Rama III, Minh Mạng and Power Paradigm In Early Nineteenth Century Mekong Valley[1]

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Abstract

This article explores the way early modern state-making conquered the space of the Mekong valley. The main aim of the article is to re-construct the transformation of the political landscape in the region through the impact of Siamese and Vietnamese centralized expansion in the time of Rama III and Minh Mạng. I shall take the increasing body of geographies of knowledge and extending infrastructure of state-building as my point of departure to unfold the move of new politico-economic institution into this complex terrain and autonomous marginal space. I argue that the Mekong basin of the eighteenth century margins and ambiguous political identification was administratively turned into "territory" of the early nineteenth century centralized state. As a result, the state-making project fundamentally transformed the political structure of the region. Unlike in the eighteenth century when the state moved toward people and economic

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centers, early nineteenth century witnessed various forms by which people voluntarily, or were forced, to move along with state establishment. Centers had been mapped and the state administrative network paved the way for reorganizing the political structure of the region, paralleled by both Siamese and Vietnamese nation-building. By looking at the Siamese and Vietnamese expansion along the Mekong basin, not from the perspective of confrontation, but in the context of power transformation throughout the basin, a convergence between them can be drawn: that is, the extensive expansion of the state into mountains, hills, and swamps by creating canals, routes, military fortresses and by collecting immigrants at the frontier to set up settlements and administrative networks. The state conquest into the periphery and semi-periphery was in a larger scale than ever before and created a fundamental transformation from the "periphery" into the "geobody" of the central state.

Introduction

"*Kep pak sai sa, kep kha sai muang*"
Put vegetables in the basket, put people in the *muang*
---Thai proverb

This article explores the early form of state-making projects in the Mekong valley before national space had been constructed or the national geography, overwhelmingly shaped by our production of knowledge and national borders, dominated our conceptualization of the Mekong valley. Politically speaking, scholarship on the early nineteenth century Mekong region tries to draw a relationship between Siam and Đại Nam from a very modern Thai and Vietnamese perspective. Regular convention deals with political confrontation, economic competition, and religious expansion as driving forces. This article will not look at Siam and Đại Nam from that antagonistic perspective, but bring them together into the political space of the

Mekong valley, arguing that during the time of Rama III (1824-1851) and Minh Mạng (1820-1841), the river basin shared the same theme of political transformation in which early modern state-making, using the power of geography and cartography to move beyond complex terrains, conquered and reorganized the space with state infrastructure. The phenomenon partly took shape within the modern contours of mainland Southeast Asia at the edge of colonialism.

Research in the last decades has detailed the economic integrity of the Mekong valley during early modern history. Several economic networks stretched from the northern mainland to the Lower Mekong River delta in the south.[3] This economic landscape of the nineteenth century mainland, however, poses the question of reconstructing the dialectical correlation with the political landscape in which such economic interaction was generated. By sharpening the tools of historical analysis, it can be seen that there is a convergence of view of scholarship relating to the political history of mainland Southeast Asia in premodern time, either from an outside perspective or by localization agency. The dominant feature is that such a pattern of political structure is still overwhelmingly captured by a very traditional perspective, particularly relating to the narrative of Siam and Vietnam. Conventional models of politics and power under the influence of religious philosophy, notably the Buddhist *cakkavatin* and the Sino-Vietnamese tributary system, nonetheless, seem not to show a strong comprehensive justification for either the scale of political development in the early nineteenth century, or power organization in shaping geopolitics in the Mekong space before French Indochina.

As a result, scholarship on the Mekong valley regularly acknowledges a contrast between the political ideology of the Theravada kingdom of Siam, on the one hand, and the Sinicized Vietnam, on the other. Differences of diplomatic worldview, economic ambition, and political expansion are described as *de facto* motors of Rama III and Minh Mạng's foreign policy toward the Mekong basin.

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[3]   See Chiranan, Yun*nan Trade in the Nineteenth century***;** Puangthong, "War and Trade"; Li and Cooke, *Water Frontier*; Lieberman, *Strange Parallels*; Walker, *The legend of the golden boat*.

Sunait Chutintaranond has conducted extensive research on premodern Siamese-Burmese warfare, in general, and on the idea of *cakravartin*, in particular. He points out that the *cakravartin* concept functioned as an ideological motivation of Siamese and Burmese kings in traditional warfare. In reality, the kings created within their imaginary *Jambudipa* the realm of their own *mandala* or "field of power", in which they contended to become the most powerful Buddhist king. However, their *mandala* never overlapped until the first half of the sixteenth century after the old Mon kingdom was totally incorporated as part of the Burmese political domain and after the interior capital, Toungoo, was abandoned and replaced by Pegu, which also wanted to control the trans-peninsular traffic with the Gulf of Siam.[4] In the cases of Thai-Lao and Thai-Khmer relations, sometimes the recognition is not limited within the context of *mandala* or tributary relations. The Thai-Lao close kinship and the protection of Buddhism against Vietnamese destruction in Cambodia sometimes were used by Bangkok to justify the presence of Siamese power in the Mekong valley.[5] Early nineteenth century Vietnamese narratives, on other hand, describe the westward movement under the characteristics of "*mission civilisatrice*". A Hue official explained the Vietnamese campaign in Cambodia, stating:

> ...from the creation of the earth onwards, only now has our Southern Country become extensive, something our dynasty has achieved beneath the southern skies. The land of Cao Man (Cambodia) is not broken up by mountains and unhealthy air; it is flat and fertile, flourishing and rich, located to the west of our country, and bordered by our Lục Tỉnh (southern Vietnam). All this [occurs] because Heaven cannot bear that it should be a barbarian desert. Now that our country is changing things in a significant way and registering [Khmer] households, the day of transforming old customs into Hoa [civilization/Vietnamese] has come.[6]

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[4] Sunait, "Cakravartin"; Sunait and Than Tun, *On Both Sides of the Tenasserim Range*.
[5] Chandler, "Cambodia Before the French".
[6] Li and Cooke, "The Customs of Cambodia", 155-156.

However, the political landscape of the early nineteenth century Mekong presents a considerable level of state expansion in which such explanations are in need of more illustration. The "field of power", especially during the time of Rama III and Minh Mạng, was extended to the marginal zone of the Mekong basin. State administration crossed swamps and climbed mountains. In this context, the gap of knowledge between our understanding economic nature and political landscape challenges the comprehensive view of the Mekong as a united economic and political subject. The early nineteenth century is also critical. Ruling on the eve of colonialism in the mainland, Rama III and Minh Mạng are conventionally acknowledged as the last and great traditional kings of Siam and Đại Nam. Therefore, a clear frontier between "old Siam" and "new Siam", "traditional Vietnam" and "colonial Vietnam" has been significantly recognized by the introduction of the Bowring Treaty (1851) and French Invasion of Cochinchina (1858). However, it is likely that their time should be better considered in the context of transition rather than merely belonging to the traditional framework. By shifting this angle of vision, it is hoped scholarly understanding of change in the mainland, from premodern to early modern history, can be enriched. This transition has been neglected or has been unable to be presented in early modern scholarship on the mainland mainly because of the usage of a traditional theoretical framework. This old perspective has been found incapable of paving a new way to understand internal change as a result of economic emergence and colonial threat.

The significance of those suggestions is that they encourage scholarship to go beyond colonial and national historiographies and present a new way to think of Siam and Đại Nam in the perspective of political transition, as well as to deal with Siamese-Vietnamese interaction in the context of two parallel projects of state-building. This approach is expected to shed light upon a wide range of political events in the early modern Mekong valley, for which concepts and patterns of traditional Southern Asian politics are unlikely to cover.[7] By examining the way early modern state-making conquered the space of

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[7]   Reynolds, "Paradigms of the Premodern State", 31-52.

the Mekong valley, the main aim is to re-construct the transformation of the political landscape in the region through the impact of Siamese and Vietnamese centralized expansion in the time of Rama III and Minh Mạng. I take the increasing body of geographies of knowledge and extending infrastructure of state-building as a point of departure to unfold the move of the new politico-economic institution into this complex terrain and autonomous marginal space. The argument is that the Mekong basin of the eighteenth century margins and ambiguous political identification was administratively turned into "territory" of the early nineteenth century centralized state. As a result, this state-making project fundamentally transformed the political structure of the region by introducing state infrastructure, facility, and institution; by recognizing space and reconstructing geopolitics; and by setting common political standardization, territorialization, and even a *lingua franca* within the new domain. The state conquest into the frontier of the Mekong valley was in a larger scale than ever before and posed tremendous transformation from the "periphery" into the "geobody" of the central state.

Structure of Power in the Premodern Mekong Valley

The power paradigm in premodern history is among the main conventions of scholarship on the mainland by which each historiography tries to portray a model of intra-and inter-political relations in shaping state and society. However, it is challenging to mark a chronological category of political change based upon the structure of power organization. The core of such debate not only lies in various types of administrative organization, but also the way the state organizes space geopolitically. Therefore, "Indianized states", "Galactic polities", "*mandala*", "circles of kings", and a Chinese model of vassal states reflect diverse power paradigms in the way the state manages different groups at different spatial layers. Narratives on "old" Thailand are currently overwhelmingly marked by the theory of *mandala*, which say that the Thai polity of Ayutthaya and smaller principalities assumed features of Angkorian-style kingship. In spite of a gradually emerging centralized establishment, Ayutthaya was never

fully in any form of coherent politics, given alternate rule by different families. A fundamental change in terms of political organization only came with the introduction of the Chakri family who were "able to convert a somewhat loosely organized mandala into a state where the component parts were much more responsive to the center."[8]

A model with a multi-political center can be practically linked with the *ban-muang* political system which is universally accepted among the Tai-speaking world and upland Vietnam in the premodern time.[9] If one looks at the Mekong valley from this perspective, it is intriguing to describe the whole region as a "field of power" with the existence of diverse political centers and in-homogeneous power relationships. Centers of the "field" were consistently shifting among Angkor, Lanna, Sukhothai, LanXang, Ayutthaya, Thonburi, Hanoi, Hue, and Sai Gon. Although many of these centers did not directly connect with the Mekong River, they were significantly engaged within the political influence of the Mekong space. When the Vietnamese went southward along the coast, and the Thai went down the Chao Phraya River, the imperial historiography of Hue and Bangkok narrated Laos and Cambodia as fragmentary histories or sub-histories of their main stream.[10]

The changing power network in the Mekong came about as the Siamese and Vietnamese started recognizing the region and showing their increasing interest toward the hills and mountains. While there used to be great civilizations and powers along the Mekong, namely Angkor and LanXang, when the Siamese and Vietnamese came to power by the late eighteenth century, they faced no significant challenge in dealing with local powers which were in division and de-centralized. Between the sixteenth and eighteenth century, overlapping influential zones between Siam and Nguyen Cochinchina

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[8]   Wolters, *History, Culture, and Region*, 31-32; Gesick, "Kingship and Political Integration in Tradition Siam", chapters 2 and 3; Tambiah, *World Conqueror and World Renouncer*.

[9]   Cam Trong, *Baan-müang*, 12-26.

[10] See Chandler, "Cambodia before the French"; Eiland, "Dragon & Elephant"; Bun Srun Theam, "Cambodia in the Mid-19th Century"; Mayoury, *Paths to conflagration*; Smith, " 'Cambodia' and 'Vietnam' ".

were significantly expanded into Cambodia and Laos, particularly to the economic and population centers. The expansion was widely conducted by military expedition to control manpower, trade and fertile land for agricultural cultivation. The Vietnamese continuously moved southward and finally annexed Champa, as well as the Lower Mekong Delta which was very ambiguously dependent on either the Khmer king's patronage, the Nguyen Lord in Cochinchina or Chinese autonomous coastal communities. This political landscape suggests that the paradigm of power in the mainland was in a period of transition from the classic mandala system into more centralized kingdoms of the premodern era.

Early Nineteenth Century Mekong Valley: Geographies of Knowledge

Mapping, cartography and political philosophy accompany political evolution in world history. "Maps blossom in the springtime of the state,"[11] and the state uses power of cartography to conquer new space in expanding its establishment. Geographical knowledge was undoubtedly the departure point for designing the politics of space in both Siam and Đại Nam and for constructing their structure of power in the Mekong basin.[12] It is worth noting that Rama III and Minh Mạng significantly started to bring this body of knowledge into their project of political management.

Prior to the second half of the 18th century, most parts of the Mekong valley maintained uncertain and ambiguous political identity among rising states, especially *muang* Laos in the central and the "water world" of swamps in the lower part. Those areas were long considered as at the margins of the three great kingdoms of Siam, Đại Nam and Burma and usually invisible with respect to political concerns. However, a study of the late eighteenth century shows significant attention was paid to the region because of the expansion of centralization. Collecting geographical data became crucial for the

[11] Wood, *Rethinking the Power of Maps*, 15

[12] On the relationship between cartography and political structure, see Edson, *Mapping Time and Space*; Thrower, *Maps and Civilization*; Harley, *The History of Cartography*.

Nguyen, Thonburi and Bangkok dynasties because all the successful campaigns they made came from the periphery to capture the center. Therefore, they present a unique perspective for the need to incorporate the margins under state control as an equally important administrative and territorial unit. Nguyễn Ánh (Ong Chiang Su) played an active military and political role in the region for twenty-five years. Taksin built his network in Chanthaburi and then tried to annex both Phnom Penh and Hà Tiên. Rama I and his younger brother engaged in military campaigns in the Lower Mekong for decades before coming to the throne. As strong and ambitious successors, Rama III and Minh Mạng had all those legacies of knowledge and interest toward the Mekong basin.

In fact, both Bangkok and Hue were fully aware of how to use geography to manage their vast territory in which many parts were only recently incorporated. Geographical records and maps were created in large numbers during the time of Gia Long and Minh Mạng, covering both Vietnam and its neighbours, including *Gia Định Thành Thông Chí* (*Gia Dinh Gazetteer*), *Đại Nam Nhất Thống Chí* (*Geography of United Đại Nam*), *Hoàng Việt Nhất Thống Địa Dư Chí* (*Geography of the Viet Kingdom*), *Lịch Triều Hiến Chương Loại Chí* (*Accounts on the institutions of successive dynasties*), *Xiêm La Quốc Lộ Trình Tạp Lục* (*Record of the Siamese Routes*), *Hải Trình Chí Lược* (*A Maritime Record*), and *Trấn Tây Phong Thổ Ký* (*The Customs of Cambodia*).[13] Nineteenth century Vietnamese cartography also made significant progress, especially with respect to information about the Mekong region. One example among those is Đại Man Quốc Đồ (Map of the Great Barbarian Kingdoms) drawn in the western Vietnamese mountain province of Hưng Hóa. The "countries" concerned are an overview of the Tai world to the west of Vietnam, stretching from the

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[13]   See Trịnh Hoài Đức, *Gia Dinh Gazetteer* (in Vietnamese); Quốc sử quán triều Nguyễn, *The Unification Records of Dai Nam* (in Vietnamese); Lê Quang Định, *Geographical Records of the Unified Imperial South* (in Vietnamese); Phan Huy Chú, *Categorized Records of the Institutions of Successive Dynasties* (in Sino-Vietnamese); Tống Phúc Ngoạn, *Collected Records of Itineraries to Siam* (in Sino-Vietnamese); Phan Huy Chú, *An account of a travel by sea* (in Vietnamese and French); Li and Cooke, "The Customs of Cambodia".

mountains in the northern Tonkin to the Gulf of Siam in the south. The map is full of *muang* and *trinh* (Chiang/Xieng). At the center of the map is the Southern Barbarian country capital (perhaps Ayutthaya).[14] The cartographic integration of Vietnam and the adoption of Western style cartography were significant in reconfiguring the geopolitical surface of Vietnam and the Mekong basin. The significance of the maps, for the first time, not only shows Viet's image of a united geography along the eastern mainland, but also integration within the regional landscape. A collection of maps from 1838-1839, named Đại Nam Toàn Đồ (Comprehensive Maps of Đại Nam), show a profound understanding of the region by the Vietnamese. In some cases, maps drawn in European style describe the entire country of Đại Nam with the Mekong River system and the Great Lake in Cambodia. Other maps include areas of southern Laos and eastern Cambodia as the "thirty-second province" of Đại Nam. [15]

Royal Siamese maps created during the first three reigns of the *Rattanakosin* era are not less significant than those of contemporary Vietnam. Most recently, in 1996, seventeen exquisite hand-drawn and hand-coloured maps were discovered in the Grand Palace, Bangkok. Those long-lost treasures cartographically record Siamese warfare and trade between 1782 and 1851. Focusing on Siam and on her immediate neighbours, the collection also includes a remarkable four-metre coastal map extending from peninsular Malaysia to Korea. Among these are maps of *muang* Thalang, *muang* Lakhon/Ko Mak/Thalang-Sai (peninsular Siam, Saiburi, Penang), *muang* Thawai (Kanchanaburi, Suphanburi, Tak & Ava peninsula), *muang* Phrataphang (Mekong River Delta), Khmen Nai Ni (Lower northeast Siam to Upper Cambodia), *muang* Ubon/ Phnom Penh, *muang* Nakhon Si Thammarat, Phra Akkhanaesorn (the whole Cambodia), Angwa/Attapue (Southern Laos), *muang* Nakhon Si Thammarat (peninsular Siam and island Southeast Asia).[16] These maps describe a remarkable understanding of

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[14] Whitmore, "Cartography of Vietnam", 497.

[15] Whitmore, "Cartography in Vietnam", 478-510; Quốc sử quán triều Nguyễn, *Bibliographies of Đại Nam,* 549 (in Vietnamese); Li and Cooke, "The Customs of Cambodia", 149.

[16] Santanee, *Royal Siamese Maps*, 22.

mainland Southeast Asia by the Siamese, in general, and the Mekong River Valley, in particular, the area which became the main surface of confrontation between Siam and Đại Nam. Some maps on southern Vietnam and Cambodia even show villages and estuaries in detail, with the local communities and ethnicities. It is possible that other maps were likely specially created for military and administrative purposes, particular those of the area along the Mekong River from Vientiane to Phnom Penh which was considered strategic for Bangkok.[17]

The increasing body of knowledge about the Mekong River is used as a starting point for designing the new geopolitics in both Siam and Đại Nam. Maps and geographical reports significantly assisted the Thai and Vietnamese in recognizing places and defining its political status. Map-making with active support of the military and economic establishment helped to demarcate the influential zone between Siam and Đại Nam over this complex terrain. Cartography also contributed to the drastic change in the way the rulers in the mainland came to acknowledge "land" as a source of economic dynamism. The increased focus on "territory" was a significant new trait of the political phenomenon in Siam and Đại Nam. Vietnamese scholar, Phan Huy Chú, stated in 1820 that "of the national treasure, nothing can compare with land from which generates people and prosperity."[18] A few years later, one of the Minh Mạng's official reported to the Hue court stated, "[In Cambodia] Land is fertile and abundant here and population is scarce. Only 30–40 percent of the land is under cultivation, mainly for cotton and betel nut and a little rice. Merchants come here to trade for local products and make big profits."[19] The king himself also talked about the land a thousand miles from his capital:

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[17] Kennedy, "An Indigenous Early Nineteenth Century Map of Central and Northeast Thailand".

[18] Phan Huy Chú, *Categorized Records of the Institutions of Successive Dynasties* (in Sino-Vietnamese).

[19] Li and Cooke, "The Customs of Cambodia", 151.

> [In Cambodia] I have heard that, for example, the land is plentiful and fertile, and that there are plenty of oxen [for plowing] … but the people have no knowledge of [advance] agriculture, using picks and hoes, rather than oxen. They grow enough rice for two meals a day, but they do not store any surplus. Daily necessities like cloth, silk, ducks and pork are very expensive.[20]

Geography and cartography are *de facto* effective companions of state-making. By putting on maps zones of ambiguous political nature, they generate a new understanding of geopolitics and allow the state to work out strategies to control the space. The consciousness of power therefore became more authentic and was easily applied over a vast territory. If the administrative function of previous political institutions was limited and mainly focused on seeking taxes, manpower, and military campaign, the power of geography enabled the state to establish a more permanent, complicated system with more effective management.

The Nineteenth Century Mekong: A Space of Early State-making

In this part, I will explore the transformation of the Mekong landscape under the project of early modern state-making. When each of the kingdoms of Siam, Burma and Đại Nam had become united the expansion of those centralized kingdoms reached to the last margins, frontier, and periphery of the mainland, mostly the complex terrain along the Mekong River. The Khmer and Lao principalities retained relative freedom from the outside hegemony until a new Siam emerged from the ashes of Ayutthaya, and Vietnam was united in 1802. The new political environment witnessed that, "for the first time, virtually the entire mainland, including upland valleys, was effectively divided among lowland-based empires, so the Burmese, Siamese, and Vietnamese realms of 1820/1830 were considerably larger than their charter predecessors. Finally, territorial extension required and reflected more effective internal administrative controls."[21]

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[20] Chandler, *A History of Cambodia*, 152.
[21] Lieberman, *Strange Parallels*, vol. 1, 28.

During the first three reigns of Bangkok, Siamese kings, through massive and violent military expeditions, sought control and annexation of several areas which used to be distinguished as vassal or periphery states. The Siamese army in the reign of Rama III, in particular, was active in a vast territory of one hundred thousand square kilometers from the north to the south, covering Chiang Tung, Chiang Mai, Luang Prabang, Vientiane, Champassak, Phnom Penh, Khorat Plateau to the Malay peninsula. Those military movements directly challenged the landscape of multi-political centers which existed during the first two reigns, which essentially can be described as a new level of Siamese centralized expansion in controlling rice, trading resources and manpower on both side of the Mekong basin.[22] The same picture is also evident from the Vietnamese attempt to expand their administrative system into southernmost Cochinchina, eastern Cambodia, and northwestern Tonkin. For the first time, after two hundred years of division, the country was united under the authority of a single central government who controlled a territory as large as present-day Vietnam. With a strong political ambition, the appearance of nineteenth century Vietnam was accompanied by the need to reorganize its territory for more effective management. Minh Mạng's administrative reforms demonstrate the Vietnamese effort to bring state making up to the mountains and ethnic minority areas. Going to the west became the new orientation of Vietnam history as the state was aware that control of the new merged territories was politically and economically vital, with trading resources coming from the mountains along the Mekong and rice exports from the lower river delta which, since the middle of nineteenth century, constituted more than seventy percent of the total exports in the region.[23]

Foreign trade was undoubtedly crucial for both Bangkok and Hue; as a result, there was the need to create an effective administrative system, especially in the area of rich commercial resources. In doing so, the Siamese and Vietnamese state conducted an

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[22] Wilson, "The Holy Man in the History of Thailand and Laos", 345-364.
[23] Yoko, "The Rice Exports and the Colonial Tariff Policy of the French Indochina", 60-82.

unparalleled massive project to conquer the Mekong River and created a space of centralized establishment. The state produced administrative infrastructure in complex terrains and expanded its institutions into the periphery. People at the frontier were then collected and resettled along those state facilities. Through territorialization of space, the state built new ways of managing the political surface by means of an administrative system, rather than traditional power relationships mainly based on "loyalty" and vassal obligation.

Moving people along the State Infrastructure in the Mekong Valley

Between the 1820s and the 1850s, the Mekong valley witnessed considerable movement of people. Various ethnic groups were voluntary or forced to cross different terrains, frontiers and human landscapes. Most of those demographic influxes directly resulted from the impact of centralized expansion through which people escaped from warfare, starvation, religious and ethnic suppression, and more frequently, as part of state design. The lack of manpower in the mainland contributed to this movement when huge numbers of people were required to service massive working project such as digging canals, building roads, fortresses, and joining warfare.[24] It is suggested that in 1800, the Siamese population was around four million and became 4.75 million in 1825.[25] During the same period, the Vietnamese population was around seven million.[26] Those figures seem far from sufficient since Bangkok and Hue both required large manpower to build a new capital, public works, hydraulic systems, and maintaining a large standing army. During the campaigns of Taksin and Rama I, war captives and peoples were collected from the Malay, Khmer, Lao and Shan territories to resettle around the Chao Phraya basin. In the early days of Bangkok, ten thousand Cambodians were

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[24] Scott, *The Art of Not Being Governed*, 4.
[25] Skinner, *Chinese Society in Thailand,* 68, 70; Reid, *Southeast Asia in the Age of Commerce*, vol. 1, 14.
[26] Li, *Nguyen Cochinchina*, 159-172; Yumio Sakurai, "Vietnam After the Age of Commerce", 1, 3; Lieberman, *Strange Parallels,* 420.

forced into labour in digging canals which allowed Bangkok, a low-lying, flat terrain of elevation less than two meters above sea level, to become a new and dense capital city.[27] Then, 5,000 Laotians from Vientiane were recruited to construct fortifications and walls and another 20,000 laborers were brought to drain the land and extend the city in a larger scale.[28] In the reign of Rama III, at least four large projects to improve waterways were completed. Among those was a project to dig a canal linking Huamak to Bang Khanak, thirty-three miles long, costing nearly 96,000 baht, and taking two years.[29] The impact of those public works was extremely significant in creating a new human landscape. Most of new dense population of Bangkok ran along the newly-building canal system of Ku Muang Dern canal, Bangkok Noi canal, Bangkok Yai canal, Rob Krung Canal, Ong Ang canal, Banglumphu canal, and Mahanak canal.[30]

Following the war with Đại Nam, those canals continued moving eastward along with increasing Siamese engagement in Cambodia and Cochinchina. Many routes and waterways were originally built for military purposes to solve the main challenge of rapid conveyance of troops and supplies to support newly established territories. Several channels were constructed to connect Bangkok with the Khorat Plateau and inner Cambodia which played a crucial role in the Siamese military responses to Lao and Cambodian incidents. The Sean Saep Canal was built in 1837 with the aim of hastening the movement of troop and military supplies to the Cambodian territory. The eastern part of this canal, called Bang Khanak, extended to the Prachin Buri River.[31] In this context, the resettlement of 30,000 Mon (1815), and 150,000 Lao brought back from Vientiane by Chaophraya

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[27] Shigeharu, "Historical Geography of the Canal System in the Chao Phraya River Delta", 28.

[28] Wenk, *The Restoration of Thailand under Rama I, 1782-1809*, 19-22.

[29] Vella, *Siam Under Rama III*, 24.

[30] Pussadee, "Settlement in the Central Region of Thailand", 17.

[31] Shigeharu, "Historical Geography of the Canal System", 44; King, "Travels in Siam and Cambodia", 177-182.

Bordin (1827) played an indispensable role in assisting Siamese state-building.[32]

To the eastern mainland, moving deeper into the vast complex terrain of the Lower Mekong, the Vietnamese faced more challenges of communication and agricultural expansion. Most of the areas along the river banks and of easy cultivation were captured and canal and irrigation works were the only choice for the state to move forward into the amphibious world. In 1817, Gia Long examined the map of Châu Đốc and instructed that, "for this region, it is now the time to open a river-route to go straight to Hà Tiên, [people] would easily make business and do agriculture. Then, people are crowded, lands are going to expand, [Châu Đốc] can be a huge commandery."[33] In the reign of Minh Mạng, building canals, routes and military fortresses were the main public works which the Nguyen dynasty conducted in the southern region. Tens of thousands of peoples, including Vietnamese, Chinese, Malay, Khmer, Cham were voluntarily or forced to move following this unprecedented phenomenon. In order to dig the Vĩnh Tế canal, for instance, nearly one hundred thousand people were recruited in this five year project, including around thirty thousand Khmer. These people then were organized into communities and villages along the water channels and rice fields which partly formed new administrative units.[34]

As a result of this massive human fluidity, both Siam and Đại

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[32] See, Chandler, who mentioned a palm leaf chronicle at Wat Srolauv (1856), in north central Cambodia which suggested that during the wartime, many Khmer escaped into Siam and whom Rama III "allowed to settle and grow rice" along the border. Chandler, *Facing the Cambodian past*, 91. Also Mayoury, *Paths to Conflagration,* 231. The search for manpower was continuously increased in Siam between 1778 and 1828. Mayoury also demonstrated vividly this phenomenon in the case of the Lao areas. Mayoury, *Paths to Conflagration,* 45-50. Puangthong also mentioned the Siamese control of the Khmer population in the western Cambodian provinces of Battambang and Siam Reap. Puangthong, "War and Trade"*,* chapter VI.

[33] Quốc sử quán Triều Nguyễn, *The Veritable Records of Đại Nam*, Vol. 4, 308 (in Vietnamese).

[34] Chandler, "An Anti-Vietnamese Rebellion in Early Nineteenth Century Cambodia", 16-24; Nguyễn Văn Hầu, *Thoai Ngoc Hau and the Campaigns to reclaim the Trans-Bassac Region* (in Vietnamese).

Nam created space for a multiethnic and multicultural society. The establishment of Bangkok vividly demonstrates the intermingling of peoples from the Mekong space. Edward Van Roy suggests that under the reign of Rama III, Bangkok's eleven disparate ethnic minorities – Mon, Lao, Khmer, Malay, Cham, South Asian, Vietnamese, Burmese, Thai-Portuguese, and Western – consisting primarily of refugees and war captives from the inlands and merchant mariners and wage workers from overseas, constituted a tableau of discrete settlements that collectively played a vigorous and variegated role in the city's political, social and economic life. The way Bangkok was structured thus reflects the shifting paradigm of the Siamese internal relationships. With respect to ethnic spatial distribution, for instance, settlements assumed a radical pattern around a sacral center in conformity with their social status, and they divided north and south of the capital's lateral axis in accordance with their respective roles in linking Siam's internal redistributive economy with the external market economy.[35] This kind of urban transition to modernity was never seen at Ayutthaya.[36] The creation of a multiethnic society in the Lower Mekong under the Vietnamese state offers another image of multiethnic transition. The Vietnamese central state collected people of all ethnicities and then put them together with different languages, cultures, and religions. Minh Mạng later on used the same strategy when he expanded control toward the Tai area in northwestern Tonkin and Cambodia. Vietnamese officials were appointed to rule Cambodia or ethnic zones in order to set up a Viet standardization of culture and politics. The process can be called "Vietnamization".[37]

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[35] Van Roy, "Twixt Land and Sea: Bangkok's Plural Society on the Verge of Modernity".
[36] The separation of ethnic settlements in Ayutthaya shows the very traditional way of the capital's organization in these old days of Southeast Asia in which ethnicities were isolated with each other and located outside the Grand Palace or the Royal Section. Garnier, *Ayutthaya: Venice of the East*; Wright, *Discovering Ayutthaya*; Baker, "Old Ayutthaya as a City".
[37] Poisson, "Unhealthy air of the Mountains", 12-24; Chandler, *A History of Cambodia,* 151-152.

Administrative Expansion

Massive expansion of state-making caused the destruction of traditional power relationships in the Mekong valley. The region has long been described as a 'social space' of shared values, culture, beliefs, identity and kinship.[38] Human interaction therefore was historically shaped by the flow of water and streams along 'riverine exchange networks' and valleys between mountains. Such discourse of political internal relations through the Mekong faced severe challenges from the two unprecedented emerging centralized building campaigns of Đại Nam and Siam who were able to locate peoples on maps and no longer accepted the existence of any ambiguous political zones. State-building provided a clear political identification by marking spaces with labels of authority and boundary. For centuries, Lao *muang* and Khmer polities were maintained as "*muang song fai fa*", a principality with dual overlordship. However, Rama III and Minh Mạng offered no space for such in-homogeneousness, but required frontiers marked and directly controlled by those polities, and, therefore, new forms of administrative networks were created throughout the Mekong space.

Changing the periphery to become territory was a fundamental challenge for the state, which was done by reorganizing space and standardizing the diverse layers of geopolitics, especially the internal political relations between the center/core and the surrounding dependent entities. Popular political and religious movements in Laos, Thailand, and Vietnam show the scale of centralization and local response in keeping the central state at arm's length. Consequently, expansion of centralization and administrative systems gradually eroded local authorities, which were replaced by new political institutions directly established by the center. Local resistance against centralization took place in various forms, including peasant and ethnic rebellions in early nineteenth century Vietnam. Choi Byung Wook and others argue that the Nguyen centralized policy encouraged revolt of the minority by those who had been forced to abandon their culture, language, and economic nature, and who were turned into a "Viet" standard of civilization. The Cham in the central and Khmer in

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[38] Sachchidanand, *The Mekong River Space and Social Theory.*

the lower Mekong also tried escape the Viet state making, although not many of their efforts came to success.[39]

The establishment of an administrative system was a popular phenomenon in Đại Nam, and, to a certain extent in the case of Siam, between the 1820s and 1850s. This started by sending troops from the center for permanent control and dispatching central officers to form a permanent government; then came the process of cultural, social, and ethnic "assimilation" following the central model of the state, a cadastral survey, population registration, taxation, and *corvée* obligation. The period between 1767 and 1851 witnessed the expansive consolidation of Siamese administration over main trading routes and extensive mobilization of manpower from the trans-Mekong basin. The whole area of the Khorat Plateau was under direct Bangkok control and was tied with Siam Reap and Battambang. The fruit of those efforts were significant for Siam. Between 1767 and 1882, about 150 new *muang* were created in the Khorat Plateau, Laos and western Cambodia.[40] After the Chau Anu rebellion, Siam brought all the former Vientiane territory under its direct administration. The same effort was made by Rama III to annex the western provinces of Cambodia, such as Siem Reap and Battambang, as part of the Siamese political domain.

In Đại Nam, Alexander Woodside also informs that the number of districts in Vietnam increased from 178 in the sixteenth century to 238 in the middle of nineteenth century.[41] Similar to the Siamese, who brought a new system of legitimacy and structure of power over the new *muang* network, Minh Mạng continuously promoted the "cultivation" of the southerners by the introduction of Confucianism, the building the roads and citadels to connect the whole kingdom and

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[39] See Choi Byung Wook, *Southern Vietnam under the Reign of Minh Mạng*; Weber, "The Destruction and Assimilation of Campa", 158-180; Weber, "Securing and Developing the South-western Region", 739-772.

[40] Puangthong, "War and Trade", 54, Also see the "Strategic Map from the Reign of Phrabat Somdet Phra Ramathibodi I", in which the map shows the state-control expansion over the Khorat Plateau and Mun River Valley, and the left bank of Mekong River during the early Bangkok Period. Santanee, *Royal Siamese Maps,* 51.

[41] Trương Quốc Dụng, Công Hạ Ký Văn, 1: 80b, quoted in Woodside, *Vietnam and the Chinese Model,* 23.

by sending his officers to rule in every corner of the country. He once instructed that, "these days I hear they [southerners] smoke opium, sing rowdily, gamble, dispute, and like the most brutal violence. These habits inevitable lead to robbery and burglary. As the women are licentious, their behavior is more disgusting. Husbands are already dissipated, then how can they ask for the fidelity of their wives."[42]

The mythical kinship relationship between the Thai and Lao, for the first time, was violated by the Taksin invasion in 1778. Four decades later, Rama III changed the Lao from brotherhood to being his subjects through a military campaign in 1827. The sack and complete destruction of Vientiane followed, together with a massive resettlement of Lao people on what is now the Thai side of the Mekong River, and in the next few years the Thai brought all the former Vientiane territories under their direct administration.[43] The following description by Vietnamese spies sent to Laos by Hue suggests the advance of Siamese in their new territory with roads, storehouses, and military fortresses:

> Nguyen Dinh Hung and Vu Dinh Hau reported that at the hour of the Cock, in the 26th day of the first month, [Vietnamese] military officers in Tran Ninh [Laos], named Tong Phuc Minh and Truong Van Su made a report that, Vietnamese spies were sent to the kingdom of Nam Chuong [Luang Prabang]. Those informed that this kingdom built two grain storehouses [for the army], one on the Thi River bank, and one in baan Lang. The road from the Thi River to Tran Ninh was widened. [Luang Prabang] also built two garrisons for Siamese Siamese troops to encamp.[44]

The 1827 incident in Laos marked a new phase of competition between Siam and Đại Nam. Although there was no direct war, the policies of Rama III and Minh Mạng toward Vientiane and other Laos *muang* were clear enough to think of a possible frontier in the central Mekong. It is likely that the Siamese had a skillful solution

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[42] Quốc sử quán triều Nguyễn, *Abstract of policies of Minh Mạng*, 13: 19a (in Vietnamese); see also Choi, *Southern Vietnam under the reign of Minh Mang*.

[43] Vella, *Siam Under Rama III*.

[44] Cơ mật viện, *Strategy to suppress rebellion following the King order* (in Vietnamese).

for this political situation when, in 1827, they depopulated most of the settlements in Vientiane, as well as refused to have any further military excursions eastward where Vietnamese troops had already set up at Sam Nua, Tran Ninh, and Savannakhet. The frontier between those two power networks seemed acceptable, even after Siamese administration reached Vientiane. In response, Vietnam strengthened its ties with the power network based in the Lao principalities locating along the present-day Lao-Vietnamese border to prevent the Siamese from any further military advance eastward. This political situation was maintained for several decades until the coming of the French.

Siamese and Vietnamese state-making in Cambodia was the main cause of confrontation on the mainland during the first half of the nineteenth century. The Cambodian kingdom was an 'overlapping zone' for centuries because of political division and dependence on Ayutthaya and Nguyen Cochinchina. They both maintained Cambodia as a vassal state with dual overlordship until Rama III and Minh Mạng challenged this traditional recognition. Recent scholarship suggests that an economic motor was the main theme of the nineteenth century Siamese engagement in Cambodia. As a result, a new political structure was set up by Siam in order to carry out an economic monopoly.[45] I also would like to propose that the emergence of early modern state making can possibly be seen as another motive for Vietnamese and Siamese expedition in Cambodia. The first attempts that tried to break the traditional political network among Siam, Cambodia, and Vietnam came from the Siamese in the late eighteenth century. King Taksin of Thonburi reached Hatien [Ponthaimas], and King Rama I launched a fifty-thousand troop campaign into the Lower Mekong Delta before being defeated in 1785/1786 by the Tây Sơn.[46]

Unlike Laos, the coherent geography and economic entity of Cambodia gave the kingdom a unique role to play in the context of regional confrontation in the Mekong. The situation was even more tragic for Cambodia as division came to its court and elite group. Accordingly, any attempt to monopolize Cambodia politically,

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[45] Puangthong, "War and Trade".

[46] Vũ Thế Dinh, *Genealogy of the Mac Family of Ha Tien* (in Vietnamese).

economically, and militarily led to unavoidable conflict because Cambodia itself was a complex geopolitical and economic entity. All demographic and economic centers, as well as trading sources, were linked along the Tonle Sap Lake, Cardamom Mountains, and northern mountains of Champassak. Notwithstanding, for a decade both Rama III and Minh Mạng consistently tried to annex the whole or part of Cambodia into their political domain. The most significant attempt was made by Minh Mạng in 1834 when he defeated a Siamese five-army invasion and assumed control over Cambodia. The Cambodian Queen was captured and taken to Sai Gon and her kingdom then became the thirty-second province of Đại Nam, Tran Tay Thanh or a western protectorate. Nguyen dynasty document shows how this province was run without exception from the others:

> In the Ming Mạng period [r. 1820–1841], the king of Cao Man had no heir and four of his daughters stood equal and could not rule the country. [Our king] thus ordered the army of Tham Tan, General Trấn Hộ (Pacify and Protect) to prepare rice rations and sent it to the [protecting Vietnamese] government, in order [for it] to [be able to] manage the land and set up [district] administrations there. Eleven prefectures (phủ) [are being set up]: Trấn Tây, Nghi Hoà, Nam Ninh, Võ Công, Hà Bình, Mỹ Lâm, Sơn Tĩnh, Hải Đông, Hải Tây, Ninh Thái, and Quảng Biên; and 25 districts (huyện): Phong Nhương, Thượng Phong, Nam Thái, Nam Thịnh, Phù Nam, Kỳ Tô, Thái An, Bình Xiêm, Trung Hà, Chân Tài, Phúc Lai, Hải Ninh, Tập Ninh, Trưng Thụy, Mỹ Tài, Hoa Lâm, Quế Lâm, Sơn Đông, Hải Bình, Thâu Trung, Ngọc Bia, Giang Hữu, Nam Thành, and Vĩnh Trường. All these units retain contacts with the [Vietnamese] provinces nearby, the same way that An Biên and Tinh Biên were managed by Hà Tiên, and Ba Xuyên was managed by An Giang.[47]

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[47] Li and Cooke, "The Customs of Cambodia", 149.

Explaining his extraordinary move, Minh Mạng was reported to have announced that:

> Truong Minh Giang once said, the people in Cambodia are plain, even more than the indigenous people in northern Vietnam, I myself do not believe. Today, among those in northern Vietnam, some have engaged with the intellectual, some have known the Chinese, [it means that] my power can make them fear, my favor can make them grateful. On the other hand, the Cambodians are insentient, and it is very difficult to rule them. I knew this [the Khmer rebellion] would happened some day, fortunately, this time our kingdom is strong, [I will take this opportunity] to launch a decisive mopping-up operation, then to comfort them in order to be free from worries. For those important things such as this, I want to take responsibility thus my sons, my grandsons will no longer have to be engaged with such troubles.[48]

In response to the Vietnamese advance, the Siamese established its authority in the western part of Cambodia which, in some way, reflected the same political movement as that of the Vietnamese.[49] In spite of the fact that those new parts of the Siamese domain were characterized as *huamuang chan-nok* (outer townships) in order to differentiate them from *huamuang chan-nai* (inner townships), Siam Reap and Battambang were under the authority of *Krom mahatthai*. Governors of those areas had Thai title, served Bangkok as officials, and collected tax and manpower for the Siamese.[50]

In the newly settled territory, the state cultivated its people into subjects and transformed rulers to be under direct center control. Both a taxation system and population survey were established in Vietnam's western protectorate and Siam's outer townships of Siam Reap and Battambang. The process of 'Vietnamization' was promoted in

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[48] Quốc sử Quán triều Nguyễn, *Abstract of policies of Minh Mạng*, 193 (in Vietnamese).
[49] See *Phongsawadan khamen*, cited in Puangthong, "War and Trade".
[50] CMH, R. III C.S. 1192/4 in Chotmaihet rachakarn thi sam [Record of the Third Reign of the Chakri Dynasty], Vol. 5 (Bangkok, Published on the occasion of the 200th birthday of Rama III, 1987), 108-109, quoted in Puangthong, "War and Trade", 182-184.

Cambodia, the same as the 'cultivation' policy Minh Mạng conducted in southern Vietnam. This implies that there was no difference between the periphery and overlapping zones which now were turned into part of the kingdom's administration system. The king ordered the Vietnamese governor of Cambodia:

> The Barbarians [in Cambodia] have become my children now, and you [Truong Minh Giang, governor of the Vietnamese western protectorate] should help them, and teach them our customs. … And my instructions to you are these; teach them to raise mulberry trees, pigs and ducks. … As for language, they should be taught to speak Vietnamese. [Our habits of] dress and table manners must also be followed. If there is any out-dated or barbarous custom that can be simplified, or repressed, then do so.[51]

Conclusion: Toward Defining a Paradigm of Power in the Mekong Valley before French Indochina

The shifting of the power paradigm during the reign of Rama III and Minh Mạng reflects a transformation of political terrain in the Mekong basin when traditional politics were challenged under the quest for an effective administrative system to manage territory, manpower, and economic resources. Significant military expeditions over Laos and Cambodia launching almost annually during the reign of Rama III and Minh Mạng presented attempts by the state to reorganize geopolitics and set up state institutions in the periphery. Those two monarchs experienced the last power shift in the precolonial Mekong space and therefore its significance should not be neglected. The paradigm of power both sought to establish the extension of state making to control groups at the frontier and for the territorialization of space. Bangkok's policy toward the western side of the Mekong, Vientiane and western Cambodia consistently fell in the same line as Minh Mạng's administrative reform of sending Viet officials to the mountains where he converted all the diverse layers of political management into homogeneous Đại Nam standardization. All those

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[51] DNTL, cited in Chandler, *A History of Cambodia,* 152-153.

people, who used to be located outside the cultural and ethnic frontier of 'civilized Viet', were turned into subjects of the Đại Nam kingdom by being cultivated into 'civilization' through Confucian education, cadastral surveys, population registration, taxation, corvée obligation, and *lingua franca*. Following the establishment of a state standard, the traditional power structure of loyalty network and a *mandala's* 'field of power' were likely extinguished and reconstructed into a new form of a more homogeneous power relationship.
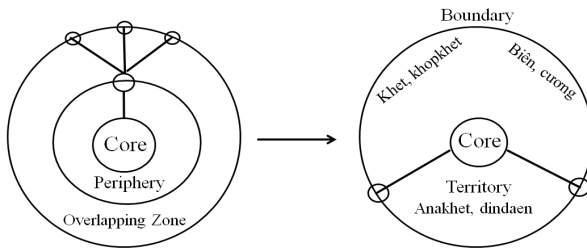

Figure 1: Changes in Power Paradigm in
Early Nineteenth Century Siam and Đại Nam

In spite of clear awareness that the phenomenon was unfinished and a larger scale of full state-making can be found in subsequent periods, this article suggests that there was a new political tendency region-wide, rather than a complete transformation of centralized states in the Mekong valley. The difference between Đại Nam and Siam should also be noted here as already acknowledged by scholarship on the later period when Siamese political reform in Western-style would fundamentally reconstruct the country's administrative system by which a 'full-version' of a modern nation state gradually emerged. However, the trend can be traced back as far as a half century earlier when both Huế and Bangkok exhibited a strong sense of building state institutions along the Mekong. The expanding state-making was based on transforming the natural and human landscape and resettling people of all ethnicities. The process was designed by the central state by creating nation-building establishments. James Scott recently has suggested a model of interaction between the valley kingdoms and highlanders of *Zomia*. He points out that the moving

of state-making toward the highland was much later and it was more challenging for the valley kingdoms to climb up to the higher terrain. The reason is that highlanders could move back and forth over the vast periphery to escape.[52] This article, however, reveals a different angle of state building with more diverse elements of complex terrain and multiethnic atmosphere, indicating that geographies of knowledge and infrastructure of state making are fundamental in order for centers to facilitate the invasion of space.

The practice of power by Rama III and Minh Mạng goes beyond the traditional idea of the power of a Southeast Asian state which comes close to the modern political conceptualization of territory and sovereignty. The place of a traditional power relationship using an administrative system was a crucial change in the early nineteenth century Mekong valley, resulting in the introduction of contours of a new political body, not only to Siam and Vietnam, but also to Laos and Cambodia. By this means, the process took part in shaping a regional paradigm of power driven by state making and the political re-identification of many places with ambiguous political status. Two among those transformations are significant: the coming to an end of the overlapping zone and the replacing of the traditional political relationship with an administrative network under direct control of a centralized kingdom. Scholarship on Southeast Asia has typically looked for change between the premodern and early modern pattern of state and the political evolution during the time of Rama III and Minh Mạng as strategically represented by this phenomenon.

By this, those centralized kingdoms crossed mountains of the *Zomia* world and tried to provide proto-nationhood for groups who, in many ways, were not fully incorporated with state organization in northern Thailand, the Khorat Plateau, the Vietnamese Central Highland, Muong Phuon, Xieng Khoang, Boloven Plateau, and Champasak.[53] It is not surprising that many of the people along the Mekong River adopted the technique of state-making from the Thai and Vietnamese as a strategic choice for political survival. In the

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[52] Scott, *The Art of Not Being Governed*.

[53] Scott, *The Art of Not Being Governed*.

context of "the last stand of autonomy," the Khmer movement against Vietnamese and Siamese intervention occurred in the form of a "Pre-Nationalist Response".[54] When King Duang came to power in 1848, after decades of political turmoil, he practiced the same strategies of Siamese and Vietnamese centralization in running Cambodia during the time of 'restoration'.[55] In 1827, Chau Anu had his own project to connect different groups on both side of the Mekong River and seek Lao reunification. Other Lao *phongsawadan* also reveal that there may have been influence coming from Vietnamese cadastral and census practices in controlling land and manpower.[56]

There is no doubt that changing geopolitics in the Mekong valley had a great impact on small principalities in shaping the early modern political landscape. This crucially reflects the way people in the region responded to the quest for modernity by recognizing, reorganizing, and redefining space with all kinds of human landscapes within. It is a time when the Mekong was gradually transformed into a form of modern politics and the people's conceptualization of space was also reconstructed, coming closer to the contemporary terminologies of geopolitics. Part of the heritage of the Rama III-Minh Mạng paradigm of power can be experienced through the wide range of map collections. Those maps contain authentic geographical knowledge, clear statements of authority, and strategic views of military, economic and political positions of places. It is worth noting that during the time of Rama III and Minh Mạng, the Mekong valley, for the first time, was put on maps, recognized by cartography, and run by a project of nation-making. Many parts of this cartography were then acknowledged as modern borderlines and historically became vital for understanding the introduction of a 'geo-body', boundaries, and territories in the Mekong valley.

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[54] Chandler, *An Anti-Vietnamese Rebellion*.
[55] Chandler, *A History of Cambodia*, 163-164.
[56] Vickery, "Two historical Records of the Kingdom of Vientiane", 3-35.

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