they sought to bend Siam accordingly, rather than see the country break into foreign-controlled fragments.[13] Measurement duties on foreign ships were significantly lowered. Rice was freed for export, and opium was admitted as an import, so long as it passed through licensed syndicates.[14] It is conjectured, though this is still a matter of historiographical controversy, that Mongkut also may have fabricated historical stele, which rebutted European claims that slavery and the trade in humans had always been a part of Siamese history.[15] (Mongkut knew that human-trafficking could be used as an excuse for Western intervention on "moral" and "humanitarian" grounds.) Englishmen were still not refused completely free movement within the kingdom, and difficulties remained over the court's insistence that Siamese ships need not pay any duties. Yet an improvement in relations was immediately apparent. The British mercantile trading bloc in Southeast Asia, in concert with allied trading concerns such as chambers of commerce in industrial cities like Manchester, levied pressure on Parliament. The result of these double-pronged assaults of influence was the mission of Sir John Bowring, who arrived in Bangkok four years after Mongkut ascended the throne.

It is difficult to ascertain how much of the resulting Bowring Treaty of 1856 was attributable to British pressure, to Mongkut's openness, or a curious admixture of the two. Certainly Mongkut's prescience during this period must be credited, for in a decade in which both Burma and Vietnam would lose huge

[13] Pasuk Phongpaichit and Chris Baker, *Thailand: Economy and Politics* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 217.

[14] D. E. Malloch, *Siam: Some General Remarks on Its Productions and Particularly on Its Imports and Exports* (Calcutta: J. Thomas, 1852), p. 26.

[15] The stelae in question is the famous Ramkamhaeng Inscription of the thirteenth century, attributed to northern Siam. Some scholars have seen this carved stelae, discovered by King Mongkut (then a monk) in Sukothai in 1833, as a declaration of independence by Sukothai from Khmer domination. Inscriptions on the stone recorded the founding of a new state, replete with new symbols, a ban on slavery, and a marked lessening of officially sanctioned religion. Other scholars, however, have seen this as a clever fake, fabricated by Mongkut to prove that Siam had always been a "free" kingdom (devoid of slavery) which thus had no need of colonization by an outside power. The script on the stone, its vocabulary, as well as the content of the inscription were all problematized to make an argument for negative authenticity. See James Chamberlain, ed., The *RamKhamhaeng Controversy* (Bangkok: Siam Society, 1991); and David Wyatt, *Thailand: A Short History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984), p. 54. Michael Vickery took issue with the thirteenth-century interpretation in an article in the Bangkok Post several years later.

tracts of territory to imperial encroachment, Siam lost nothing. Yet the Bowring Treaty did grant the British such wide *commercial* privileges in the kingdom that it is difficult not to see in Siam a huge breach of economic sovereignty. Extraterritoriality was ceded to all British subjects, as was unlimited freedom of movement. Britain became Siam's most-favored-nation, and all previous measurement duties were abolished. Additionally, previously denied items of international trade (such as salt and fish) were delineated for export for the first time, except in times of scarcity. The Siamese royal trade monopoly on almost all commodities was ended. Not all of Mongkut's court agreed with these provisions of "concede to survive," even if the King's program has often been seen as active agency to modernize an endangered kingdom.[16] As the Phra Khalahom (the Siamese Prime Minister) told the American envoy to the throne at Bangkok: "(The English are) rapacious tyrants who are seizing the whole of Asia. . . . [We signed] not because we like the English, but because we fear them."[17]

Commodities in Motion

The effects of the Bowring Treaty changed the tenor and balance of three centuries of Siamese trade. British commercial penetration into the heart of the Siamese economy followed these concessions relentlessly. Though many elite Thais and Sino-Thais benefited and were actively a part of these new arrangements, much of Siam's import and export economy now swung out of the court's control. Illegally trafficked "commodities" at the fringes of the Siamese polity took on special importance. Teak is a fascinating example of how influential Britain's presence would become, especially in regard to the transit of officially "illegal" objects through Siam's border landscapes. As early as the mid-1850s, Britain was already eyeing "off-limits" Siamese timber stands: "to carry on this trade successfully it will be necessary to penetrate into the forests," one Englishman wrote to Bowring, "and the Siamese have great objections to foreigners entering the Laos country for any purpose."[18] These objections were brushed aside over the next several decades, as licit and illicit British logging proceeded at pace on the northern Siamese frontier. In 1882, when the King of Burma raised court royalties on Burmese teak exports, British loggers looked east to the forests around Chiang Mai. The volume of Thai teak leaving Bangkok port alone rose from 5,600 cubic meters in 1873–1876 to 62,000 cu-

[16] For internal court wranglings on this subject, see Phongpaichit and Baker, *Thailand,* p. 217.

[17] Specific terms of the treaty and the Pra Khalahom's lament can both be found in D. S. Sardesai, *British Trade and Expansion in Southeast Asia,* 1830–1914 (Bombay: Allied Publishers, 1977), p. 90.

[18] Public Records Office, Foreign Office/Confidential Print (hereafter, PRO/FO/CP): Mr. Bell to Sir J. Bowring, 12 Feb. 1856, (#4537i, Appendix 1) [repr. in Kenneth Bourne, et al., eds., *British Documents on Foreign Affairs: Reports and Papers from the Foreign Office Confidential Print,* Vol. 27, Pt. I, Series E, (Washington, D.C.: University Publications of America, 1995).

bic meters between 1895–1899.[19] Britain's officials themselves acknowledged that these were only the recorded statistics; much timber was being felled by private British and Siamese interests, and smuggled out of the kingdom at great profit.[20] Thai officials concurred in their own reports, and mapping out the Anglo/Burmese border in the north and the location and size of remaining teak stands became a project of some urgency.[21] Almost all of this wealth was in British or elite Sino/Siamese hands; there were no other European firms competing. British interests controlled an estimated 90 percent of Siam's up-country teak trade in 1906.[22]

Opium was also in transit in Siam and along its frontiers, reaping huge profits for its handlers as both a legal and black market commodity. By the Burney Treaty of 1826, opium was still considered to be contraband by the monarchy, but by the time of the Bowring Treaty thirty years later, England had insured that the distribution of the drug would now become legal. A revenue farming system was set up from Bangkok, and large quantities of the drug were imported into the kingdom to be farmed out to local populations.[23] Opium found an especially receptive market among Chinese laborers in the kingdom. On Siam's frontiers, use of the drug was commonplace, as it was brought in by Chinese traders and various hill peoples who used it to counteract hunger, fever, cold, and the effects of long mountain journeys.[24] Almost all of this up-country opium economy functioned outside of Bangkok's control, and little revenue fell into Siamese coffers from the borders. Local chiefs built their power bases on control of the drug's movement, and tried to squeeze out their competitors on the Upper Mekong caravan routes.[25] On Siam's other frontiers, vast fortunes

[19] James Ingram, *Economic Change in Thailand since 1850* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1955), p. 96. In 1880, the value of this timber was $193,080; in 1881, $279,989; in 1882, $378,294; and in 1883, $735,366. See "The Trade of Siam in 1883," *Straits Times*, 11 Jan. 1884.

[20] PRO/FO/CP: Mr. C. E. McCarthy to Mr. Palgrave, 29 Mar. 1883 (no. 4874i), Vol. 27.

[21] Nai Banchaphusmasathan, "A Thai Government Survey of the Middle Salween, 1890," in, Constance Wilson, trans., *The Burma-Thailand Frontier over Sixteen Decades: Three Descriptive Documents* (Athens: Ohio University Southeast Asia Studies, No. 70, 1985), p. 32.

[22] PRO/FO/CP: General Report on Siam for the Year 1906, No. 23 (no. 9006i), and General Report on Siam for the Year 1907, No. 16 (no. 9207i), both in Vol. 27. See also Ian Brown, *The Elite and the Economy in Siam 1890–1922* (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 110, passim.

[23] PRO/FO/CP: Mr. Bell to Sir J. Bowring, 12 Feb. 1856 (no. 4537i, Appx. 1), in Vol. 27; for a brief analysis see Carl Trocki, "Drugs, Taxes, and Chinese Capitalism in Southeast Asia," in Timothy Brook and Bob Tadashi Wakabayashi, eds., *Opium Regimes: China, Britain, and Japan, 1839–1952* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), p. 94, and Carl Trocki, *Opium, Empire, and the Global Political Economy: A Study of the Asian Opium Trade, 1750–1950* (London: Routledge, 1999), p. 150.

[24] H. Warrington Smyth, *Five Years in Siam From 1891–1896* (Vol. II, 1898) (Bangkok: White Lotus Reprints, 1994), pp. 194–95; PRO/FO/CP: Mr. J. McCarthy to Mr. Palgrave, 29 Mar. 1883 (no. 4874i), Vol. 27.

[25] Pierre Lefèvre-Pontalis, *Voyages dans le Haut Laos (et sur les frontières de Chine et de Birmanie)* (Vol. 5 of *Mission Pavie Indo-Chine 1879–1895, Géographie et Voyages*, (Paris: Ernest Leroux, 1902), p. 301; see also Daniel McGilvany, *A Half Century among the Siamese and the Lao: An Autobiography* (New York: Fleming Revell, 1912), p. 368.

were made from both licit and illicit opium dealings, especially by revenue-farming syndicates like the Khaw Group.[26] Shortly after the turn of the century, the profits from officially-sold opium were providing the Siamese crown with one-seventh to one-fifth of all of its income, revealing the state's complicated relationship with the narcotic.[27] Controlling frontier geographies where opium ran freely therefore became increasingly important. Nonetheless, smuggling of the drug, especially on Siam's frontiers, remained rampant, since prices were high and Bangkok's interdiction capabilities were still very limited.[28]

Siam's ruling elite both aided and tried to temper these encroachments on Siamese forests and on the health of Siamese subjects. There was revenue to be gained in these transactions, but there was a growing feeling that control over the economy—and potentially, over territory—was being lost. Sensing that the Siamese dependency of Trengganu, by virtue of its resources and strategic position, was one of the principal regions of British commercial interest, Siam asked that all sales of munitions into the state by British merchants be monitored and counter-signed by the Siamese envoy in Singapore. The reason for this request was clear: aside from building an infrastructure of docks and roads in the area, local British interests were also quietly selling muskets into the region. Many of these merchants were fomenting local rebellion, in the hopes that Trengganu would later fall into English hands. On the advice of the Straits Settlements Governor, Sir Cecil Smith, London was advised to refuse the Siamese request as an infringement of British economic rights, a course of action to which the Government eventually acceded.[29] Trengganu soon became a known haven for munitions smuggling, a regional arms mart where firearms were bought and sold in large quantities against Bangkok's wishes.[30] This was not the only frontier where guns flowed freely; they also traveled in unhindered (but technically illegal) fashion along Siam's vague northern borders.[31]

The traffic of human beings as commodities provides us with a last glimpse into the complicated intersection between empires, commodities in motion, and frontiers in nineteenth-century Siam. Slaving has a long history in much of

[26] See Jennifer Cushman, "The Khaw Group: Chinese Business in Early Twentieth-Century Penang," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 17, 1 (1986), pp. 58–79.

[27] Ian Brown, "The End of the Opium Farm in Siam, 1905–07," in, John Butcher and Howard Dick, eds., *The Rise and Fall of Revenue Farming: Business Elites and the Modern State in Southeast Asia* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1993), p. 233.

[28] PRO/FO/CP: General Report on Siam for the Year 1906, No. 23 (no. 9006i), Vol. 27; also Ingram, *Economic Change in Thailand since 1850*, pp. 178–79.

[29] Governor Smith's letter is reproduced in Sardesai, *British Trade and Expansion*, p. 226, a relevant portion reading: "The question of having permits for the export of gunpowder to Tringanu countersigned by the Siamese Consul is seemingly a small one, but it is the first attempt, I believe, on the part of Siam to interfere in the trade between the colony and any of the Malay States on the east coast. In my opinion it should be resisted." Trengganu officially fell into British hands in 1909.

[30] See Eric Tagliacozzo, "Secret Trades of the Straits: Smuggling and State-Formation along a Southeast Asian Frontier, 1870–1910," Ph.D. dissertation, Yale University History Department, 1999, ch. 4.

[31] PRO/FO/CP: Mr. J. McCarthy to Mr. Palgrave, 29 Mar. 1883 (no. 4874i), Vol. 27.

mainland Southeast Asia, particularly in the highland regions. Despite the presence of Europeans and the ostensible "civilizing project" they brought with them, human beings continued to be captured, bought, and sold in upland Siam in the nineteenth century. This traffic was sometimes Lao in origin, and sometimes Siamese, but slaving was a fairly common upland phenomenon in the region until at least 1905.[32] Many upland peoples participated, and still others were bought and marketed across nominal boundaries. We know that when Chiang Mai attacked several towns in upland Shan areas in 1839, slaving on a large scale was part of the net result of conquest.[33] We also know that officially titled elites (such as Cao Ratchaphakhinai in Muang Khunyuam) organized slaving expeditions seeking local women, which aroused the approbation and anger of many village elders.[34] All of these actions blurred the lines between overlapping upland spheres, joining landscapes through the commerce in humans that lowland authorities were increasingly trying to separate. Yet these transactions also show the limited influence that the British had regarding some issues, as opposed to their great impact on the flows of opium, arms, and teak.

The Restless Frontier

Borders in these fluid upland districts of mainland Southeast Asia gradually began to harden by the later decades of the nineteenth century. The year 1885 proved to be a watershed for the larger region as a whole. While British commercial interests on Siam's frontiers pushed forward, Upper Burma was annexed and northern Vietnam was conquered by the French. Everywhere France's influence seemed to be on the rise; in 1889, France formally proposed the existence of Siam as a buffer state to the British, and four years later they demanded Siam's evacuation of all lands east of the Mekong. A crisis developed which only was averted when Royal Navy warships were sent to Bangkok. Part of the problem was that neither European nation really had a firm grasp on the geographies of Siam's frontiers: "*S'étant trouvés arrêtés, au cours de leurs travaux, par la difficulté de déterminer, d'après des données certaines, les limites et la configuration géographique des diverses provinces situées dans cette région.*"[35] A bilateral technical team was assembled to carry out surveying, using available geographical and political landmarks to carry out the division.[36] This, of course, mostly ignored indigenous conceptions of boundaries or frontiers, and China's views that the "territorial integrity" of Siam should be re-

[32] "Mr. Carl Bock's Travel's in Siam" (*Siam Advertiser,* as excerpted in the *Singapore Daily Times,* 10 Dec. 1882).

[33] Constance Wilson, trans., *The Burma-Thailand Frontier,* p. 10.

[34] Banchaphumasathan, "Thai Government Survey (1890)," p. 33.

[35] PRO/FO/CP: 25 Nov. 1893 Anglo/French Protocol on the Upper Mekong (no. 6521, Appendix F[i]), Vol. 26.

[36] "Les Agents Techniques devront noter soigneusement quelles limites géographiques et politiques atteindraient le mieux ce but." PRO/FO/CP: Protocol Signed on 25 Nov. 1893 by the Marquis of Dufferin and M. Develle (no. 6521, Appendix F[i]), Vol. 26.

spected were given only perfunctory consideration.[37] Yet by 1895 London was having second thoughts about the viability of any formalized buffer state along Siam's northern frontier—they saw the combination of French agents, Chinese "disorganization," and Siamese "political weakness" as a recipe for disaster in mainland Southeast Asia.[38]

If imperial visions of the frontier were vague and indeterminate, then collective local perceptions of any hard and fast border were equally imprecise. Thongchai Winichakul has shown how Siamese conceptions of mapping and mapped space changed enormously from the nineteenth into the twentieth centuries. It was only in the late nineteenth century that Siamese maps started to take on boundary lines of "fixidness," whereby territory on one side was owned, and on the other side only coveted.[39] Upland peoples on the frontier often had in common the older worldview of space, if published surveyors' reports—both European and Siamese—are any guide. In 1882, the Norwegian naturalist/explorer Carl Bock had to impress upon Laotians the "power and importance of their (Siamese) sovereign"; many of them had little idea that they were at least nominally under Siamese jurisdiction.[40] Yet the British traveler C. E. McCarthy was greeted with fairly exact (if contradictory) approximations of territory and sovereignty in his own visits to the hill regions a year later. In several instances he was given delineations of the frontier by local peoples which were completely different from Bangkok's versions. McCarthy's recorded conversations on two of these occasions are reproduced at some length in footnote 41; they make for fascinating reading.[41] His observations were also echoed by Siamese

[37] PRO/FO/CP: "Memorandum on Questions of Principal Importance in the American and Chinese Department under Discussion between September 1893 and March 7, 1894" (no. 6636, Annex A), Vol. 26.

[38] PRO/FO/CP: "Siam, France, and China," 13 Aug. 1895 (no. 6521, Appendix F[i]), Vol. 26.

[39] See Thongchai Winichakul, *Siam Mapped*, esp. chs. 3 and 5.

[40] "Carl Bock in Siam," *Singapore Daily Times*, 10 Aug. 1882.

[41] PRO/FO/CP: Mr. J. McCarthy to Mr. Palgrave, 29 Mar. 1883 (no. 4874[i]), Vol. 27: "The next day I again visited Chow Lathanaburi, this time only with Dr. Chuk. He was much pleased, and said 'You have come about the boundary between Chiang Mai and Raehang.' I said, 'No; all I have to do is a survey with the boundary; I have nothing to do except mark on a map what is said to be the boundary.' He fired up, and said, 'The Laos country extended down to what the Siamese call Muang Khampang-pet.' I told him that was easily believed, as there were the ruins of walls exactly like those at Lampoon and Lakon, and which the Siamese told me was the ancient Siamese capital. 'All lies,' he quickly replied. He continued, 'When we were tributary to Burmah our country extended below Luwo, called by the Siamese, Khampang. We turned out the Burmese and became tributary to Siam by an act of our own, but by some way we did not understand, Luwo slipped from our hands, and the Chief was replaced by a Siamese Governor.'

"Raehang Officials: Raehang officials were sent to show where the boundary was in the May Tyn; they accompanied me to a 'hoay' and said that was the boundary. I proceeded on for the head of the valley, and next day met men in a great way of excitement, who declared I had been misinformed by the Siamese; to return, and they would show the boundary. I declared I would do nothing with the boundary, and proceeded on my journey, when I met a brother of the Chief of Chiung Mai with fifty armed followers. He told me the Siamese had misinformed me. I explained I would do nothing with the boundary, as there was not time. He replied that his instructions were to show me the boundary in the May Tyn; would I oblige and accompany him, as he would then be able to

surveyors sent out by King Chulalongkorn, who reported similar disagreements, dissimulations, and obfuscations by local peoples.[42]

Ethnicity seems to have had relatively little to do with where frontiers were imagined to be, or where they were ultimately set.[43] As early as the 1850s, Siamese and Western sources had to be cobbled together to make these approximations, as ethnic groups often spilled across areas that geographically suggested themselves as borders.[44] McCarthy noted that Burmese horse merchants "traveled through Siamese territory with great airs of independence, thoroughly regardless of Siamese officials, who, on their side, think it best not to interfere with these adventurers, who are accustomed to quick reprisals."[45] Three years later, another English traveler named W. M. Archer also took copious notes on the ethnicities of these porous frontiers. He described Burmese, "Tonngons," and Karennis crisscrossing the border regions by foot. Chinese merchants often journeyed by way of Siam's rivers, at least during the appropriate seasons. In the far north, however, he came across huge Chinese mule caravans from Yunnan which were trying to sell opium in the region. The opium they brought was technically illegal in Siam (i.e., sold outside of the revenue farm), yet their very presence may have been of more concern to the court. Some of these men were Muslim Chinese from Yunnan, and many were probably related to Muslim uplanders with whom Bangkok had recently been skirmishing.[46] Yunnanese traders regularly skirted the tax officials of both Siam and her northern vassals, preferring to sell their goods without having to pay any "required" duties.[47]

The attitude of British traders and diplomats toward the end of the century, once so encouraging of such movements, eventually started to harden. As mainstream British trade interests in Siam expanded (especially in rice exports), the continuity of quasi-"illegal" and potentially "de-stabilizing" commodities in motion started to take on a different color. For the Siamese court, too, now seriously set on a course of "modernization" and control of its outer regions, such a state of affairs was unpalatable. Control over shrinking teak re-

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return to Chiung Mai. I did so; his boundary was vastly different, and, as he said, pointing to some old men, 'These men are upwards of 80 years old, and resided here when Raeheng was under a Laos chief; this then was the boundary.'" French travelers reported similar experiences; see Pontalis, *Voyages dans le Haut Laos*, pp. 141–42.

[42] Banchaphumasathan, "Thai Government Survey, 1890," p. 43.

[43] For a good overview, see the Introduction in Gehan Wijeyewardene, ed., *Ethnic Groups across National Boundaries in Mainland Southeast Asia* (Singapore: ISEAS Press, 1990).

[44] "Geographical Notices on Siam," *Singapore Free Press*, 25 Feb. 1858.

[45] PRO/FO/CP: Mr. J. McCarthy to Mr. Palgrave, 29 March 1883 (no. 4874[i]), Vol. 27.

[46] PRO/FO/CP: Mr. Archer to Mr. Satow, 3 Apr. 1886 (no. 5295[i]), Vol. 27; see also Ann Maxwell, *Hill Merchants and Migrants: Ethnicity and Trade Among Yunnanese in Southeast Asia* (New Haven: Yale University Southeast Asia Studies, 1998).

[47] Henri Ph. de Orléans, *Autour du Tonkin* (Paris: Calmann Lévy, 1894), p. 609; Auguste Pavie, *Exposé des Travaux de la Mission* [Vol. 1 of *Mission Pavie Indo-Chine 1879–85: Géographie et Voyages*] (Paris: Ernest Leroux, 1901), p. 227.

serves, non-taxed opium, and potentially destabilizing munitions along the frontiers became vital for keeping the geobody of Siam intact. As a result, attempts were made in the late 1890s and early 1900s to begin hardening these frontiers as never before.[48] Anglo/French rivalry, and eventual detente around the turn of the twentieth century, helped solidify these borders and control some of the movements across them. The Siamese, British, and French achieved this by stationing more and more border guards, and establishing additional trade posts and surveillance stations; new technologies (including modern mapping surveys and overland telegraph lines) were made available to these outposts. There is still a good deal of historiographical disagreement as to how successful these new border arrangements were in limiting older patterns of free-wheeling trade.[49] What is clear, however, is that Siamese attempts at controlling border permeability in terms of quasi-legal people and quasi-legal commodities were far more successful than those of their Burmese counterparts. We will now examine many of these same forces of commerce, commodity-flows, and frontier politics in the territory of Siam's neighbor, the rapidly disappearing kingdom of Burma.

ENGLAND AND BURMA: POLITICS AND THE ECONOMICS OF THE FRONTIER

Early Overtures

British interest in the economic penetration of nineteenth-century Burma followed many of the same lines as Britain's policies toward Siam. Initial and primary interest, as in the Siamese case, was predicated on protecting the Bengal frontier and the sea-routes, and only later on trade concerns. The Burmese coast was known to be a fantastic repository for the types of hardwoods needed in ship construction. London moved quickly to establish a base in the region, and the East India Company founded a settlement on Negrais Island in 1753. From this off-shore depot England hoped to counter the growing French military presence in the Bay of Bengal, as the two European powers began the contest for India. This Company settlement, however, was massacred only a few years later when the new Konbaung Dynasty of Burma learned that the British had smuggled muskets to their rivals, the Mons. Despite this early incident, trade picked up in the following decades, with Burmese saltpeter especially high in British esteem. As in many other parts of Southeast Asia, therefore, English traders managed to destabilize indigenous regimes through weapons smug-

[48] PRO/FO/CP: General Report on Siam for the Year 1907 (no. 9207i), Vol. 27.

[49] See Martin Stuart-Fox, *A History of Laos* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 21; and Craig Reynolds, "Introduction: National Identity and Its Defenders," in C. Reynolds, ed., *National Identity and Its Defenders: Thailand, 1939–1989* (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 1991), pp. 21–22; but see also Andrew Walker, *The Legend of the Golden Boat: Regulation, Trade and Traders in the Borderlands of Laos, Thailand, China, and Burma* (Surrey: Curzon, 1999), p. 43.

gling, while subsequently propping up these same polities through arms-materials purchases.[50]

Yet what allowed Burma a special place in British strategic and economic thinking was the possibility that a large-scale transit trade to China might be organized through the Burmese mountains. This idea had a pedigree reaching back into the late seventeenth century.[51] More than one hundred years later, in 1795, the leader of the first British expedition to Burma, Michael Symes, would describe the existing overland trade to China in glowing terms, especially that of the city of Sagaing, where the Burmese cotton boats left for Yunnan. Each boat carried baskets of 100 "viss" weight apiece on a journey taking thirty to forty days, and in return drugs, raw silk, velvet, tea, and cutlery all found their way back to Burma.[52] The market reports of the first British resident in Burma, Hiram Cox, would supplement these writings with data on the prices, weights, and portage duties of the trade, especially on cotton.[53] By the time of Crawfurd's missions to the courts of the mainland Southeast Asian potentates in 1822, the great traveler was estimating Burma's share of the overland trade at approximately 500,000 pounds sterling, fully half of which came from raw cotton shipments to China.[54]

The brief border war between Burma and British Bengal in 1824–1826, whereby the frontier provinces of Arakan and Tenasserim were ceded to the Raj, heightened the British trading bloc's interest in channeling this overland commerce. Some wanted trade between these new British protectorates and the Court at Ava. Others sought a road to Yunnan to assure a flow of cheap labor, while still others advocated a territorial campaign to connect the nearest part of China with the new British dominions on the coast. Yet by far the most important common agenda was the opening and exploration of new routes, both for their passage to Western China and the economic possibilities along the way. The prizes of these avenues were manifold: amber, rubies, and jade lay athwart the Mogaung Valley on the Assam to Ava trek; teak and other timber between Calcutta and Arakan; and silver and gold through the passes of the Shan States.[55] As had been the case along Siam's frontiers, local British officials paved the way for exploitation. The British resident at the Court of Ava between

[50] For an overall account of the period, see William Koenig, *The Burmese Polity, 1752–1819: Politics, Administration, and Social Organization in the Early Konbaung Period* (Ann Arbor: Michigan Papers on South and Southeast Asia, no. 34, 1990).

[51] See the communication of 1684 reproduced in Alexander Dalrymple, Oriental Repertory [Reprint from Dalrymple's, *Oriental Repertory of 1791–1797 of Portions Relating to Burma*] (Rangoon: Government Printing Press, 1926), p. 6 (I: 102).

[52] See D. G. E. Hall, *Europe and Burma* (London: Oxford University Press, 1945), p. 82. Also see the report itself, in Michael Symes, *An Account of an Embassy to the Kingdom of Ava in the Year 1795* (Edinburgh: Constable and Co., 1827), (II), p. 211.

[53] William Franklin, *Tracts, Political, Geographical, and Commercial, on the Dominions of Ava and Northwest Parts of Hindostan* (London: T. Cadell and Davies, 1811), pp. 52–53.

[54] Crawfurd, *Journal of an Embassy*, (II), p. 194.

[55] Sardesai, *British Trade and Expansion*, p. 105.

1830 and 1837, Henry Burney, and the Commissioner of Tenasserim, E. A. Blundel, sent out several reconnaissance/"spying" parties to gather topographical information.[56] Meanwhile, many British merchants passed into the hills on their own account to see what opportunities were available, and to cut their own deals outside of the vision of the Burmese monarchy. A British doctor conducted secret negotiations with a Red Karen leader, noting the increasing demand for British goods in several upland areas, while Chinese traders along the frontier tried to obtain the silence of curious Hill peoples, fearing their own loss of livelihood and a potential British invasion of Yunnan.[57] Even the Emperor of China himself sent a memorial to the Burmese King, advising the latter to expel the rising tide of Englishmen before they spread like the weeding "pipal" tree, as they had managed to do elsewhere.[58]

Yet dislodging British commercial interests by this time was no easy matter. Rangoon had developed by the 1840s into a large mercantile base for a variety of British traders, who prospered on cotton and teak shipments as well as up-country arms smuggling and illegal speculation in bullion. Within a decade, a series of events pitted these interests against the Burmese Crown and brought relations to crisis point. In 1852, a visiting British commodore touring Rangoon decided that the city was no longer safe for British investment or trade; after a brief fight, Lower Burma was formally annexed as part of the larger Anglo/Indian Empire.[59] The new King of Burma, Mindon, tried conciliation, yet this

[56] For a Burmese nationalist historian's view of this sort of incitement, and severe criticism of British duplicity in these events, see Htin Aung, *The Stricken Peacock: Anglo-Burmese Relations 1752–1948* (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1965), p. 36. For an interesting Siamese parallel, see Andrew Turton, "Ethnography of Embassy: Anthropological Readings of Records of Diplomatic Encounters Between Britain and Tai States in the Early Nineteenth Century," *South East Asia Research,* 5, 2 (1997), p. 175.

[57] See Dr. Richardson's diary, quoted in Dorothy Woodman, *The Making of Burma* (London: Crescent Press, 1962), p. 105.

[58] The letter was encased in a tube, which in turn was held within a yellow bag marked with a dragon. It had four seals, and was translated by the head merchants of Amarapura (Nga Shwe-yeh, Nga Lo-tsam, and Nga Lo-tauk), who lived in the Chinese section of the city. The date of translation, by Royal Burmese decree, was 18 April 1836. It reads in part: "The Royal Elder Brother, Emperor of China, who . . . rules over a multitude of umbrella-wearing chiefs in the Great Eastern Empire, affectionately addresses his Royal Younger Brother . . . who rules over a multitude of umbrella-wearing chiefs . . . Everything that occurs in Elder Brother's Empire shall be made known to Younger Brother with respect to Younger Brother's Empire. It is not proper to allow the English, after they have made war, and Peace has been settled, to remain in the city. They are accustomed to act like the "Pipal" tree. Let not Younger Brother therefore allow the English to remain in his country, and if anything happens Elder Brother will attack, take and give." In W. S. Desai, *History of the British Residency in Burma (1826–1840)* (Rangoon: University of Rangoon, 1939), Appendix B.

[59] The government, however, was not above taking all it could from these arrangements either: the new border between Upper and Lower Burma was extended fifty miles in some places to garner new forests of teak, which the British Navy prized. See A. G. Pointon, *The Bombay-Burmah Trading Corporation* (Southampton: Millbrook Press 1964), p. 12; the full particulars of the conflict can be found in Oliver Pollack, *Empires in Collision: Anglo-Burmese Relations in the Mid-Nineteenth Century* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1979).

only seemed to whet the British trade bloc's appetite for more. No serious exploration of the northern routes to China had been undertaken since 1837, and the British commercial lobby began to apply pressure for further expeditions. Chief among these enthusiasts was a Captain Sprye, who forwarded grandiose plans for a railway route from Rangoon to Esmok on the northern frontier with China. His itinerary had the advantage over the then predominant Bhamo route of being navigable year-round, not just during the dry season.[60] The British textile industry seized on the idea, funding the lobbying of the project and asking that Esmok be opened as an "inland mart."[61] Mindon, however, balked at this concession, citing the China Trade as a royal monopoly, which was farmed out to mostly ethnic-Chinese traders. A British doctor at the court of Upper Burma, Clement Williams, who had managed to gain access to the inner circle around the throne, also reported resistance to the project. This resistance was strongest from Chinese at the court, who painted a "Wild West" portrait of the border to Mindon, replete with violent ethnic chaos.

Opium, Gems, Human Traffic—and the French

Burma's frontier regions were indeed a mosaic of peoples, territorial claims, and commodities in transit at this time. Mindon knew this very well, and he also knew that the Chinese court clique had vested interests in the status quo, which enriched them with every cotton barge heading north, or mile-long mule caravan heading south from China. He was aware that the free-wheeling economic conditions of the frontier made the uplands a potential quagmire for conflict; the large-scale traffic in humans, for example, could be used as an excuse for intervention by the British, and was also sometimes destabilizing in itself.[62] The Burmese monarch himself participated in this trade—he purchased women from the uplands as concubines, sometimes for large sums of silver.[63] Many other slaves (especially females) were sold outside of his jurisdiction or control, partially for local cultural reasons, and partially on commercial rationales such as for profit or to stave off impending bankruptcies.[64] The Karen seem to have been particularly adept at slaving in the hills along the Burma/Siam frontier; British Indian newspaper accounts from 1856 make this very clear.[65] These

[60] Sir Henry Yule gives a fascinating description of Bhamo, "The Old Shan Town," on pp. 145–49 of his *Narrative of the Mission Sent by the Governor-General of India to the Court of Ava in 1855* (London: Smith Elder, 1858).

[61] Arthur Redfield, *Manchester Merchants and Foreign Trade* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1956), p. 88.

[62] British officers in the "Unadministered Areas" of Upper Burma estimated in the 1920s that 30–40 percent of local populations in some places had been procured as slaves. See Gordon Means, "Human Sacrifice and Slavery in the 'Unadministered' Areas of Upper Burma during the Colonial Era," *SOJOURN* 15, 2 (2000), pp. 188–89.

[63] PRO/FO/CP: Diary of the Officiating Political Agent, Bhamo, from the 1st to the 31st January 1876 (no. 2925/115[i]), Vol. 26.

[64] See "Upper Burma," *Blackwood's Magazine* (n.d., excerpted as "Our New Eastern Province," in the *Straits Times*, 22 Apr. 1886, p. 3).

[65] See "The Karenee Plateau, Pegu: A Description," *Friend of India*, 7 Feb. 1856.

notices were confirmed by Siamese travelers to the hills, who also commented on the slaving proclivities of local uplanders.[66]

Other potentially "problematic commodities" were also in constant motion along Burma's outstretched frontiers. Opium was forbidden transit across the Sino/Burmese boundary except by sanction of the two respective regimes, yet it moved in large quantities anyway, outside the vision (and exchequers) of both Amarapura and Peking.[67] Opium was also used as a common protection payment (along with salt) by trading caravans coming in and out of Burma, to forestall attacks by the many interested parties separating the two kingdoms.[68] The drug spilled easily from this corridor into French-controlled lands of the Upper Mekong as well, since the high prices of the opium monopoly in Indochina encouraged rampant smuggling.[69] Teak, too, traveled outside official channels, flowing freely across the Siamese/Burmese boundary, as we saw earlier in this article; the "executions" and "corruptions" practiced by local and Siamese elites in the north seem to have been used as an excuse for Anglo/Burmese merchants to extract as much timber as they could, often on the sly.[70] And gems and precious stones traveled in large quantities as well, many of them never finding their way through the monopoly tendrils of the Burmese monarchy. Spinels, rubies, topaz, sapphires, silver, jade, and serpentine all circulated in this way. Many actors in this arena knew it was in their best interests to market these frontier products away from the collection-channels of the Burmese regime.[71]

Commercial and political events at mid-century were hastened by the growth of a perceived threat from the French. As in Siam, the French landings at Tourane in 1858 and the subsequent treaty of 1862 which ceded Cochin-China to Paris jolted British policy. Doctor Williams, from his privileged position in Amarapura's inner circle, wrote back to London of growing French influence in the Court, citing King Mindon's need of cash as a potential Achilles' heel. Williams was also reporting the existence of a Burmese Government initiative—which, he said, was really a front for a French company—to open a China railway route of France's own to Bhamo.[72] The Garnier-Lagree Expedition

[66] See "The Report of Thao Sitthimongkon, 1845," in Constance Wilson, *The Burma-Thailand Frontier over Sixteen Decades: Three Descriptive Documents* (Athens: Ohio University Southeast Asia Studies, no. 70, 1985), p. 23.

[67] PRO/FO/CP: "Memorandum on Questions of Principal Importance in the American and Chinese Department under Discussion between September 1893 and March 7, 1894" (no. 6636, Annex A), Vol. 26.

[68] "Re-Opening of Bhamo to China Road," *Singapore Daily Times*, 3 Aug. 1881, p. 2. For an analysis, see Ronald Renard, *The Burmese Connection: Illegal Drugs and the Making of the Golden Triangle* (Boulder, Colo.: Lynn Rienner, 1996).

[69] See Eugène Picamon, *Le Laos français* (Paris: Augustin Challamel, 1901), pp. 259–62, 285.

[70] See "Border Question Between Burmah and Siam," *Rangoon Times*, 1 Nov. 1883.

[71] "The Ruby Mines of Burmah," *Times of India* (n.d., excerpted in the *Straits Times*, 8 Mar. 1886, p. 3).

[72] Sardesai, *British Trade and Expansion*, p. 124. Anthony Webster has argued that British business interests pushed events forward faster than any threat from France; see his "Business and Em-

up the Mekong in 1867–1868, searching for an "underbelly" route to China's vast markets, only made matters worse from the British perspective.[73] France now had the right by treaty to navigate all the way to the loosely defined Chinese border, a situation rendered even more "dangerous" by Mindon's recent allowance of French missionaries to work and reside at Bhamo.[74] By 1886, the British Secretary of State Lord Cranbourne would write: "It is of primary importance to allow no other European power to insert itself between British Burmah and China. Our influence in that country ought to be paramount. The country itself is of no great importance, but an easy communication with the multitude who inhabit Western China is an object of national importance. No influence superior to ours must be allowed to gain ground in Burmah."[75]

The conclusion of the 1862 Anglo/Burmese treaty had been a start toward these goals. British traders were given rights of free movement anywhere in Upper Burma, and a tax was collected on all Chinese goods passing through British Rangoon. Yet it was still the overland routes to China, and the firm control of these routes in British hands, that modulated British policy. Commercial and governmental interests, though motivated by different goals, were starting to combine. Solid information on the border regions came at a premium. Dr. Williams, despite the attempts of the Chinese court clique against him, reported on four major routes linking China to the Burmese North: the "Talo Route," which was used by Chinese coming for serpentine; the "Bhamo Route," where silk, silver, copper and opium came in exchange for Burmese cotton; and two other roads (the "Sawaddy" and "Shweli"), which were used by Shan tribesmen.[76] Included in reports such as these was data on topography and demography, as well as highly prized maps.[77] Williams even obtained information that the Bhamo route was navigable by steam all the way to Sinbo, where "forty million [Chinese] people were waiting to be clothed by British goods."[78]

Munitions and Burma's Unstable Frontiers

The 1860s had brought about a devolution of Mindon's domestic position at the same time that the objectives of British trade and government converged. In-

pire: A Reassessment of the British Conquest of Burma in 1885," *The Historical Journal* 43, 4 (2000), pp. 1003–25.

[73] Francis Garnier, *Voyage d'exploration en Indo-chine, effectué pendant les années 1866, 1867, et 1868* (2 vols.) (Paris, 1873); see also Garnier's *Voyage d'exploration en Indo-chine* (Paris: Hachette, 1885). On Lagree, see A. B. de Villemereuil, *Explorations et missions de Doudart de Lagrée* (Paris, 1883); and generally G. Taboulet, "Le voyage d'exploration du Mékong (1866–68): Doudart de Lagrée et Francis Garnier," *Revue française d'histoire d'outre-mer*, 1970.

[74] On the missionary question, see Jorg Schendel, "Christian Missionaries in Upper Burma, 1853–85," *South East Asian Research* 7, 1 (1999), pp. 61–92.

[75] Sardesai, *British Trade and Expansion*, p. 132.

[76] See Clement Williams, *Through Burma to Western China* (London: W. Blackmore, 1868), pp. 39–43. Also see William Milburn's fascinating product lists and descriptions in his *Oriental Commerce* (London: Black, Parry, and Co., 1813), (II), pp. 278–94.

[77] See Clement Williams' topographical information toward eventual road and rail routes, as well as the map at the beginning of his book, *Through Burma to Western China*, pp. 40–43.

[78] Ibid., p. 43.

ternal rebellions in 1866–1867 by the Shan, the Crown Prince regiments, and even by two of Mindon's own sons, pushed the monarch to bargain for British help. The King bought 2,000 new Enfield rifles, but had to work out a new treaty to maintain his sovereignty in return. The firearms of many of his enemies had seeped into Burma by way of the kingdom's frontiers, probably via Chinese and European traders. No royal monopolies were allowed now except the traditional ones over rubies, earth oil, and timber, and extraterritoriality was ceded to all British citizens. A formal British resident was installed at Bhamo in the north, and duties were increased to 5 percent on all of Burma's borders.[79] Furthermore, a ship of the Irrawaddy Flotilla Company was given free passage up the river to Bhamo once per week, where it would trade and then return to British Burma loaded down with riches. There was perhaps no better symbol of where and how fast this trading "relationship" had gone than this ship's weekly passage, sailing with efficiency downriver to Rangoon.

King Mindon needed British help to maintain his paramount position on the Burmese throne, but he was also careful to try to use to his own advantage the division his agents reported between British government and trading interests. By the 1870s, however, this division was fast disappearing and Mindon's attempts at ensuring the survival of Burmese independence were becoming more difficult. The Rangoon Chamber of Commerce began funding explorers to delve deep into the northern extremities of Burma, searching out the fastest and most secure routes to the markets of China. Englishmen were also sent to thirty-nine different Shan chiefs with gifts of guns and ammunition to help conclude "understandings" that British commerce could pass their way. When Mindon sent an embassy to Europe in order to complain about the distribution of firearms as a violation of sovereignty, and also to press for face to face diplomatic recognition, the envoys were rebuffed.

This did indeed push Mindon further toward France. His envoys left London only to call at Paris later that year. In 1872 a Franco-Burmese commercial treaty was signed, which British intelligence indicated gave the French concessions over the Mogok ruby mines (a previous royal monopoly) in exchange for unspecified quantities of firearms. It is difficult to determine whether Mindon's objectives here focused more on the utilitarian acquisition of guns, or on a diplomatic counter-wedge against British influence; from the British point of view, he seemed to be getting both. At the same time, French activity was also picking up elsewhere in Southeast Asia. The French adventurer Dupuis had ascended the Red River and from there was smuggling guns into Yunnan; Garnier was also pushing toward Hanoi in 1873, briefly taking the city a year later. Though France had stated that she had no interests in Burma, a secret offer was extended to the court to train and arm the Burmese army against inevitable British en-

[79] Sardesai, *British Trade and Expansion*, p. 136; on the earth oil monopoly specifically, see Marilyn Longmuir, "Yenangyaung and Its Twinza: The Burmese Indigenous 'Earth-Oil' Industry Re-Examined," *Journal of Burma Studies* 5 (2000), 17–48.

croachment. Two French officers were also sent to the Shan States to explore new routes to China, though both died of disease while on the journey.[80] Possibilities for trade across the frontier had definitely risen at this point, as the Muslim Panthay Rebellion in Yunnan had been crushed by the Ch'ing in 1873.

This freewheeling commerce in firearms, undertaken by both British and French traders in the "Golden Triangle," helped fuel many of these "rebellions," "intrigues," and a general trend toward complicated politics. Even at mid-century, British observers reported that almost every Karen house possessed muskets, which were often sold "at a large profit to [even] wilder tribes."[81] While both the Burmese and Siamese courts purchased firearms from Westerners, the sale of such items to border peoples only loosely controlled by these regimes was seen as a serious breach of sovereignty. British agents distributed double-barreled breech-loading rifles and hundreds of cartridges to Chinese who performed services for them along the frontier; Frenchmen, as we have seen, frequently did the same.[82] Chinese traders tried to smuggle munitions into Burma for profit, but only rarely were they caught and brought to cities like Moulmein for trial.[83] By the 1870s, Kachins, Shan, and even lowland-dwelling Burmese were starting to acquire guns very easily. These items crossed frontiers as easily as water and air, perhaps more so because they were in such constant demand.[84]

Border End-Game: Ethnicity and Detente

Yet even as these commodities trickled across "boundaries," it became apparent that almost no one knew where the exact demarcation of Burma's northern and eastern frontiers really lay. British subjects said as much in an 1856 newspaper report: "There remains one territory which has been rarely visited and never (fully) described. We mean the great table land which stretches from the Chinese frontier to the parallel of Shwaygeen, and is held by the Shan tribes and the independent Red Karen."[85] By 1876, Britain thought that the boundary between Burma and China might be at the river Nanp'eng, near Manwye.[86] A diplomatic missive from China to the British from that same year suggests that the Chinese court was also unsure.[87] This is significant because as transecting

[80] On Dupuis, see J. Dupuis, *Les origines de la question du Tongkin* (Paris, 1880); and J. Dupuis, *Le Tong-kin et l'intervention française* (Paris, 1898). A summary of the available routes by this date exists in J. Coryton, "Trade Routes between British Burmah and Western China," *Journal of the Royal Geographical Society* 45 (1875), pp. 229–49.

[81] See "The Karenee Plateau, Pegu: A Description," *Friend of India*, 7 Feb. 1856.

[82] PRO/FO/CP: Translated Petition of Lee Chen-Quo, 26 Feb. 1876 (no. 2925/115[i]), and "Memorandum of Crawford Cooke," 29 Feb. 1876 (no. 2925/115[i]), both in Vol. 26.

[83] PRO/FO/CP: Diary of the Political Agent, Bhamo, from the 1st to the 29th February, 1876 (no. 2925/115[i]), in Vol. 26.

[84] Ibid; PRO/FO/CP: Diary of the Political Agent, Bhamo, from the 1st to the 31st March, 1876 (no. 2925/140[i]), in Vol. 26.

[85] See "The Karenee Plateau, Pegu: A Description," *Friend of India*, 7 Feb. 1856.

[86] PRO/FO/CP: Sir T. Wade to the Prince of Kung, 29 Feb. 1876 (no. 2925/104[i]), Vol. 26.

[87] PRO/FO/CP: Prince of Kung to Sir T. Wade, 3 Mar. 1876 (no. 2925/104[i]), Vol. 26.

routes and thoroughfares—trade arteries, in effect—became better and better known, the exact coordinates of a "frontier" was not becoming common knowledge at anywhere near the same rate. Peking still seemed to reckon according to a more abstract, tributary frontier. In 1886 Bhamo was still being posited as a Chinese satellite, despite a large and growing British presence in the town.[88]

In the face of expanded French activity in the area, Britain pushed to extend her sway over Upper Burma's borders. One such region, the Karen State, was deemed increasingly important because of its vast reserves of timber and tin and also because it lay athwart a possible overland route to China. British survey parties in the 1860s came across two distinct groups in the Karen State, both of whom had been at least nominal vassals of the Burmese Court for years: the Eastern Karen, where Mindon had recently stationed troops in anticipation of British arrival; and the Western Karen, where he was trying to do the same. These later Karennis now professed a tenuous independence, and such a stance agreed well with British designs, especially in terms of China-route possibilities. Mindon was told that Western Karenni autonomy must be respected, though it was clear that all of the Englishmen involved knew that pragmatics—and not any ideologies of freedom—were behind this policy.[89] The Western Karenni themselves tried to use the situation to balance all three outside forces against each other: Burma, the British, and the Eastern Karenni, many of whom were their long-time enemies.

The Karenni question shows how ethnicity complicated both frontier formation and the movement of goods. Traditionally, both the Burmese and Chinese polities received tribute from highlanders, a practice that extended as far into the nineteenth century as both courts were able to enforce it.[90] Yet the frontier regions were also seen as lawless and dangerous by lowland polities, as largely bereft of civilization and often more trouble then they were worth.[91] The various hill peoples of these areas used these prejudices as a wedge to maintain their independence from lowland civilizations, and also made a mockery of them in the conduct of their daily lives. For example, many Karen were prolific agricultural cultivators, while they also engaged in regular and highly organized long-distance trading.[92] Yunnanese peoples sometimes learned Burmese, which they could speak, read, and occasionally write, because it was advantageous to have these skills on their long commercial journeys to the south.[93] In-

[88] See "China's Claim to Bhamo, From a Chinese Point of View," *Shen Pao,* 24 Jan. 1886 (excerpted in the *Straits Times,* 6 Mar. 1886, p. 3.).

[89] Saimong Mangrai, *The Shan States and the British Annexation* (Ithaca: Cornell University Data Paper No. 57, 1977), p. 175.

[90] PRO/FO/CP: Diary of the Officiating Political Agent, Bhamo, from the 1st to the 31st January, 1876 (no. 2925/115[i]), Vol. 26.

[91] See PRO/FO/CP: "Translation of a Chinese Memorial," 9 Dec. 1875 (no. 2925/27[i]), in Vol. 26.

[92] "The Karenee Plateau, Pegu: A Description," *Friend of India,* 7 Feb. 1856. This does not mean that upland peoples did not engage in robbery and "opportunistic" commerce when they could; for such notices on the Shan, for example, see Pontalis, *Voyages dans le Haut Laos,* pp. 132–33.

[93] "Trade Route from Moulmein to China," *Moulmein Advertiser,* 19 Jan. 1872.

deed, Edmund Leach has shown how "ethnic" differences on the frontier were often a matter of choice and context, with Shan essentially "becoming" Kachin when it suited their needs, and vice-versa.[94] By the 1880s, British observers in the hills were reporting that "frontier culture" was actually extremely hybridic: Burmese and Yunnanese now regarded many of the other's products as their own cultural necessities, from silk and gold heading south to cotton and jade transiting north.[95]

Yet the 1880s also saw France re-enter British calculations on a much larger scale than ever before. In 1885 a new Franco-Burmese commercial treaty was signed, in which France recognized Burma's full rights as a sovereign power in return for a formal French consulate in Mandalay. These were the stated terms of the treaty, but rumor had it that an Indochinese Customs Union was under discussion, which would subsume most of mainland Southeast Asia under French commercial control. Tolls were said to be going up along the Upper Irrawaddy, all under French control; a railway was to be built between Tonkin and Mandalay; and joint-ventures were in process regarding rubies and the collection of earth-oil.[96] The British Government thought it had to act quickly, and the Rangoon Chamber of Commerce and others made sure that it did. Reports of enormous increases in British teak exports from Upper Burma, and a concomitant rise in teak prices in the 1880s, were mailed to London to show how much British industry had come to depend on these supplies to be competitive in world markets. At the same time, technical assessments about the *loss* of Burma to the French were also impressed upon the home government, complete with detailed scenarios of how British trade would suffer from lost economic supply sources in Burma. Yet it was the Depression of the 1880s and the worldwide scramble for "unclaimed" territory that provided the most convincing logic of all to London, especially when metropolitan newspapers began carrying editorials advocating expansion as a means of escaping national recession. The influential London Chamber of Commerce wrote in one paper at the end of 1885 that nothing would jump-start the British Empire's trade better than the wholesale annexation of Burma.[97] By this time, that outcome was already a foregone conclusion: after two desultory weeks of war, the Burmese Court in the north fell to advancing British armies.

CONCLUSION

The end of Burma as a sovereign kingdom in 1885 was seen in two ways by most Englishmen in Southeast Asia. On the one hand, the rich lands of the

[94] Edmund Leach, *Political Systems of Highland Burma* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1954). Leach's fluid ethnic and organizational categories have become classic models of the ethnography of identity.

[95] "Upper Burma," *Blackwood's Magazine* (n.d., excerpted in "Our New Eastern Province" in the *Straits Times*, 22 Apr. 1886, p. 3).

[96] See Sardesai, *British Trade and Expansion*, pp. 192–201.

[97] *The Times* (London), 4 Dec. 1885, p. 2.

Burmese frontier were judged to be finally free from the "mismanagement," "neglect," and "graft" exercised for centuries by the Burmese court; this was a situation of great economic potential.[98] On the other, the ascension of British primacy all along Burma's frontiers was also seen as a moral victory, as upland peoples once under the "yoke" of China or Burma were now free and "absolutely independent."[99] This charitable optimism was short-lived in British eyes, and in British hearts. By 1892 discussions were ongoing with Peking about where absolute borders would be set, with little regard for the fleeting independence of the frontier peoples. For the Chinese boundary, it was decided by the British that "it will be for the advantage of both countries and of their mutual commerce that British jurisdiction should be established over the whole of the Irrawaddy watershed. This would give a good and distinct natural frontier, and would enable them [the British] to protect efficiently the trade routes from Yunnan."[100] The declaration solemnized a border in an area where an international boundary had existed in a de-facto manner since the late sixteenth century, bisected by numerous river routes. On the Siamese frontier, a similar logic of convenience was used, which set the frontier in an arc to give British and French interests a healthy distance from one another. The various peoples of Burma, Siam, and the uplands were consulted in only a limited fashion about these designs, and an agreement was signed two years later. Rampant "smuggling" and untaxed trade continued across the new borders for years, however.[101] These boundaries (with minor variations) are still with us today, a full century after these patterns of power, commerce, and dominion were decided in this arena.

The changing trajectories of European imperial projects toward land-grabbing in the latter half of the nineteenth century were preconditioned by important changes in the global political economy. While the rise of competing industrial states presented a challenge to the British hold on the nineteenth-century commercial world, existing empires in Asia began to close their doors to British trade opportunities, such as French Indochina and the Dutch East Indies. Tariff barriers went up against English merchants at the same time as breakthroughs in technology widened the field for European competition: the advent of steam over sail, the opening of Suez, and the rise of the telegraph all pushed Asia closer to Europe than ever before. Britain attempted to consolidate an empire in Asia in response, with her mercantile subjects in the region especially vigilant for reliable outlets of trade. As the voice of the British trade bloc in Asia grew stronger and competition increased, those parts of Southeast Asia

[98] "Upper Burma," *Blackwood's Magazine* (n.d., excerpted as "Our New Eastern Province" in the *Straits Times*, 22 Apr. 1886, p. 3).

[99] A. R. Colquhoun, *Among the Shans* (n.d., excerpted in the *Straits Times*, 19 Jan. 1884, p. 3).

[100] PRO/FO/CP: "Memorandum on the Questions of Chief Importance in the American and Chinese Department," Feb. 1892 (no. 6241), Vol. 26.

[101] PRO/FO/CP: "Convention between Great Britain and China Respecting Burmah and Thibet, signed at London, March 1, 1894" (no. 6521, Appendix C), in Vol. 26.

not already under direct imperial control became targeted for expansion, either through economics or at the point of a gun.

Much of the crucial action of Burma and Siam's incorporation into the British fold took place on each of these kingdom's frontiers. While bulk rice shipments from the Irrawaddy and Chao Phraya basins formed a large part of official export statistics, it was the products of the northern hill regions that truly attracted Britain's interest. Many of these items passed in and out of "legal" and "illegal" rubrics, with their passage linking a wide variety of actors.[102] The frontier areas, with their complicated checker-board patterns of ethnicity and geography, saw new lines of trade develop over the course of the nineteenth century, as well as the continuation of much older ones. Opium, munitions, and people were exchanged as they had been in the past, and Britain's agents in the upcountry regions both aided (and later) worked against these commodity flows. The pattern of British complicity and control in this arena, which helped shape undulating frontiers and prop up some ethnic groups against others (the Karen vs. lowland Burmans, for example) is a fascinating one. This rhythm of local and international histories in collision, often linked by the passage of ambiguously defined goods, certainly seems to agree with descriptions of border dynamics in several other parts of the world. We can find analogues in this respect along the U.S./Mexican frontier, in the Early Modern Caribbean, and at the riverine boundary separating contemporary India and Bangladesh.[103] Several other studies along other global frontiers confirm the patterns in these findings.[104]

This article has sketched events, trends, and flows writ large; the locus here is the activity of an intrusive force—English commercial and political power—over the course of an imperial century. In studying these patterns, we should take to heart Alan Smart's admonition that "we might make faster progress toward better theory by devoting at least as much attention to the state side of the equation as the illegal practices."[105] This is sound advice; most states, after all,

[102] For similarities in the passage of such products through different "lifecycles of legality," see Lee Cassanelli, "Qat: Changes in the Production and Consumption of a Quasilegal Commodity in Northeast Africa," in Arjun Appadurai, ed., *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), pp. 236–57; and Ruth Phillips and Christopher Steiner, eds., *Unpacking Culture: Art and Commodity in Colonial and Postcolonial Worlds* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).

[103] R. R. Alvarez, "The Mexican-U.S. Border: The Making of an Anthropology of Borderlands," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 24 (n.d.), pp. 447–70; Lance Grahn, *The Political Economy of Smuggling: Regional Informal Economies in Early Bourbon New Granada* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1997); Willem van Schendel, "Easy Come, Easy Go: Smugglers on the Ganges," *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 23, 2 (1993), pp. 189–213.

[104] See J. C. O. Anene, *The International Boundaries of Nigeria, 1885–1960* (London: Longman, 1970); A. Lamb, *The Sino-Indian Border in Ladakh* (Canberra: Australia National University Press, 1973); and J. C. Wilkinson, "The Oman Question: The Background to the Political Geography of Southeast Arabia," *Geographical Journal* 137 (1971), 361–71.

[105] Alan Smart, "Predatory Rule and Illegal Economic Practices," in Josiah Heyman, ed., *States and Illegal Practices* (Oxford and New York: Berg Publishers, 1999), p. 100.

were only starting to be able to manage these flows and frontiers in any meaningful way by the late nineteenth century. Therefore, bringing the state back into these analyses, even colonial states such as Britain (which had diverse and complicated relationships with local indigenous powers), can only be helpful. Studying an arena in this way complements the larger insights we can gain from fields such as critical legal studies, which has shown us how different actors bend and manipulate concepts of legality and illegality in complex ways.[106] Highlighting the roles of states also allows us to see these dynamics as multipolar and regional in scope.[107] The movements of quasi-legal commodities, undulating frontiers, and shifting politics have shaped this region for centuries, yet it was over the "long nineteenth century" that many of these patterns saw their fullest expression.

[106] See Tom Campbell, "Legal Studies," in Robert Goodin and Philip Pettit, eds., *A Companion to Contemporary Political Philosophy* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1993), pp. 183–211.

[107] For such an approach historically, see David Wyatt, "Southeast Asia 'Inside Out,' 1300–1800: A Perspective from the Interior," *MAS* 31, 3 (1997), pp. 689–710; for the more contemporary period, see Grant Evans and Christopher Hutton, eds., *Where China Meets Southeast Asia: Social and Cultural Change in the Border Region* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000).