

Review Essay

Travelers and Sojourners In The Southeast Asian Highlands: A Review

Talbott Huey

Michigan State University, MI

In the post-imperial twentieth century, and certainly since the publication of Edward Said's *Orientalism* in 1978, at least, Western writers on Asia have been self-consciously concerned not to blindly disparage or condescend to Asian peoples in historical and cultural observations. However, earlier works, some unabashedly Eurocentric, still may have much to teach us about that area. This paper reviews some interesting travel literature of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in this context.

Two hundred years ago, political and economic systems in East and Southeast Asia were beginning to experience escalated challenges from the aggressive trading and political strategies of the European powers. Persistent urgings to trade had characterized European policies for three centuries; now actual colonial seizures began to seem desirable to the imperial powers. Impacts were varied. In Vietnam a civil war was nearing its end, and the victorious side was advised by a French missionary bishop. In India, the British Raj was looking covetously at Burma. Only in one part of the area, the Philippines, was a European flag flying over the capital. But the rest of the nineteenth century would see progressive imperial domination of Southeast Asia by European (and later, American) empires.

Perhaps ironically, a similar political scenario can be seen in the relations between the lowland "rice-paddy" states of the area and their hinterlands in the extensive highland areas of both mainland and island Southeast Asia. In Vietnam, for example, civilized lowland regimes up until this time had never seriously attempted to colonize the highlands, but the Nguyen dynasty which came to power in 1802 adopted a policy of "pacification," which involved "a strong military presence in strategic locations with the political incorporation of local chiefs in the Vietnamese administration, with establishing trade

monopolies and with tax collection.”¹ In succeeding decades it would be the French who attempted similar methods of domination and resource extraction, often adding the elements of missionary proselytizing and land seizure. Throughout the colonial period, however, the political and economic ecology of the highlands enabled a certain autonomy to continue.

Among the Europeans who in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries would come to the Southeast Asian highlands were those who can be characterized as travelers or sojourners, as opposed to colonists or missionaries or governors: temporary residents, passers through, with a myriad goals and roles, sometimes with considerable impact on the local scene, sometimes not. Many of these adventurous people wrote, sometimes exhaustively, of their travels and experiences. Their encounters with Asia were a special, heightened experience with elements of adventure, hardship, the exotic, personal opportunity, and fascination with the Asian Other. What they wrote can still have meaning for us today.

And today we have a fairly well defined and perhaps newly respected genre of travel writing, often defined, rightly, as literature, but certainly not as fiction. Travel writings stand out as useful but complex and sometimes confused/confusing sources of information about the real life of the distant hills of Southeast Asia. As Kerr and Kuenn note in speaking of Western travel in China at this time, the high period of imperialism was a high period of “a cultural self-confidence that characterizes most of the travelers..., even when it is accompanied with disclaimers of expertise....”² Images of Asia are constructed according to the needs of the Western observer as well as the observed phenomena. Lands and customs are described, with the emphasis on what seems distinctive and different, while the superiority of the homeland is an often explicit undercurrent. While the exotic is sought and valued, sometimes efforts are made to turn it into something trite and familiar for the home readership. In his

¹ Oscar Salemink. *The ethnography of Vietnam's Central Highlanders: a historical contextualization*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2003, 36.

² Douglas Kerr; Julia Kuenn. *A century of travel in China: critical essays on travel writing from the 1840s to the 1940s*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2007, 2.

essay in the Kerr and Kuenn book, Q.S. Tong points out that “In the context of historical imperialism, especially in its more adventurist early period, ‘travel’ was not just a movement from one place to another, but a required action for discovery, conquest, and acquisition. Imperialism is by definition ‘traveling’....”³

The travelers and sojourners discussed in this paper—only a few of many—were indeed participants in the “great adventure” of European and American imperialism. They functioned within a wide range of roles and goals, with most taking on more than one role and performing as amateurs, thus forming a coherent category distinct from the professionals and permanent settlers among whom they traveled. Victor R. Savage in describing “Western impressions” gives a 47-page list of European sojourners, noting a wide range of occupations.⁴

So, excluding the colonial administrators, planters, missionaries, and other permanent settlers, the following roles or occupations can be identified:

- Explorers, mapmakers, and surveyors. There were few travelers whose missions were entirely geographical, but almost everyone traveling in the highlands was aware of the relatively trackless nature of the area, and of the opportunity to identify territories where an imperial flag could be raised.
- Adventurers and freebooters. Some foreigners saw Southeast Asia as a fertile field for personal aggrandizement, which might take bizarre forms. For example, a Belgian adventurer named Mayréna founded a “Sédang Kingdom” in the 1880s while nominally a representative of France. But power in this isolated hill area was exclusive to himself—now acclaimed as “Marie I, Roi des Sédang.”

³ Q.S. Tong, “Traveling imperialism: Lord Elgin’s missions to China and the limits of Victorian liberalism,” in *A century of travels in China*. 39.

⁴ *Western impressions of nature and landscape in Southeast Asia*. Singapore: Singapore University Press and National University of Singapore, 1984. Appendix, 337-384.

- Military men. Apart from settled colonial units, usually officered by Europeans, many individual soldiers served as explorers, amateur ethnographers, etc., and acquisition of territory was never far from their minds. The French Navy was perhaps the most enthusiastic imperial advocate in that country.
- Scientists and medical men. European medicine and public health were brought and practiced by some sojourners. Others investigated natural phenomena, flora, and fauna.
- Hunters. This category can include “pure” hunters, aiming only for slaughter or sport, and those of a more scientific bent who preserved hides and feathers for museums or private collections, and perhaps those who hunted with cameras or sketchbooks. There was of course no sense in colonial times that animal resources were limited or, indeed, that they were valuable as living beings.
- Artists and writers. Some of the most interesting and well-written travel accounts are, not surprisingly, those of literary professionals, who could be expected to be sensitive observers. While many produced factual accounts of their travels, others turned to fiction—W. Somerset Maugham, for example.⁵ Visual artists were fascinated by the light, the exotic scenes, etc.
- Spouses/women. It was an exceptional challenge for European women to either settle or travel in the area.
- Ethnographers and linguists. Obviously the exotic customs and speech of highlanders attracted attention for both

⁵ Maugham wrote *The gentleman in the parlour: a record of a journey from Rangoon to Haiphong* (Garden City: Doubleday, Doran, 1930) as a travelogue, in addition to many stories about the area. See also Robin W. Winks and James R. Rush, eds. *Asia in Western fiction*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990.

scholarly and practical purposes. This might involve amateur attempts at history or archeology.

- Mere sightseers and dilettantes.
- “Resisters.”⁶ Richard Phillips notes some examples of those disaffected with the ruthless course of empire in other parts of the world, but it is hard to find any in the literature concerning the highlands. One famous dissenter was George Orwell, whose *Burmese days*⁷ pilloried colonial administration in Burma.

The highlands of Southeast Asia, particularly of the mainland, represent the farthest and most tentative penetration of European, and later, American influence.

To continue Saleminck’s point noted above in reference to Vietnam, the Nguyen court’s policy of pacification involved establishing some military presence and certain tributary relations with at least one large *Montagnard* population, but by the time the French protectorate over “Annam” and “Tonkin” was established in 1883, “the Vietnamese administrative system had already crumbled and collapsed in many areas, first of all in those Highland areas where they had only a tenuous hold,”⁸ but trade and exchanges continued. The French travelers of the time recorded the attempt of the French empire to succeed where Vietnam had partially failed. Most of the travelers and sojourners discussed below visited “French Indochina,” but similar events involving similar people can be seen in areas further west where the British were intent on penetrating northern Burma.

To put these travelers, their roles, and assess their impacts in historical context, the accounts below follow in chronological order.

⁶ Richard Phillips, *Mapping men and empire: a geography of adventure*. London & New York: Routledge, 1997. 113.

⁷ New York: Harper & Brothers, 1934.

⁸ Saleminck. *The ethnography of Vietnam’s Central Highlanders*, 2003, 36-37.

The 1820s--Adventure and progress in the Philippine hills

Paul Proust de la Gironière. *Vingt années aux Philippines: souvenirs de Jala-Jala.*⁹

Anyone who ventured boldly into the Southeast Asian highlands in the nineteenth century has to be called an adventurer, but some of these intrepid travelers seem to deserve the title more than others. One of these, establishing himself in the hills far from mainland Southeast Asia almost two hundred years ago, was Paul Proust de la Gironière, a Frenchman. The introduction to a recent edition of Gironière's story notes that it "probably was the best seller among books about the Philippines in the 19th century." The English edition, *Twenty years in the Philippines*,¹⁰ indicates that Gironière was not a tourist or a man with any short-term mission, but a sojourner, one who stayed for a number of years and was occupied in interesting ways, but who left the area and retired to France in the end. As it happens, his twenty years in Luzon were not only interesting but sometimes hair-raising, with some elements of ethnography and economic development also to be examined.

In the year 1820, Spanish colonial rule over the core of what is now the Republic of the Philippines (i.e., mostly parts of Luzon) had been in place for at least 250 years. The international context was a rivalry for empire among the European powers. Manila had been captured by the British in 1762 and held briefly, and Spain had to contend constantly with Portuguese and Dutch pressure, as well as with the Muslim sultanates in the southern islands. Aside from the all-important missionary effort, the chief Spanish objective was to obtain the fabled riches of the East. The focus of efforts at trade, governance, religious control, and general exploitation in the name of the "civilizing mission" was the walled city of Manila. Few areas

⁹ Paris: Comptoir des Imprimeurs-Unis, 1853. In 1855 Gironière put out an expanded version titled *Aventures d'un gentilhomme Breton aux Philippines*. Paris: Au Comptoir des Imprimeurs-Unis, Lacroix-Comon, 1855.

¹⁰ Originally New York: Harper & Bros., 1854; current edition, Manila: Filipiniana Book Guild, 1962. Introduction by Benito Legarda y Fernandez.

outside the city were under anything but nominal control, and many jungle and highland dwellers had never seen a white man.¹¹

In the midst of this rather haphazard and confusing amalgam of colonial authority and native autonomy, Gironiere, a young French ship's doctor seeking foreign adventure, arrived at the port of Cavite in 1820. He was immediately involved in energetic and sometimes dangerous hunting expeditions, and, after some wild experiences in the Manila revolt of the same year, saw his ship disappear without him, leaving him with "13 dollars" [sic] and the clothes he stood in. He determined to practice medicine in Manila, made early cures and friends, took a Spanish wife, and soon moved to establish an estate in the mountains of Jala-Jala, a peninsula more than a day's travel from Manila. It was here that he lived for twenty years, establishing himself with great energy as a local lord, successful agricultural entrepreneur, explorer, and seeker of lively experiences. As he put it, "...The wish for unlimited liberty caused me to abandon [the] advantages [of conventional medical practice] for a life of peril and anxiety."¹² His first-person account reveals through his thoroughly European attitudes much of the life around him. His basic view: "My wife and I were the only white and civilized persons in the midst of a bronzed and almost savage population, and yet I felt no apprehension."¹³ Far from apprehension, he was supremely self-confident, and indeed habitually cheerful, assuming from the first a role composed of bravery, dominance, and paternalism which sustained him for two decades.

He could not have survived and flourished in his mountain estate without constantly engaging with the local people, of course. Three terms constantly recur in his accounts: "Indians"—any indigenous person or group; "vassals"—those who served him on the estate; and "banditti"—local marauders, all of whom seemed

¹¹ While Spanish influence was stagnant for centuries, the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries saw considerable popular unrest and some attempts at reform and economic development. See Norman G. Owen, ed. *The emergence of modern Southeast Asia: a new history*. (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2005, 148 ff.

¹² *Twenty years*, 26.

¹³ *Twenty years*, 46.

eventually to either reform or bow to his authority. His career in Jala-Jala and his impact on the local community formed an interesting and apparently effective amalgam of feudalism, adventure, and modernization. He was certainly lord of his manor and was followed sometime slavishly by minions impressed with his bravery and commanding attitude, but he was also an eager amateur ethnographer and a serious agriculturalist familiar with relatively developed current European practices. In one summary of his early life he wrote:

We [he and his wife] were more than a year at Jala-Jala without seeing a European. One would have thought that we had withdrawn ourselves entirely from the civilized world, and that we were going to live forever with the Indians. Our mountains had so bad a reputation that nobody dared expose themselves to the thousand dangers they feared to encounter in the locality. We were therefore alone, yet still very happy. It was, perhaps, the most pleasant time I spent in my life. I was living with a beloved and loving wife; the good work I had undertaken was performed under my eyes; the comfort and happiness, the natural results of such good work, spread themselves among my vassals, who daily became more and more devoted to me.¹⁴

Of Gironière's attempts at producing prosperity—making Jala-Jala a model farm—his editor says,

Gironière appears to have been one of the pioneers in scientific agriculture in this country. He developed a flourishing estate and made it a showplace....[He was given] a prize of one thousand pesos for being the first man in the country to present a coffee plantation of more than 60,000 shrubs in the second year of harvest, [and later coffee became] the colony's number four export. Gironière also claims to have introduced improvements in the processing of indigo...and improvements in the growing of sugar cane....Finally, Gironière appears to have developed a breed of pig...which retain fame to this day as Jalajala pigs.¹⁵

¹⁴ *Twenty years*, 63.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, xix.

The unfortunate part, Mr. Legarda continues, is that after Gironière left Luzon for other travels and eventual retirement in France, these progressive accomplishments declined to the point that by 1962 only ruins were left of his model establishment.

It is perhaps sufficient...that the work of a man who had a genuine affection for this country, who in his own way propagated knowledge about it, and who above all contributed considerably to its economic rise and that of its people...should once again be made available to this generation of Filipinos.¹⁶

And, one must add, to others as well. There are interesting paradoxes in this story. Gironière was a pioneer, a man of the nineteenth century who introduced modern agriculture into a traditional society, but acted as a feudal lord. His innovations were successful, but did not long outlast his sojourn. He describes his often dangerous adventures with élan, and gives interesting, sympathetic, but rather superficial observations of many Philippine communities. In a way he had an impact on his area of Southeast Asia far greater than the average sojourner, but it seems his major legacy is a book. Can the same be said of the other travelers whose works are discussed below?

The 1860s—Henri Mouhot, Angkor and all that

Christopher Pym, ed. *Henri Mouhot's diary: travels in the central parts of Siam, Cambodia and Laos during the years 1858-1861*.¹⁷

No account of Southeast Asia in the nineteenth century would be complete without mention of Henri Mouhot, whose 1860 “discovery” of the fabulous temple/city/palace of Angkor brought it and him great fame in Europe. Actually Angkor had always been known to the local populace and a number of earlier explorers. As is clear now, one of the reasons for the sudden worldwide interest in Mouhot’s travels was Mouhot’s own premature death in a remote

¹⁶ *Twenty years*, xxi.

¹⁷ Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1966, xi.

part of Indochina. He died on the trail of more discoveries and was acclaimed posthumously.

One might say that Mouhot's historical character was thus as much martyr as explorer. But Angkor, though linked to the Mekong through the great Tonle Sap lake, is not in the highlands and need not be mentioned further here. While Mouhot did experience the Cambodia of the time and had strong opinions about it, he also made a visit of several months to the eastern Cambodian mountains where dwelt the Stieng people. Mouhot was not particularly fond of the Cambodian people of his time. His rapturous view of Angkor and its builders was accompanied by his insistence that the population of his time was simply degenerate. He put it very succinctly:

All that can be said regarding the present Cambodians is that they are an agricultural people, among whom a certain taste for art still shows itself in the carved work of the boats belonging to the better classes, and their chief characteristic is unbridled conceit.¹⁸

He goes on immediately to say

It is not so among the savages of the east, called by the Cambodians their elder brothers. I passed four months among them, and, arriving direct from Cambodia, it seemed like entering a country comparatively civilized. Great gentleness, politeness, and even sociability—which to my fancy, bore evidence of a past refinement—struck me in these poor children of nature, buried for centuries in their deep forests....¹⁹

Here we can see a strong expression of themes which would become standard fare in Western assessments of highlanders: they are ancient peoples, possessed of an innocent natural nobility and little else, but from the point of view of Europeans, childlike and without the benefits of Western civilization—which they should adopt forthwith!

¹⁸ Pym, 115.

¹⁹ Pym, 115.

Amid the condescension and stereotyping, foreign attitudes could range from empathy and pity to righteous disgust and a prescription for discipline—which in turn might lead to assimilation or even extinction.

Although Mouhot's impact on Stieng society may have been minimal, his impact on Cambodia, France, and the world was immense by virtue of the new awareness he brought of magnificent Angkor. He put into play certain powerful concepts and questions in the European view of Southeast Asia which would continue to resonate in later days: were contemporary Cambodians mere degenerate relics of ancient giants? Could an Asian civilization of the past or present be the equal of European? What right did French colonialists have to justify their power by referring to a civilizing mission?

1866--Exploring the Mekong

Francis Garnier, *Voyage d'exploration en Indo-Chine effectué pendant les années 1866, 1867 et 1868*....Paris: Hachette, 1873.

Perhaps the most famous French traveler in the Southeast Asian highlands in the nineteenth century was Francis Garnier, a young naval officer. Briefly, in the years noted in the title above he was the deputy commander, chief motive force, and public face of the first European effort to navigate the Mekong River and explore its surrounding highlands in what is now Laos and southern China. "Famous" because he wrote a detailed, well written and well illustrated book²⁰ which appeared in France first in 1873, the year he was killed in an ill-advised French campaign against Hanoi. But perhaps also "notorious," because after the return of the surviving Mekong explorers to France, there was at first little credit and considerable controversy over the mission and later disapproval of the Hanoi debacle. Thus he has appeared as both icon and martyr of the expanding French empire. He was a young brave, energetic, and

²⁰ Also, *Voyage d'exploration en Indo-Chine effectué par une commission française présidée par le capitaine de frégate Doudart de Lagrée*.... Paris: Hachette, 1885. Recent English editions published by White Lotus in Bangkok include *The Mekong Exploration Commission report* (1996) and *Further travels in Laos and Yunnan: the Mekong Exploration Commission report (1866-1888), volume 2*. (1996).

idealistic imperialist, and determined to prove that the Mekong could serve as a French-dominated north-south route for penetrating prosperous southern China, and for extending French power in northern Indochina.

Garnier and the expedition have continued to capture attention up to the present day. Australian scholar Milton Osborne produced first *River road to China: the Mekong River expedition, 1866-1873*²¹ and later *The Mekong: turbulent past, uncertain future*,²² as well as the article “Francis Garnier (1839-1873), explorer of the Mekong River.”²³ John Keay’s recent contribution is *Mad about the Mekong: exploration and empire in Southeast Asia*.²⁴ Journalist Edward Gargan spent a year traveling down the river in 2000, and his book includes insights into history, politics and culture.²⁵

Before the remarkable but flawed Mekong expedition Garnier served (1863) as French proconsul in Cholon, ethnic Chinese twin city of Saigon in France’s new colony of “Cochin-chine.” Here he tried hard to implement the “*mission civilisatrice*,” supervising road building, sewer construction, and similarly useful infrastructure projects, but apparently getting little appreciation from the local populace. He exhibited both sides of the French imperial adventure: improvement and exploitation—although at first the Cochin-chine colony was a drag on the French treasury. In 1866 Garnier took these roles into the highlands and the Mekong valley. He was the second in command, and designated geographer, mapmaker, and naturalist of the expedition, and also charged with assessing the commercial value of the Mekong region to French entrepreneurship, which was seen as dependent on the navigability of the river in its upper reaches. And, naturally, all information collected would be regarded as valuable

²¹ New York: Liveright, 1975.

²² New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2000.

²³ In Victor T. King, ed., *Explorers of South-east Asia: six lives*. Kuala Lumpur; New York: Oxford University Press, 1995.

²⁴ London: HarperCollins, 2005.

²⁵ *A river’s tale: a year on the Mekong*. New York: Knopf, 2002.

intelligence by French imperialist circles. He and his comrades trekked for two years and 6000 kilometers over strange, difficult, and disease-ridden terrain, sometimes barefoot and often seriously ill, and finally ending up in southern China, only to see the failure of the original goal—the river is not navigable in the hills—and at least at first, the indifference of their masters at home. Eventually Garnier, eager to return to empire-building, involved himself in the fatal misadventure in northern Vietnam.

It should be noted here that while the Lagrée/Garnier expedition represented a new, aggressive element in French overseas expansion in the 1860s, many of the characteristics of the experience had been foreshadowed by a similar expedition made 88 years before in a neighboring area. In 1774 George Bogle, a young Scotsman, set off on a mission from Calcutta north through Bhutan to Tibet, commissioned by the (British) East India Company, the effective ruler of Bengal, to reach the seat of the Panchen Lama in Tibet. Here Bogle was directed to persuade the Panchen Lama, at that time an especially powerful figure in Tibet, to use his influence with the emperor of China, nominally the suzerain of Tibet, to open Chinese-British trade relations. It is not known whether the French travelers of 1866 were aware of this earlier trek, but many of their experiences mirrored Bogle's. In both cases, traveling was hard and results equally hard to achieve.

While trade was the stated goal of these initiatives, in both cases trade was inextricably linked with the extension of European power over areas that had been completely outside the European sphere of influence. And the travelers had inevitably to act as geographers, ethnographers, diplomats, and diarists as well as prospective trade negotiators. Both expeditions were highly conscious of what seemed to them the glaring gap between civilized and technically advanced Europeans on the one hand and backward hill peoples on the other. As it happened, Bogle, a genial and relatively modest young man, found his attitude of “candour and plain dealing” and his interest in the local peoples led him to be relatively accepting of the differences he perceived, pursuing “dual roles as philosophical traveler and trade envoy,” according to historian Kate Teltscher.²⁶ Perhaps Bogle was also lucky in finding

²⁶ *The high road to China*. London: Bloomsbury, 2006. 80.

the Panchen Lama to be an intelligent, open, and congenial ruler, while the French travelers in Laos found little to admire in local chieftains.

Both expeditions had to overcome dangers and difficulties in traversing the alien physical and social terrain. Their day to day travels were supported (or not) by quasi-diplomatic means; that is, their only claim for local acceptance and support rested on passports from lowland authorities who had at least putative sovereignty over far-flung mountain areas. But in a necessary effort at self-sufficiency both expeditions took with them enormous numbers of servants, supplies, laborers, guides, interpreters, and sometimes soldiers. The prestige of imperial power was at stake and the ability to rely at least in part on European technology and firepower was important. In the end the similarities of the expeditions reflected the physical and social realities of the similar times, places, and attitudes. Both failed in their stated goals, since success was beyond their powers, but they established patterns of exploration and influence that remained on the Southeast Asian scene.²⁷

To focus back on the French expedition, what might be called the socio-political character of the Mekong expedition is well described by Gargan:

His [Garnier's] travels took him and his team²⁸ through Cambodia and Laos and up into Yunnan as far as Dali, all conducted in the nineteenth-century, matter-of-fact conviction of the cultural and intellectual superiority of the *colons*; Garnier studied "racial types" and never hesitated at the sweeping judgment. China, he wrote, was "a sick civilization," and "when the Chinese are better informed about the West, they will understand its superior power." When deserted by porters, he dragooned peasant farmers, their buffaloes and

²⁷ For a very detailed account of how such journeys were organized and reported, see Volker Grabowsky and Andrew Turton, *The gold and silver road of trade and friendship: the McLeod and Richardson diplomatic missions to Tai states in 1837*. Chiangmai: Silkworm Books, 2003.

²⁸ Although the actual leader of the expedition was Commandant Ernest Doudart de Lagrée, who died en route, Garnier through his energy and his book became the public symbol of the effort.

their carts to haul his caravan's supplies. When offended, he felt no compunction about caning a presumptuous local. And when his pirogue rowers, fighting relentless current, exhibited fatigue, Garnier spurred them on with his revolver. His expedition was, in today's lights, a rather grotesque exercise in arrogance, ignorance, and power.²⁹

The impact of the Mekong Expedition on local society was neither profound nor constructive. It proved that there could be no great interior route for international trade and exploitation, although others would continue to try. But in the long run the expedition fit into and inspired further French dreams of empire, and formed the foundation of later Anglo-French rivalry for influence in the hinterlands. Garnier's book is itself a fascinating and eloquent adventure story and a classic in the literature of imperialism.

1877—Survival of the fittest

F.J. Harmand. *Laos and the hilltribes of Indochina: journeys to the Boloven Plateau, from Bassac to Hue through Laos, and to the origins of the Thai*. Translated and Introduction by Walter E.J. Tips: [Bangkok]: White Lotus, 1997. See *L'homme du Mékong: un voyageur à travers l'Indochine inconnue*. Paris: Phébus, 1994.

Dr. Francois-Jules Harmand, a French medical doctor and naturalist, traveled in the hills of the Upper Mekong in 1877. His recent translator Walter Tips has a clear opinion of him, his attitudes, and his impact:

Dr. Harmand was one of those, now reviled, cultural barbarians who, in the name of bringing civilization, blindly trampled upon viable civilizations—quite prepared to destroy them wholesale without thought or regret—who were so typical of the nineteenth century colonialist adventures. He was, from the point of view of his disposition, impatient, flamboyant, uncompromising, totally unequipped

²⁹ Gargan, 116.

temperamentally to deal with the indolent Laotian tribes who had their own imperatives of action and notions of time. From the first contact onwards, it was clear that clashes, consisting of more than just mutually unintelligible four-letter words, would be unavoidable.³⁰

Indeed, Harmand seemed determined to make virtually every mistake a stranger to the area could do in dealing with local people, and this was perhaps inevitable given his unshakeable feeling that he and European ways were infinitely superior to anything he could encounter in Asia, and that everyone he met, from local potentate to long-suffering servant, must accept that view, sometime at pain of “punishment by my own hand.”³¹

He was, however, not without sympathy at what he considered to be the degenerate and miserable lives led by many of the peoples he encountered, and searched for explanations for the bad conditions he sometimes met in the highlands. In describing the aftermath of a cholera epidemic in a small tribal village, he opined,

What a life and what a death these disinherited people suffer! How is it possible that these people, who, after all, do not appear to have been deprived of intelligence, and who certainly have their heads as well composed as the Laotians, have remained so inferior to them? This degradation is no doubt the result of the fear which constantly depressed their souls, a fear which originates especially in slavery and the perpetual insecurity which torments them relentlessly and mercilessly. Who knows whether, if this odious trade disappears, they will not little-by-little lift themselves up on the scale of humanity?³²

³⁰ Harmand, 61.

³¹ 61. Harmand in this incident is in a rage, threatening a local official who is not sufficiently quick to give his expedition men and boats to continue his journey.

³² Harmand, 55.

He refers here to a real problem, ruthless exploitation of highlanders by outsiders, and is certainly right to condemn the practice and at least hope for better conditions. Of course, for a nineteenth century European, the “scale of humanity” reached its zenith at being a nineteenth century European. At the same time, he is confident that Vietnamese penetration of the highlands, together with French imperial control, will offer the best future—perhaps a “final solution.”

In one word, we can count on the Annamites, when they become our subjects, to colonize a great deal of the valley of the great Indochinese river to our benefit, where they will quickly supplant the leftovers of the decrepit races which inhabit it....First the Laotians must be eliminated, not by violent means, but by the natural impact of competition and the supremacy of the fittest.³³

From the social Darwinism of the nineteenth century to the ethnic cleansing of our time is no great distance.

1886—Sojourner, sportsman, writer, and conqueror

“Shway Yoe” [Sir James George Scott]: *The Burman: his life and notions*. London: Macmillan, 1882.

George Scott was a spirited, indefatigable enthusiast of empire with a sturdy sense of humor who “hacked, bullied, and charmed his way through the uncharted Burmese highlands,”³⁴ fortunately keeping a diary for later generations to peruse. First venturing to Rangoon in the 1870s as a journalist and schoolteacher, Scott mastered the Burmese language and by 1882 produced a long, lively and successful

³³ Quoted by Tips, xiv.

³⁴ Andrew Marshall, *The trouser people*. Washington: Counterpoint, 2002. p.6. Marshall, a long-time foreign correspondent in Southeast Asia, “discovered” Scott recently and examined his diaries, which tell much about Scott and about Burmese and highland history. Marshall’s book moves back and forth between Scott’s adventures and Marshall’s travels in today’s Burma/Myanmar.

account of every aspect of Burmese society under the Burmese pseudonym “Shway Yoe”—a work still in print today.³⁵ It was also at this time that he changed Burmese history in a small but salient way, introducing soccer football—and accompanying ideas of sportsmanship—to Burma. His third wife later described him this way:

He was always in good condition, for he was sparing in what he ate, and continually exercising. He could ride, wrestle, shoot, play football and cricket, row and swim. His bright brown eyes went questioning everywhere. Never was a man more alive. No department of human life but was interesting to him....He was ever a fighter.³⁶

Only two months after the British takeover of the capital of Upper Burma in 1886, Scott was attached to a British military expedition into the Shan hills east of Mandalay to bring that multiethnic wilderness under British control.³⁷ As Marshall describes this new venture,

Scott would spend a quarter of a century exploring this vast, landlocked nowhere. Acutely aware of how British influence erased the ancient societies it touched, he would study the tribes he encountered in minutest detail, record their beliefs and rituals, learn their languages, and photograph their way of life. And everywhere he went he brought a gift—not the great imperial gift of civilization, as it turned out, but a game of two halves, and a circular stitched sphere of India rubber to play it with.³⁸

³⁵ For example *The Burman: his life and notions*. Whiting Bay, Arran, Scotland: Kiscadale, 1989.

³⁶ Marshall, 25.

³⁷ In the same year he published *Burma as it was, as it is, and as it will be*. (London: G. Redway, 1886).

³⁸ Marshall, 57-58.

Scott's enthusiasms and enquiring mind made him an unusual colonial administrator, and he is remembered as much as an explorer, writer, and, perhaps like Gironière or Auguste Pavie (see below), a European who both respected the highlanders—even exulted in their strange ways—and wanted them to gain something from contact with empire. In his 1886 book, aimed at providing information for his countrymen on “our new province,” he shows considerable respect for traditional Burmese history and society. In a chapter entitled “Their faults,” for example, he begins, “Their very faults lean to virtue’s side. They are most marvelously and inconceivably lazy...but too great laziness is certainly no more objectionable than too systematic plodding.”³⁹ Most other European go-getters building empire in Asia bitterly deplored what they saw as the hopelessly lackadaisical Asians and suggested corrective measures ranging from Christian conversion to physical discipline.

The British expedition into northern Burma of 1886 was a sizable military force, in which Scott was designated “assistant political officer,” and the mission was to demand formal allegiance to the British crown from the many rulers of the often feuding Shan principalities covering a mountainous area as large as France and with little connection to the Burman kingdom to the south. These were states, of varying size and prosperity, of varied ethnic character also; some might be best described as semi-civilized. Some acceded to British rule readily, while others had to be attacked and disarmed. It was not the British plan to replace local rule, but mostly to make it amenable to the extraction of resources, allow the incursion of missionaries, merchants and explorers, and to neutralize any military threat. While there were great differences between the challenges faced by the British and the French in the character of the highlands, the imperial impetus was basically the same, and it was in the highlands that the two empires crept towards each other and towards Siam.

Scott's diaries record a number of incidents of sharp military engagements and stiff-upper-lip bravado on his part and by the Gurkhas, Indians, and Britons of the imperial force, but, as Marshall

³⁹ Ibid, 112.

describes, skirmishing or not, Scott was always confident of himself and his mission.

Most Shan villagers offered no opposition to the British. They lived to hear the deeply perplexing news, delivered by a short, bearded Scotsman wearing a pith helmet as big as a washbasin, that they were now subjects of a queen who lived over 6,000 miles away. “Assembled all of the villagers,” Scott wrote in his diary, “men, women and children, about 30 in all, and made them an oration, and gave the smallest baby a rupee, which it promptly swallowed.” So the battle for hearts and minds was won.⁴⁰

Marshall’s perception of the humor or absurdity of such situations seems to reflect Scott’s own, but as a “natural imperialist,” he was serious about his work and apparently highly effective. To cite just one more of his exploits,

[Scott] spent the next few years tramping relentlessly along the unmowed touchlines of the British Empire. He dodged bullets, came down with fevers, braved mosquitoes the size of light aircraft, and—“what annoys me most”—lost a pair of horseshoe cufflinks during a freak hurricane, which also carried off his shirt, his chair, and his tent. “The work was arduous,” trumpeted *The Times*, “but before the end of 1888 the mission has succeeded in transforming some two or three millions of excited and rebellious Shans, scattered over an area of nearly 80,000 square miles of difficult country, into loyal subjects.” Scott summed it up more succinctly: “Awfully fagged.”⁴¹

But in 1891 Scott began work on what would be a remarkable five-volume compendium called the *Gazetteer of Upper Burma and the*

⁴⁰ Marshall, 83-84.

⁴¹ Marshall, 102.

Shan States.⁴² “Scott’s *Gazetteer* records every man, woman, child, bullock, buffalo, cow, pig, and pony in the Shan states, along with the geography, ethnicity and chief produce of even the most piffling tiny village...written... with the flair and passion of an experienced journalist.”⁴³

The story of George Scott would not be complete without mentioning someone who can represent many other foreign sojourners in the highlands: his first wife Dora. After marriage in London, the couple moved immediately to the Shan area, where an English woman had to meet mind-boggling challenges of culture shock, boredom, discomfort, and disease. Dora Scott fearlessly chose to follow her husband on his jungle treks. She was the first European woman to cross both the Mekong and Salween Rivers, and endured attacks by bullets and poisoned arrows among other trials. Andrew Marshall found a photograph of her and opined, “She looked as if she could eat a Kachin warrior for breakfast, and two for lunch. Scott adored her.”⁴⁴ But she paid for her courage with an early death. By contrast, one may examine the case of some French women in Indochina in the colonial period, as reported by Milton Osborne in an examination of French fiction:

There is a consensus in French fiction that when significant numbers of European women arrived in Indochina intending to stay, the basis was laid for a new class of dissatisfied foreigners, whose ennui and peccadilloes would further corrupt colonial society. French women in novels on Indochina written in and about the 1920s and 1930s are almost universally bored—offended and enervated by their

⁴² Rangoon: Printed by the Superintendent, Government Printing, 1900-1901.

⁴³ Marshall, p.124. For a less sympathetic British essay on the Shan peoples, see Holt S. Hallett’s *A thousand miles on an elephant in the Shan states* (Bangkok: White Lotus, 1988, originally published by Blackwell, Edinburgh, 1890, describing a journey of 1876). Hallett, like his contemporary Garnier, sought a southern transport route to China and a way to exploit highland goods and resources. His attitude was that “civilizing and christianising” was what the benighted savages needed.

⁴⁴ Marshall, 161.

tropical surroundings. Life for these fictional women is a succession of sterile gatherings at which they find fault with servants and husbands, bicker over imagined slights, and deplore their absence from France. Joyless infidelities help to pass the time.⁴⁵

Of course in a strict sense the responses of European women to the challenges facing them in the highlands or lowlands of Southeast Asia were as varied as the individuals concerned—and fiction may not be fact. But various accounts suggest a crude categorization into those who hated the life and were miserable, and those who dealt with it positively and successfully—which does not necessarily mean happily.

1887—The amateur turned professional

Auguste Pavie. *A la conquête des coeurs*. Paris: Editions Bossard, 1921.

In 1885 the governor general of French Indochina, M. Le Myre de Vilers, made an unusual but important appointment, naming as French consul in up-country Luang Prabang, then a tributary of Siam, one Auguste Pavie, a former employee of the telegraph company in Cambodia. Pavie was not a conventional colonial official by training, but his sojourn in what we now call Laos would prove to be of great significance for the future of the entire region. In short, he made great progress in securing for France a protectorate over the territories of the left bank of the Mekong and its hinterland, effectively removing the area from Siamese sovereignty and control. It is this larger political context that Pavie's expedition of 1887-1888 reveals, as recounted in his memoir *A la conquête des coeurs*.⁴⁶ As Andre Masson's later introduction comments,

⁴⁵ *Fear and fascination in the tropics: a reader's guide to French fiction on Indochina*. Occasional Paper, The Center for Southeast Asian Studies, University of Wisconsin, 1986, 13-14.

⁴⁶ Subtitled *Le pays des millions d'éléphants et du parasol blanc, les pavillons noirs, Déo-van-tri*. In the series *Colonies et empires, Les classiques de la colonisation*, Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1947. The title inevitably is seen to foreshadow the later American efforts to capture "hearts and minds." The text reads "A classic of colonization; if one book deserves this title, it is this, published by the great explorer Pavie towards the end of his days....He has revived the glorious adventure which gave to France, without difficulty, one of the richest and certainly the most seductive of its Indochinese provinces."

Classique de la colonisation, si un livre mérite ce titre, c'est celui que publie le grand explorateur Pavie, au déclin de ses jours....Il revivait la glorieuse aventure qui donna à la France, sans coup férir, l'une des plus riches et certes la plus séduisante de ses provinces indochinoises.⁴⁷

And the question is raised: why Pavie? Why was one man, not trained as a diplomat or soldier, sent to essentially conquer a large territory almost single-handedly, and with what guidance and strategy? Masson refers to the "théorie de la pénétration progressive" articulated by Le Myre de Vilers, which said bluntly that in the colonizing effort, a European should do what he thinks best "on the ground," waiting for propitious moments, avoiding confrontation, and avoiding needless complications. Thus in terms of policy guidance for Pavie, "il sera guidé en toute circonstance par une intuition infallible."⁴⁸

So who was Auguste Pavie to win such confidence? First, whatever his other qualifications, he was clearly one who respected local Asian society and people and had accrued skills in dealing effectively in the Indochinese context. In working to set up the post and telegraph system in Cambodia he took pains to learn the language, study the history of the region, and bone up on science and geography. In 1880 he was selected by Le Myre de Vilers to explore a largely unknown region between the Gulf of Siam and the great lake Tonle Sap, which he did for five years, often going barefoot, it was said, and adopting the habits of the local people, in stark contrast to the all too common overbearing colonial administrators, ruthless soldiers, and ardent tax collectors. And, as it happened, Pavie's ability to gain the confidence of both officials and populace in Laos, along with his courage and sense of honor, proved the critical factors in the contest with the Siamese.

Pavie's account begins with a long introduction in which he describes his formative experiences in the Cambodian port of Kampot, which were the basis of his comparatively empathetic and

⁴⁷ *Conquête*, vii.

⁴⁸ *Conquête*, x.

constructive approach to the colonial impact on local people and affairs. The introduction concludes with this succinct statement: “La direction de mes idées si favorable au Cambodge et aux Cambodgiens, née sur les bords du golfe de Siam alla s’assurant encore sur les rives du Mé-Khong.”⁴⁹ Pavie saw his next assignment in Luang Prabang, which actually began in January 1887, as a continuation of the exploration of Cambodia. Later, the entire sixteen-year period of Pavie’s activities in Indochina—ethnographic, geographic, political—was described as the “Mission Pavie Indo-Chine 1879-1895,” involving many people in both the highlands and lowlands, and was published in many volumes.⁵⁰

In Luang Prabang, Pavie found this petty state to be ruled by an elderly Lao “king” named Ounkam, who was surrounded by Siamese officials and soldiers. The latter had been engaged in fighting a number of freebooting Chinese forces who had their origin in the Taiping Rebellion and had been marauding in Vietnam and Laos for more than ten years. These intruding armies, of considerable size and identified by colored “flags”—or “pavillons” in French—as Black White, Yellow, and Red—had been the opponents of Francis Garnier’s doomed military expedition near Hanoi in 1873. They were seen by the French as an ongoing threat to all of northern Indochina. Pavie’s political task was thus to prove to the Lao king that the French were more capable and reliable an ally in dealing with this threat than the Siamese, and would serve as less repressive overlords as well.

Pavie’s first act in Luang Prabang was to pay homage at the tomb of Henri Mouhot, but he rapidly became involved in the politics of influencing the king and dealing with the local Siamese viceroy. In the summer of 1887, perhaps felicitously for Pavie, bands of Chinese troops attacked the city while Siamese forces were absent, thus giving the French mission the opportunity to rescue the king and set in motion a year-long campaign to increase French military presence, defeat the Black Flags, and convince the king of the desirability of a French protectorate, which was established in due

⁴⁹ *Conquête*, 39.

⁵⁰ A detailed bibliographic description can be found in Masson’s Introduction, xix-xx.

course. What is now the nation of Laos was in a short time effectively divorced from its traditional tributary relationship with Siam and set on an entirely new course to meet—still rather lackadaisically, it seems, the challenges of new centuries.

Thus by the 1880s Europeans had come not only to travel, explore and contemplate new realms of empire in the Southeast Asian highlands, but to take physical possession of them. As George Scott plowed through the Shan states and Auguste Pavie charmed the local satraps of the Mekong, swathes of territory previously marked on European maps as unknown came to be filled in with the imperial colors that would remain until the mid-twentieth century. Some travelers, at any rate, had become conquerors.

Science and medicine

Alexandre Yersin, “Sept mois chez les Mois,” published originally in Louis Vaillant, ed., *Variétés sur les pays mois*. Saigon: Gouvernement de la Cochinchine, 1935.

Many travelers and sojourners in the Southeast Asian highlands performed more than one role or function. Some of the adventurers, military officers, and colonial administrators certainly acted as men of science, whether it be naturalist, geographer, or amateur ethnographer. It is possible, though, to mention two prominent figures of this intrusive company who represented science above all other activities. The most influential was probably the physician and public health activist Alexandre Yersin.

Yersin is well remembered even now in Vietnam, where a hundred years ago he was affectionately called “Ong Nam” (Mr. Nam) by the people. Following the country’s independence, streets named in his honor kept that designation, and his tomb in Suoi Dau was graced by a pagoda where rites were performed....Yersin’s house in Nha Trang is now a museum, and the epitaph on his tombstone describes him as “Benefactor and humanist, venerated by the Vietnamese people.”⁵¹

⁵¹ *Wikipedia* entry.

Yersin's contribution to the public health of Asia and the world is rightly praised. During a research visit to Hong Kong in 1894 he and a Japanese collaborator discovered the bacillus which causes bubonic plague, and later, at the Institut Pasteur in Paris, he developed the first anti-plague serum. He settled in Vietnam and established the first medical school there, in Hanoi, in 1902. He also contributed to rubber agriculture in the highlands and to malaria control. He can clearly be seen to represent what was truly constructive in the foreign intrusion into Southeast Asia in the colonial period. It is obviously not easy to describe him as a sojourner, since he spent the last forty years of his life living and working in Vietnam, but he was a mere visitor to the highlands. In 1892-1893 he trekked through parts of the central highlands (for the second time, actually) and recounted the experience in a short account "Sept mois chez les Mois."⁵²

The account strikes one as somewhat naïve and mechanical. Yersin was delighted to see the local scenery and wildlife (including many tigers) and to have an elephant carry his baggage. His ethnography is very simple:

Les Mois de la Cochinchine sont bien conformés, tres brun de couleur. Ils ont la caractere doux, timide, craintif. Ils n'aiment pas a s'eloigner de leur village. Ils cultivent le riz en rais, le maïs et un peu de tabac.⁵³ ("The Moi of Cochin China are well shaped, very brown in color. They have a character that is sweet, timid, wary. They do not like to be far from their villages. They cultivate dry rice fields, maize, and a little tobacco.")

Some further information is given on hospitality, housing, and ceremonies as Yersin traveled from place to place. Later he notes that such people "sont durement exploités par les Annamites qui viennent commercer chez eux." At one point Yersin, convinced of

⁵² Reprinted in Pierre Le Roux, *Alexandre Yersin, une passé-muraille (1863-1943)* [Paris]: Connaissances et Savoirs, 2007, .95-123.

⁵³ Le Roux, 99.

the greed of local Vietnamese wheeler-dealers, took more of a dozen of them virtual prisoner, to the delight of the Montagnards. Yersin was also convinced that Montagnards who traveled to province towns like Phanthiet to trade were routinely cheated, and that Vietnamese officials ruthlessly demanded levies of valuable animals.

By this time his public fame had preceded him and he was importuned to give vaccinations even in the most remote villages. (In the lowland town of Phanry it is recorded that he vaccinated 1200 Vietnamese and Cham children). In short, Yersin informed his visits to the highlands with concrete and constructive actions, according to his lights.

A French scientist in the Philippines

Alfred Marche. *Luzon and Palawan*. Manila: Filipiniana Book Guild, 1970.

One genuine traveler who seems to exemplify devoted attention to science, or at least to objective and well-ordered observation of natural phenomena, was Alfred Marche. Visiting the southern hinterlands of the Philippines in the 1880s, he was a dedicated investigator of the local flora and fauna, and made efforts at ethnography, but seems most clearly to have described what could be called the sociology of disaster. *Luzon and Palawan*⁵⁴ describes the great earthquake of 1880 (which he witnessed), some impressive typhoons, and the eruption of the Mayon volcano in 1881, each of which caused great disruptions in local life. The introduction to the book states that Marche's mission "constitutes one of the major nineteenth-century scientific endeavors in Philippine history."⁵⁵

The age of the tourist—1890-

Prince Henri d'Orléans. *From Tonkin to India: by the sources of the Irrawadi, January '95 – January '96*. New York: Dodd, Mead, 1898.

If by about 1890 the incorporation of Southeast Asian highland territories into European empires was at least formally accomplished,

⁵⁴ Translated from the French by Carmen Ojeda and Jovita Castro.

⁵⁵ By W. A. Burke-Mailhe, p.xiii.

the succeeding years saw the increasing appearance of travelers of that particularly modern sort we call tourists, or those engaged in “recreational” travel. Some were of high rank and ample resources, and might be called “ceremonial” travelers. Even earlier (1878-1879) former U.S. president Ulysses S. Grant made a world tour involving short and personal stops in the area, but he did not penetrate to the highlands. Siamese king Chulalongkorn (Rama V) made a number of informal trips around his country, sometimes in disguise, it is said, but seems not to have visited the highlands. Prince Henri d’Orléans of France, not interested in being a royalist pretender but a serious naturalist, spent the year 1895 trekking through northern Vietnam, southern China, and northern Burma. He could be described as a serious traveler, with a somewhat romantic reverence for nature and a determination to make good observations of land and people—but essentially a sophisticated tourist.⁵⁶

And in this period one sees in many less prestigious travelers the flourishing of the genre of travel writing for its own sake. Names such as Isabella Bird Bishop,⁵⁷ Archibald Colquhoun,⁵⁸ and Pierre Loti⁵⁹ became well known for their tales of Asian travel, but neither they nor most professional travel writers often ventured into the highlands.

In the twenty-first century tourism is of course a major world occupation and industry, and the question is often raised of the possibly deleterious effect of tourism on traditional societies. This is not the subject of this essay, but a sophisticated discussion can be

⁵⁶ Original French publication, *Du Tonkin aux Indes, janvier 1895 – janvier 1896*. Paris: Calmann-Levy, 1898.

⁵⁷ She wrote many books on many nations. See a brief account in John Gullick, ed. *Adventurous women in Southeast Asia: six lives*. Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1995, 196-245.

⁵⁸ His *Across Chryse* (London: Low, Marston, Searle and Rivington, 1883) does deal with a highland journey in southern China.

⁵⁹ Loti was a French naval officer who wrote often romantic and “atmospheric” works about areas coming under French influence. See Alain Quella-Vilégier, *Suprêmes visions d’Orient*. Saint-Pourçain-sur-Stoule: Bleu Autour, 2006.

found in *Tourism in Southeast Asia*,⁶⁰ especially the chapter “Tourism, culture and the sociology of development,” by Robert E. Wood.

The hunters

Harold J. Coolidge, Jr. & Theodore Roosevelt. *Three kingdoms of Indo-China*. New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1933.

In 1929 the highlands of Southern Vietnam were visited by a man with a famous name: Theodore Roosevelt. But this was T.R., Jr. (1887-1944), the son of the former U.S. president, who would be named governor general of the Philippines later the same year. The occasion was a hunting expedition, one with a special purpose,

...To make scientific collections, particularly of large mammals, from the remotest parts of Southeastern Asia....The expedition worked in two divisions. The one led by the Roosevelts [Theodore and his brother Kermit—the latter had to withdraw at the last moment] specialized in collecting large mammals, and [in China] they killed the first specimen of the rare giant panda shot by white men....The other division...[led by Harold Coolidge] was more slow-moving, and was composed of four scientists whose objective was to make a careful study and collections of the bird, mammal, and reptile life in the unknown regions of northwestern Indo-China.⁶¹

The scope of this “scientific” assault on the fauna of the highlands was massive. The Coolidge division, unsure of being able to find sufficient food and needing room to package dead specimens, shipped six months supply of food to the area in sixty crates, then used the crates to ship preserved skin, bone and feathers back to Chicago!

⁶⁰ Michael Hitchcock, Victor R. King, and Michael J.G. Parnwell, eds. London and New York: Routledge, 1993.

⁶¹ Coolidge, Jr. & Roosevelt. *Three kingdoms of Indo-China*, 1933, 11-12.

Roosevelt's report in this volume is remarkable in its single-minded attention to killing animals. After only a two-page account of travel from Yunnan to Saigon, and a two-paragraph comment on Saigon and Cholon, the remaining 58 pages of the account are totally devoted to the details of the hunt, which focused mainly on wild cattle and deer, but also bagged wild dog and elephant. At one point, in a paragraph on an evening encampment, Roosevelt made this rather darwinian observation: "the forest seemed teeming with life and death—life so abundant that death meant nothing."⁶² Perhaps this was part of the hunter's creed. And after shooting a fawn, he opined, "When we came to him he was so delicate and pretty it seemed a shame to have shot him, but we needed meat and the Museum a specimen."⁶³ There were many French and local guides to assist in the effort. Coolidge was somewhat more interested in the people around him in the northern area, but really had little to offer in terms of amateur ethnography.

In a similar account, Mary Hastings Bradley wrote of her hunting expedition of 1929 in the highlands of Malaya.⁶⁴ Like so many visitors, she placed emphasis on the "picturesque," combining anecdotes of quaint local behavior with tales of big-game slaughter. She also visited the Vietnamese/French hill resort of Dalat to hunt, and made these observations of the Vietnamese:

The Annamites are a race of Chinese extraction, the Chinese strain considerably reinforced by the seven centuries of occupation. They are a small, brown-skinned people, rather poor in physique, with the curious distinction of having such separate great toes that they form a private anthropological division....They are not a trusty race and have no great endearing qualities, but they are facile and learn easily. The servants are inclined to be forward and cheeky.⁶⁵

⁶² Ibid., 247.

⁶³ Ibid., 248.

⁶⁴ *Trailing the tiger*. New York: D. Appleton, 1929.

⁶⁵ Coolidge, Jr. & Roosevelt. *Three kingdoms of Indo-China*, 1933, 188-189.

About the “Mois” virtually nothing is said, but the successful tiger hunt is described in loving detail.

“Do we not eat the same rice?”

Roland Dorgelès. *On the Mandarin Road*. New York & London: The Century Company, 1926.

Roland Dorgelès (born Roland Lecavélé in 1885) was a French writer whose journalistic career ended when he volunteered to join the French forces at the very beginning of World War I. The war and his constant attempts to express its terrible nature in prose with the publication of his acclaimed *Les croix de bois* in 1919,⁶⁶ “fait de ce journaliste à la plume légère un ‘grand romancier’.”⁶⁷ Settled in Paris as a writer and traveler after the war, in 1923 he “discovered” French Indochina, and in *Sur la route Mandarine*⁶⁸ produced insights into the life of Vietnamese highlanders suitable for an artist of his talents. He may thus represent here other serious intellectuals engaged with both art and social concerns who sought to gain a first-hand view of a society both strange to them and intimately connected with European power.

His expedition and the substance of his account of travel in Vietnam and Cambodia had three parts: traveling from Hanoi to Hue; a separate journey into the highlands, from Hue to Darlac; and a further trip to Angkor. By the 1920s the French impact on the highlands had become complex and somewhat contradictory. As noted above, there was a good deal of autonomy left to the realm of people known as *sauvages* amid the exploitation of resources such as furs, minerals, forest products, animals, and in some border areas, rubber and coffee. However, French respect for people often seen only as primitive, lazy, filthy, and incompetent was generally lacking.

⁶⁶ Paris: A. Michel.

⁶⁷ Micheline Dupray. *Roland Dorgelès: un siècle de vie littéraire française*. Paris: Presses de la Renaissance, 1986, 20.

⁶⁸ Original French publication, Paris: A. Michel, 1925.

Dorgelès was apparently prepared to be more respectful of what he observed on his trip. His book is mostly organized as a series of encounters with interesting or prominent people, and he was prepared to learn as well as view. His final chapter “Among the Moï” describes his expedition into the highlands as a series of surprises—first at the profound lack of any civilized habits among the *savages*, and their helplessness in dealing with the pressures of French and Vietnamese exploitation, but then also at the frequent expressions of dignity and integrity he encountered among them. In Dorgelès’ mind the key analogy came quickly to be to Fenimore Cooper! That is, the Montagnards seemed the true counterpart of the ravaged but brave tribespeople of North America in the famous novels even French schoolchildren read.

Squaws, wigwams, calumet—it is the dream of my childhood that I am about to realize [in seeing the highlands], even the rifle slung over the shoulder, the enchanted forest of my old books. Dear twelfth year books, I have found you once more, thrilling with life!”⁶⁹

I still see old Ma-ngay, questioning an arrogant Annamite who had insulted the Moï guards at a certain post and treated them like monkeys and swine. “Why did you insult them like that?” asked the old man in his rough Rade tongue. “You are very proud. Are we not all alike? *Do we not eat the same rice?*”

...Is Khunjonob, chief of the tribe of elephant hunters, nothing but a savage—he who hurled at the governor-general the proud challenge; “Send your spirit beyond the great mountains, behind which the sun disappears. It is there that we live, the Rades, the Pihs, the Mnongs. We belong to neither Annam nor Laos nor Siam. We stand alone; we are ourselves alone. The land in which we live is the land given us by the Lord of Heaven.”⁷⁰

Dorgelès comments, “Such are the men who are to be made a race of coolies!”

⁶⁹ Coolidge, Jr. & Roosevelt. *Three kingdoms of Indo-China*, 1933, 267.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 274-275. Emphasis in the original.

One experience introduced Dorgelès to a native justice which he found rough but effective. He spent some time observing a traditional Rhade court administering local customary law:

The law of the Rade is not incorporated in a code; it is disseminated in innumerable sayings that have been handed down for ages....Everywhere I have known law; here I had a glimpse of equity. And if I am able now to imagine Solomon on his throne or St. Louis under his oak, it is neither to the Bible nor to Joinville that I am indebted; it is to those three [Rhade chiefs] with copper bracelets and tin necklaces.⁷¹

Dorgelès describes the scene, appreciating the spontaneity and openness of the gathered villagers.

At times all the inhabitants of a village came to testify, half on one side, half on another, and hardly had the plaintiff uttered two words before the row would begin. The old women stopped hunting lice, the men shoved back their betel-quid, the plump babies were thrown down among their wrappings and had to stop nursing, and all of them bellowed, threatened, and insulted one another, so that in the frightful din it was quite impossible to make out what the trouble was about....But [the youngest judge] was equal to the occasion. Ten times he began the examination anew, summoned one, sent back another, laughed boisterously at the howling; and then suddenly the months of prison and the fines fell, also sacrifices, consisting of a pig or a buffalo to be slaughtered. As soon as sentence was pronounced, bracelets were exchanged and the pacified villagers returned home in Indian file, their baskets on their backs.⁷²

In some case discussions turned into quarrels and the senior judge would intervene:

⁷¹ Ibid., 295.

⁷² Coolidge, Jr. & Roosevelt. *Three kingdoms of Indo-China*, 1933, 297.

All at once he would stretch out his arm, fingers spread wide, and with an altered voice and measured words he would begin to recite. All grew quiet. They understood. It was the *Bidoué*, the ancestral law.... “The bananas, the yams, the rice you shall divide with your sisters..., the entrails of the buffalo and the flesh of pigs you shall divide into equal parts...small pots, small calabashes, objects worth one *dah*, divide among your sisters....Without dispute, with no outcry. Do not leave one another. Do not separate. Live together. Otherwise, small or great, weak or strong, will be lost. Give aid to one another....”

The people listened in silence, recognizing the familiar phrases. It seemed to them that their ancestors were judging them.⁷³

What does our code have to add to the *Bidoué*? Crimes, delinquencies, offenses, all are to be found there, even to the forsaking of a sick servant, to the excessive profits of a merchant, the transmission of contagious diseases. Have our laws of civilization considered these?⁷⁴

Dorgelès’ attitude reminds one of the seventeenth century essayist Montaigne, who in his essay “On cannibals” viewed South American natives with the same respect:

...I do not believe, from what I have been told about this people, that there is anything barbarous or savage about them, except that we call barbarous anything that is contrary to our own habits. Indeed we seem to have no other criterion of truth and reason than the type and kind of opinions and customs current in the land where we live. There we always see the perfect religion, the perfect political system, the perfect and most accomplished way of doing everything....In [such people], the true, most useful, and natural virtues and

⁷³ Ibid., 300.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 307.

properties are alive and vigorous....These nations, then, seem to me barbarous in the sense that they have received very little moulding from the human intelligence, and are still very close to their original simplicity. They are still governed by natural laws and very little corrupted by our own.⁷⁵

Interestingly, George Bogle had some of the same sentiments regarding Bhutanese:

So far from that Barbarism which with transalpine Arrogance is too often considered the Lot of every Nation unknown to Europeans: I found a little State governed by a regular and strict Police, independent by the Situation of the Country, and subject to an elective Government, which though absolute was checked by the free Spirit of the People, unawed by Mercenary Troops, and apt to rebel when treated with Oppression.⁷⁶

The tendency of Europeans to see the “savages” they met around the world in past decades as noble in their freedom from civilized corruption has been common, and is no doubt as incomplete an analysis as any other, but is at least less arbitrarily demeaning and Eurocentric. Perhaps Dorgelès and Bogle can be considered “resisters” to this extent.

Conclusion

That the highlands of Southeast Asia made a strong impact on these travelers is obvious from the accounts they published. What impact did such people have on the highlands? As noted, there were those who can be described as mere tourists, implying their impact on local life was transient and superficial, while others changed that life considerably. And what can we learn from them? Their writings are

⁷⁵ Michel de Montaigne. *Essays*. Translated with an introduction by J.M. Cohen. Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, 1958, 1966, 108. Thanks to Professor Michael Koppisch for this reference.

⁷⁶ *High road to China*, 80.

studies in the epochal and mutual confrontation and penetration between East and West we describe as the impact of Western imperialism on Asia. We see a progression of European power as it gradually made its strong impact on the highlands. If Paul de la Gironière was a semi-feudal figure whose efforts at modernization proved evanescent, by the time of Francis Garnier, French commitment to exploration with the clear intent of eventually controlling territory and life was explicit and serious, and local authorities were being forced not only to submit, but to facilitate this effort. Auguste Pavie continued the effort to establish a French protectorate as George Scott was genially forcing the submission of Shan villages to Queen Victoria. Along with imperial power came advances in public health and scientific knowledge of the area, and increasing openness to foreign tourists, hunters, and artists as well as the permanent settlers, soldiers, and missionaries. But even after end of the colonial era, highland societies seemed to survive with an autonomy perhaps as far from outside domination as before.