

Historical Population Movements in North and Northeast Thailand

Kennon Breazeale*

This paper examines patterns of resettlement in north and northeast Thailand and in adjacent areas of Burma and Laos. The time period is limited mainly to the late-eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, owing to lack of sources for earlier periods. Difficulties in finding and interpreting quantitative data and their limitations are discussed. Patterns are described by major category (refugees, economic migrants and forced resettlement) and by ethnic group. Government policies are discussed in terms of defensive measures in relation to potential invasions by foreign armies and to resettled people as assets for the state. The paper ends with a theory of recurrent depopulation and repopulation patterns extending back more than 500 years.

Keywords: *depopulation, economic migration, forced resettlement, refugees*

It is difficult to find either numerical or descriptive population data for the outlying territories under Thai rule prior to the late nineteenth century because of the nature of local administration and record keeping. During most of that century, the core of the Thai kingdom comprised the Thai provincial towns of the central plain and seacoast. Relatively more is known about these and a few adjacent towns (such as Nakhon Ratchasima), because they employed the Thai system of administration under the direct supervision of Thai ministers, and records relating to taxation and corvée labour in these towns were maintained in Bangkok. Although

* Kennon Breazeale is a Projects Coordinator of the East-West Center and an affiliate graduate faculty member of the Center for Southeast Asian Studies of the University of Hawaii. E-mail: Breazeak@eastwestcenter.org. His work on the history of Thailand and Mainland Southeast Asia includes *Culture in Search of Survival: The Phuan of Thailand and Laos* (with Snit Smuckarn, Yale University. Southeast Asia Studies, 1988), *From Japan to Arabia: Ayutthaya's Maritime Relations with Asia* (Toyota Thailand Foundation and Textbooks Foundation, 1999), *Breaking New Ground in Lao History: Essays on the Seventh to Twentieth Centuries* (with Mayoury Ngaosrivathana, Silkworm Books, 2002), and *The Writings of Prince Damrong Rajanubhab: A Chronology with Annotations* (Toyota Thailand Foundation and Textbooks Foundation, 2008). He has also translated and annotated two books by Prince Damrong Rajanubhab: *Journey through Burma in 1936: A View of the Culture, History and Institutions* (River Books, 1999) and *A Biography of King Naresuan the Great* (Toyota Thailand Foundation and Textbooks Foundation, 2008).

incomplete, these records provide at least some numerical data for the study of population changes in the nineteenth century.

The territories beyond this central core consisted mostly of dependency states. In the Mekong valley above Cambodia, the Lao were divided into three princely states: Champasak, Vientiane and Luang Prabang. The territory immediately north of the central plain of Thailand was inhabited by the Müang people (or northern Thai) and was divided into five dependency states ruled by princes: Chiang Mai, Lampang, Lamphun, Nan and Phrae.

The movements of peoples across these outlying territories surrounding the old Thai kingdom are the subject of this study. The dependency rulers were responsible for their own internal affairs, appointed their local governors and maintained the records for their respective territories. Other than scattered references in correspondence with Bangkok relating to numbers of able men available for service in times of war, there are few clues about population in ordinary administrative records. The large-scale changes that took place in the dependencies in wartime, however, provide a few insights into population change in the interior of mainland Southeast Asia. Despite the rarity of numerical data, some broad patterns of population change can be documented from about the 1770s up to the time that the modern international boundaries were demarcated in the 1890s and early 1900s. In illustrating the types and limitations of sources, this study attempts to provide an overall impression of a period of dynamic population redistribution.

Sources

The Thai archives in Bangkok house the indispensable collections for the study of border areas in the nineteenth century. Documents made of traditional writing materials are preserved in the manuscripts division of the National Library. The National Archives houses documents written on modern paper, which rapidly superseded traditional materials in the 1880s. Tax records and despatches from provincial towns and dependency states, together with the ministerial edicts sent to them, provide a wealth of political documentation on frontiers areas from the 1830s onward, because of innovations at that time in the system of taxation (and consequently of record-keeping). But there is relatively little documentation about earlier years of the Bangkok period. Some information from documents that have disappeared has been preserved by chroniclers such as Thiphakòrawong, who

compiled the official history of the early Bangkok period in 1869, and the chroniclers who compiled brief histories of the princely states.

Foreign consular and colonial reports date largely from the second half of the nineteenth century, although they contain occasional references to events in earlier times. The archives in Britain and France provide much useful detail about the interior regions of Southeast Asia, which can be supplemented by contemporary accounts published by explorers and travellers. Among the other types of research materials available, the missionary records are probably the most voluminous. The records of the Catholic mission in Thailand (which was almost entirely French in the nineteenth century) are housed in the archives of the Missions Étrangères in Paris. Bradley (1981) provides a helpful overview of Protestant archives and an extensive bibliography of works published by and about the American Protestant missionaries.

For earlier times, most Thai records were lost when the old capital at Ayutthaya was sacked by Burmese forces in 1767. Much of Lao history disappeared into flames when Vientiane was sacked by Thai forces in 1828 and 1829. On several occasions, Luang Prabang and Champasak were sacked, too, and most of their records were lost.

Even in cases where detailed records have survived, the political entities that they document rarely have an exact modern counterpart. The modern provincial boundaries of Laos and Thailand, for example, came into existence only during the 1890s and early 1900s. Although historic town names have been retained, most of the territories that these towns administered in the last century were later subdivided, and some political entities disappeared entirely before modern map-making began.

A survey of population growth in Laos under French administration, for example, was compiled from the colonial records in Vientiane. Annual estimates were made from the first census year 1912 through 1943, and data extracted from that series are provided in Table 1. This series is essentially “complete” for Laos under French administration, because the modern boundaries were established only between 1895 and 1907 (Breazeale, 2002). Earlier Lao political divisions were entirely different.

Table 1. Population of French Laos, 1912–1943

Year	Population (millions)
1912	0.650
1930	0.897
1915	0.704
1935	0.991
1920	0.814
1940	1.078
1925	0.840
1943	1.159

Source: Pietrantoni (1953)

Note: Pietrantoni believed these numbers to be underestimated by 10 to 15 percent.

Caution is necessary, moreover, when using data from tax registers and other local records, which always represented an underenumeration. A consular officer made the following observations about records kept at Phayuhakhiri, a central Thai town south of Nakhon Sawan in the 1880s.

“There were 2,000 able-bodied men on the registers, which may mean a population of from 10,000 to 20,000 according to the fancy of the calculator, for no one yet is in a position to say what proportion of the inhabitants are enrolled.” (Satow, 2000, p. 34)

Quantitative data are rare, but the few scattered enumerations of able men or populations offer at least a general impression of relative numbers involved. It was the custom in principle to register the able men in every province once during each reign. The registers provided a kind of resource indicator upon which to fix the province’s taxes, but they remained unchanged until the next enumeration. This system was not applied in the dependency states, but it was enforced in most of the Lao and Khmer towns of the Mekong basin beginning in the 1830s.

Extensive movements of people took place in the nineteenth century across the frontier areas inhabited by the Lü, Müang and Shan. The data in these records, too, should be used with caution. Only an overall impression can be documented, because the Müang dependencies, where most of these people resettled, kept their own records, few of which have been preserved.

Because of the nature of the records that have survived, there is far more extensive documentation concerning the resettlement of Lao and Phuan than of any other ethnic group. With the exception of the Lao captives assigned to the Müang princes, the Lao were resettled in provinces that came under the direct supervision of ministers in Bangkok, and the provincial governors were required to report important events and changes (such as numbers of able men) relating to taxation. The extant provincial reports and instructions issued by the ministry are incomplete, but they are adequate to outline the origins and destinations of some migrants (occasionally including exact numbers of people assigned to a specific province) and to reconstruct some essential elements of government policy relating to taxation and labour provided to the state.

Refugees

Movements of people into and across Thai territory during the nineteenth century can be divided broadly into three categories: refugees, economic migrants and those who were moved under an official resettlement plan. Documentation on state-managed resettlement is extensive, because of tax records and national defence policy. Much less was recorded about people in the other categories, partly because they were only a temporary concern of the state.

Two examples of refugees arriving in Thai territory in relatively large numbers are the Vietnamese and Mon. There is a long history of Mon migration from the coastal region of southern Burma into the Chao Phraya basin. After the Burmese took control of the Mon kingdom in 1757, Mon refugees streamed east across the mountains into Thai towns. And perhaps as many as 3,000 of them went as far north as Chiang Mai (Richardson, journal March–May 1834, folio 96). In 1815 some disaffected Mon from Martaban moved across the border into Tak and were assisted in resettling in the Bangkok area near existing Mon villages. An enumeration revealed that more than 30,000 people (among whom 10,000 were able men) were resettled at this time. The state provided assistance with food, transports down-river, materials for building houses and land to develop into paddy fields for the Mon to gain a livelihood (Thiphakòrawong, 1961a, pp. 74–75).

Vietnamese Catholics fleeing from religious persecution at home were already well established in various parts of the Thai kingdom by the end of the eighteenth century. There were noticeably large communities in Bangkok (numbering perhaps

2,000) and in Chanthaburi.¹ Some Vietnamese migrated also into the central Mekong valley. In 1859, for example, the Lao governors of Mekong-bank towns were instructed to round up Christian refugees and to find home sites for them near the river. Some of the refugees reported that they were trying to escape not only political strife at home but also food shortages.²

Several small communities of political refugees were established temporarily in Bangkok in the late eighteen and early nineteenth century. Among them was the group of Vietnamese led by Nguyen Anh (the future Emperor Gia Long), who lived in Bangkok at various times from 1783 to 1786 and continued to receive military assistance from the Thai until he gained his throne.

A striking example of movement in the opposite direction occurred during the 1833–1847 Thai-Vietnamese war, which was fought mostly in Khmer territory. The eastern part of the kingdom of Cambodia came under Vietnamese control, and the western part was governed by a Khmer Prince (Ang Im), who was appointed by the Thai king as governor of Battambang. The prince soon became dissatisfied and decided to join the Vietnamese side, in hopes of Vietnamese support to make him king of Cambodia. When he left Battambang in 1839, he took the entire populace with him. A Catholic missionary witnessed this extraordinary exodus.

"One of those revolutions, which suddenly change the face of a country in the East, has just destroyed before my own eyes the city of Battambang.... The entire population...has been transported into the territory of Cochinchina. ...When night arrived, the signal for departure was given. ... Imagine a population of 8,000 or 10,000 souls, in movement in the midst of the darkness...."

"Everyone was in movement: the men, the women, the children and the old people went into exile in a hurry, scarcely knowing which country they were being pushed towards. Some took the land route, carrying in oxcarts what little they could gather together. Others, more numerous, went by water, and threw into their boats the supplies for the voyage.... From 7 o'clock in the evening until 11, I saw more than a thousand boats pass by. ...At midnight we [the two missionaries] were nearly the only inhabitants of Battambang...." (Miche, 1841, pp. 320–321)

In the morning, the town was deserted. One of the largest urban populations in Cambodia had vanished overnight, in a political and strategic move intended to strengthen the prince vis-à-vis the Vietnamese and, at the same time, to weaken the Thai who were now his enemies.

Economic Migrants: Khamu Forest Workers

Many immigrant groups carved specific niches for themselves in the Thai economy of the nineteenth century. Foresters from Burma, for example, were active in the early development of the Thai teak industry. Indian merchants managed much of the retail business in imported cloth. And the largest and most important group in this category—the Chinese—are the subject of an extensive body of literature. This section examines one group that is relatively little known: the Khamu of northern Thailand.

The extraction of teak trees expanded rapidly during the second half of the nineteenth century as individual entrepreneurs from Burma and western logging companies gradually acquired leases to many of the forests in the upper Chao Phraya and lower Salween basins. Some teak grew along the northern edges of the Thai central plain, but most of Thailand's teak forests were farther north in the Müang towns. The labour-intensive work of girdling, felling and removing trees required a large work force that had to live in the forests for long periods of time. Since the lowland rice farmers were reluctant to accept this type of work or to live in the malaria-infested forests, the loggers turned to forest dwellers as a source of labour.

The dramatic increase in employment opportunities in the forests attracted large numbers of Khamu from the mountainous area north of the Mekong, between Luang Prabang and Chiang Rung (capital of the Lü kingdom of Sipsòng Panna). Recruiters from the Müang towns went annually to Khamu villages and got agreements with Khamu men to work for fixed wages for specified periods of time. These recruiters then led the Khamu to the teak forests and hired them out (at a profit to the recruiter) to the timber companies.³ From the 1860s to the 1890s the Khamu were distributed primarily among the first major teak areas to be exploited: the river valleys around Chiang Mai and Lampang and the tributaries of the Salween that were under Chiang Mai control.⁴ The timber companies subsequently expanded into Nan and other less accessible areas of the upper Chao Phraya basin and even later into the teak forests of the upper Mekong. By 1890 Chiang Mai had an estimated

10,000 Khamu workers. In 1896 about 20,000 Khamu were working in the Müang towns as a whole⁵ (that is, in modern northern Thailand which was delimited by this time within its present boundaries). The net outflow of Khamu from French Laos continued only until 1901. In that year alone 1,325 Khamu men left Luang Prabang, compared with a total of fewer than 300 during the succeeding six years combined.⁶

Several factors contributed to the sudden cessation of this pattern after the turn of the century. Net emigration from Laos fell to almost nil between 1902 and 1908. The immediate cause was the 1902 Shan uprising in Northern Thailand and continued fighting between the Shan and the Thai armed forces until 1904, particularly in the areas bordering on French Laos. The second factor was the Thai Forest Department, which was created in the mid-1890s and began, early in the new century, to enforce regulations for better forest management, thereby curbing uncontrolled exploitation and damping the demand for additional labour. The third factor was the French initiative, beginning around 1908, to slow the emigration from northern Laos by creating more employment in French territory, by preventing ethnic discrimination against the Khamu and by making the tax and corvée system less onerous.⁷ Although French administrators in Laos were not successful in making life better for the Khamu,⁸ the net Khamu emigration from Laos became almost negligible.

French consular officers in 1908 thought that the cumulative number of Khamu migrants into Thai territory was about 23,000 and that only about 2,000 of them had returned permanently to Laos. French estimates suggest that the number of Khamu immigrants in northern Thailand at any one time stabilized at about 20,000 thereafter.⁹

The initial inducement to work in the Thai forests was the accumulation of a little cash with which to buy goods in the market to take home to isolated villages. The Khamu were regarded by the timber companies as highly reliable and hard working. Ultimately they constituted about 90 percent of the forest labour force in northern Thailand. The Khamu did not, however, limit themselves to this occupation alone. They performed corvée services annually to the Müang officials by clearing the new growth from jungle trails after the rainy season, so that official parties and traders could pass more easily.¹⁰ Some Khamu took Müang brides and engaged in rice farming or grew dry-field crops. Some cultivated *miang* shrubs and processed the edible leaves into a popular fermented-leaf food product.¹¹ Some Khamu raised pack-cattle and engaged in the caravan trade that crossed the region from Yunnan

and northern Laos by way of Chiang Mai to the coast of Burma well into the twentieth century. Because of their origins as forest dwellers, the Khamu were treated as inferiors by the Lao, Müang and Thai, but they were very successful at adopting to their new way of life. Once they became permanently settled and had established regular livelihoods, they appeared to be more prosperous on average than most other villagers in northern Thailand.¹²

Forced Resettlement of War Captives

The third broad category of migrants comprises people who were forced to settle in specific places. The largest number by far were civilian captives taken during wartime. Probably for as long as the Burmese, Khmer, Lao, Malay, Mon and Thai have waged war among each other—certainly for more than a half millennium prior to the colonial era in mainland Southeast Asia—their common borders have been the scenes of periodic forced migration. The centuries-old military philosophy in this region is succinctly stated by one of the foremost Thai historians:

“According to the custom when waging war in the past, if a town were captured as a result of a battle, the victors indiscriminately took the local people as captives—men, women and children alike. The soldiers were permitted to take whatever goods and belongings of the local people that they wanted. Sometimes they put the town to the torch, too. If the town submitted without resistance, the victors did not seize belongings or take prisoners, but merely collected armaments, requisitioned specific items that were needed and made the local people perform various tasks for the army, including services as bearers and construction workers. For the performance of such work, their own local leaders were left in charge of them.” (Damrong, 2008, pp. 8–9)

This practice was not adopted by the Vietnamese governments (which discouraged minorities from settling among the Vietnamese), but it was still common in other parts of mainland Southeast Asia until the second half of the nineteenth century. It helps to explain in particular the mix of Thai and non-Thai villages within the modern boundaries of Thailand.

At the conclusion of a military campaign, captives were divided among the principal army commanders and moved to the respective towns of the officials to whom they were assigned, which might include princely state rulers, Thai provincial governors,

princes and court officials in Bangkok, and the crown. The captives were not prisoners of war (a term that properly applies only to enemy soldiers) and were not deemed a security risk for the areas where they were settled. They were regarded primarily as a resource from which the state could benefit.

Captive labourers were moved permanently to areas that were firmly under Thai control, where they provided a populace and work force for the vast, undeveloped agricultural lands and served as a source of wealth for the official class. Their own leaders were left in charge of them at the village and work-force level. In a few provinces, where one ethnic group predominated, such leaders became governors.

An inventory of about 8,500 people removed from the vicinity of Vientiane in 1828, after the Lao capital was captured at the end of the Lao-Thai war, illustrates the means by which even more massive forced migration was made practicable. Fixed numbers of able men and their dependents were parcelled out among the provincial towns in manageable groups, typically of about 20–35 able men and in many cases even smaller numbers.¹³ The villagers were assigned to specific provinces. For purposes of resettlement and subsequent taxation and use of their labour in peacetime and in war, the new arrivals were formed into a troop (*kòng*, a basic Thai administrative unit in which farmers were registered) headed by a troop leader (*nai kòng*) who was subordinate to the provincial governor and council of elders. Most of these troop leaders must have been village elders or other members of the same ethnic group who understood the central Thai dialect well; otherwise, verbal communication and carrying out their responsibilities would have been difficult. Moving entire villages together and providing village-level leaders from their own ethnic group helped to ensure control over manpower, maintain social cohesion and discourage people from attempting to flee back to their abandoned village sites.

A major determinant in the distribution of people and choice of resettlement sites was the military performance of individual commanders, because the only forms of remuneration to officials who led their men into battle were plunder and captives. Any provincial governor could hope to receive a share of the captives, depending on how much his province contributed to the success of a campaign.

In addition to civilian captives, there were also prisoners of war—a numerically small subcategory consisting of enemy soldiers captured in battle, moved to prison camps deep within Thai territory and watched closely. When Burmese forces attacked the Thai in 1786, for example, the chroniclers note that some Burmese soldiers were

imprisoned in the vicinity of Bangkok. Under a general amnesty in 1795, Burmese and Mon military prisoners were freed (Thiphakòrawong, 1960, pp. 130, 143 & 251). At least some of the prisoners of war settled permanently among the existing Mon villages of the Thai central plain.

Newly settled farmers helped not only to open up new agricultural areas but also to repopulate places that were abandoned. In the mid-1830s the Burmese and Mon may have been a majority among the dense population along the river banks for a distance of more than 20 kilometres above Bangkok (Bradley, journal entry 22 Jan. 1836). It is not surprising that relatively recent arrivals in the early Bangkok period occupied such prime agricultural sites so near to Ayutthaya, which was the Thai capital for more than 400 years. The countryside surrounding the old capital was overrun during the 1767 invasion, and most of the villagers either fled or were carried away into captivity by the Burmese. The Thai government seems to have regarded such people as permanently lost, although in one campaign during 1792–1794 the Thai made an unsuccessful attempt to gain possession of Tavoy and use it as a haven for ethnic Thai captives attempting to return home from various parts of Burma (Thiphakòrawong, 1960, p. 224). The need for a populace for the fertile and abandoned paddy fields was partly filled by non-Thai ethnic groups, regardless of the reason for their movement into this area. Registered in the labour troop system, they were assigned to governors and other officials as a kind of service class, to provide for the needs of local administrators, and were used in any way the officials wanted.

Such troops provided similar services required by the crown and were especially important for large-scale projects. In 1789, for example, 20,000 workers were mobilized for construction work on a royal monastery in Bangkok (Thiphakòrawong, 1960, pp. 266–267). Troops assigned to such duties had to provide both tools and building materials. Other provincial troops were required to supply special varieties of wood, lacquer and other materials for decoration. Some artisan troops made the brightly colored ceramic roof tiles. Some specialized in making the mosaic-like mirrored glass decorations on exterior walls of monastery buildings, and some were assigned permanently to royal monasteries to provide for their maintenance.¹⁴ The Thai court benefitted from the acquisition of artisans of all sorts, including skilled goldsmiths and silk weavers.¹⁵ Some troops were assigned to specialized units that required semiskilled and unskilled labour for tasks such as stone cutting, brick making and panning for gold.

The transport of goods and men for the state was generally the responsibility of individual provincial governors who resided along the route followed, but there were also some labour units assigned to these specific duties. Troops in charge of elephants or pack cattle supplemented the state's transport service from town to town. In addition to transporting the officials themselves, they conveyed some of the agricultural, forest and other products collected under the taxation-in-kind (*suai*) system.

In wartime they could also be mobilized almost instantly for the same services. The network of transport troops was especially important along routes that lacked natural waterways. They provided an essential link across the mountains between the northeast region of Thailand and the boat landings on the central plain. The communications and transport role played by such specialized troops was an important element in the defence of the kingdom, and defensive strategy was therefore a major determinant in the overall pattern of resettlement.

Defence as a Factor in Resettlement Patterns

Newly established administrative centres provided better control over the manpower needed in strategic areas for military service in case of war. Some of the labour units provided specific services such as manning war vessels and artillery units. Some settlements provided bridges of communications for military logistics. The most important of these in the 1830s during the Thai-Vietnamese war was the line of Lao villages extending up the main river valley east of Bangkok, which led into Cambodia.

Population size was a constant strategic concern of the ethnic Thai provinces, and some captives and other migrants were strategically placed to reinforce the inner lines of defence of the kingdom. In the early Bangkok period, at the first signs of a threatened Burmese invasion, Thai forces were immediately sent to Phetburi and other towns along the western borders, which played a key role in guarding the sea lanes and overland trails across the peninsula. Labour to build and maintain war boats and provide logistical support for troops in this area was provided partly by resettled captives. In 1824 lower Burma became a possession of the British, with whom the Thai maintained cordial relations, and thereafter this border no longer represented the threat that had loomed there for nearly three centuries.

The depopulation of some areas bordering on Burma and Vietnam created barriers intended to hinder the passage of invading troops. Some populations were moved or regrouped to create outer lines of defence behind which the populous areas of the kingdom were rendered more secure. This strategy is implicit in Cambodian affairs from the 1770s to the 1840s, in Chiang Mai in the 1780s, in the Lao and Phuan states from the 1830s to the 1860s and in Chiang Rai and other upper Mekong towns in the 1840s.

Strategic depopulation of fertile zones was essential to defence until the border populations became numerous and the Thai government was confident of their loyalty. When a Burmese army attempted to attack the Thai central plain in 1786, for example, it was pushed back. But the Burmese commander in the Shan States posted part of his forces in the upper Kok valley, to tend paddy fields and amass food stocks (Thiphakòrawong, 1960, p. 159). As long as the enemy had access to such areas, attacks along these routes might continue indefinitely. And the logistical support provided by the soldiers and granaries increased the likelihood of a successful invasion.

The next sections of this study examine the attack routes that were of major concern to the Thai government in the nineteenth century and the different policies adopted in each case (reinforcing the population along some routes while depopulating others). The first area of focus was the Burma frontier, which posed the foremost threat until 1824, when lower (British) Burma became a protective buffer against Burmese attack. From 1833 to 1847 the Thai-Vietnamese war and the potential attack routes from the east were the main focus of concern. The following sections will therefore consider the principal areas of resettlement on the Burma frontier first and then examine the changes on the long frontier with Vietnam.

Müang, Shan and Lü Resettlement, 1802-1813

Although the rulers of Chiang Mai asserted their independence from time to time over the centuries, they were always obliged to acknowledge Burmese suzerainty whenever Burma was ruled by a powerful king. For any Burmese attempt to gain control of the central plain of Thailand, Chiang Mai was in a strategic position. It had a broad, fertile plain that was less prone to drought than its neighbour to the southeast (Lampang), and it controlled the headwaters of the Ping River, which was the best of the river routes leading down to the central plain. It was not only a source

of reinforcements for an invading army but also served as an important staging point and source of food and supplies for an invading army that came overland by way of the Salween basin or the Shan States.

After the destruction of Ayutthaya, it was evident to the new Thai strategists that continued Burmese control of the upper Chao Phraya basin would be a never-ending threat to Thai security. The first Thai attempt to capture Chiang Mai was decisively repelled, and the struggle for control of the Müang region continued for the rest of the eighteenth century (Thiphakòrawong, 1960, p. 135). During this period, the Müang leaders broke their ties with Burma, switched allegiance to the Thai king, and remained permanently in the Thai political sphere thereafter. Several Müang leaders who were members of a single family were appointed by the Thai king to govern the three princely states (Chiang Mai, Lampang and Lamphun) on the western side of the upper Chao Phraya basin. This area and the other two Müang towns (Nan and Phrae) on the eastern side were the scenes of continued fighting and disorder in the 1790s.¹⁶

By the turn of the century, the leaders in all these areas regrouped their villagers and restored order. Once they gained effective control of enough manpower to shift from ad hoc defence to the offensive, the next step was to provide better security from attacks launched by way of the Shan States. The key to Burmese strategy in this area was Chiang Saen, as illustrated in the pattern of Burmese attacks on Chiang Mai in 1786 and 1803 and the Burmese use of Chiang Saen as a temporary military base and a source of men and supplies. To understand Thai strategy in relation to the peoples living to the northeast of Chiang Mai, beyond the watershed of the Mekong basin, it will be helpful to examine first a few geographical features and the political divisions at the turn of the nineteenth century.

The Kok River rises in the region across the mountains north of Chiang Mai and flows in a predominantly eastward direction to the Mekong. Fang was the administrative centre for the upper portion of this river basin. The large plain in the lower part of the basin was controlled from Chiang Rai. Chiang Saen, the Burmese stronghold on the Mekong, is at the edge of a smaller plain not far up-river from the mouth of the Kok. The second river basin in this area is the Ing. The easiest route from Phayao, which is on the shore of a lake in the upper Ing, is not down-river but across the plain that stretches north to Chiang Rai. This group of towns formed the core area controlled from old Chiang Saen.

The small river basins on the opposite side of the Mekong, plus a narrow strip of land on the west bank of the Mekong north of Chiang Saen, constituted the Lü princely state known as Chiang Khaeng, which was a dependency of Burma. This little state was important because of its geographical position straddling the Mekong up-river from Luang Prabang (which was the northern limit of ethnic Lao territory). On the north it bordered on the Lü kingdom of Sipsòng Panna, which was under the joint suzerainty of Burma and China. Its neighbor to the west was Chiang Tung (Jengtung or Kengtung), the largest of the Shan princely states, which stretched across the mountainous region from the Mekong nearly to the Salween.

From the Thai viewpoint, Chiang Saen and Chiang Khaeng represented a serious threat not only to Chiang Mai but also to Nan and Luang Prabang, both of which submitted to Thai rule in the latter part of the eighteenth century. The Mekong is easily navigable for most of the year from Chiang Saen down to the Lao capital, and the route across the hills from the Mekong into the Nan valley was relatively short in comparison with the distance a Thai army had to travel to repel invading forces. As long as the Burmese maintained a stronghold on the Mekong itself or in the plains around Chiang Rai, Phayao and Fang, from which swift attacks might be launched, the frontier states under Thai rule could never be secure.

The initial Thai strategy to resolve this problem was in two parts. The first was to take possession of Chiang Saen, thereby gaining command of the navigable stretch of the upper Mekong, and created a depopulated zone stretching from the Mekong across to the Salween. In 1802 Müang forces made incursions into Shan territory, depopulated the upper Kok valley and moved Shan officials and their villagers to Chiang Mai and Lampang.¹⁷ The governors of the Shan towns in the little river valleys east of the Salween were induced to renounce their ties to Burma, and they brought their people to the upper Ping valley and to Lampang.¹⁸ In 1804 the Burmese garrison was driven out of Chiang Saen, and the inhabitants were divided in equal proportions for resettlement in Chiang Mai, Lampang, Nan, Vientiane and the central plain of Thailand.¹⁹

The second element of Thai strategy was to provide a zone of security for the western flank of the Lao region. An attack was made on Chiang Khaeng in 1805, and many of the inhabitants (mostly Lü-speaking) and their leaders were carried off and resettled in Nan. The original Lü populace seems to have been concentrated near the Mekong and along its tributaries, since the left-bank territory away from the Mekong

was hilly, had only a few small rice plains, and could not support a large number of rice farmers.²⁰ The elimination of Chiang Khaeng left a fairly large geographical area nearly devoid of lowland inhabitants, thereby rendering inhospitable and resourceless the routes by which large armies might attack. And Chiang Tung territory was likewise depopulated.

The plan to create a depopulated buffer was only partly successful because the countryside around Chiang Tung was abandoned for only a few years. The Chiang Tung Prince moved with his family and much of the Shan populace to Chiang Saen. His youngest brother, however, took refuge in the northern part of the state, where he tried to regroup part of the scattered populace. In the early 1810s he renewed his allegiance to Burma, and by 1820 he had reoccupied the walled town of Chiang Tung, restoring the princely line that ruled the state into the twentieth century (Mangrai, 1981, pp. 258–261). In view of the resistance maintained by the younger prince's faction, it would have been risky for the Thai to leave other Shan leaders in the area extending from Chiang Saen to Phayao. The older Shan princes and the remaining populace in that area were therefore moved across the mountains into Chiang Mai, thus widening the depopulated zone. At about the same time, another attempt was made to complete the depopulation of the territory of Chiang Khaeng. Some of the Lü farmers previously taken to Nan had been moving north beyond the Mekong, and in 1812 the Nan Prince's army scoured the entire left bank again. Most of the populace fled into Chiang Tung or the Lü kingdom, and during 1812–1813 everyone else was removed deep into Nan territory.²¹

The broad result of the negotiations and the armed interventions along the northern limits of Thai rule between 1802 and 1812 was the establishment of a depopulated zone that extended from the Salween across the southern limits of Shan rule and then beyond the Mekong to the border of Luang Prabang. The history of this frontier region during the rest of the nineteenth century can be interpreted largely in terms of the movements of people back into the rich paddy lands of the Kok and Ing valleys and the conflicts that resulted as Müang and Shan settlers gradually converged from opposite directions on the site of old Chiang Saen. These changes were halted only by the modern boundary line, which was demarcated by Thai and British officials from the Salween to the Mekong in 1893 and cut through the formerly depopulated zone.

Farmers began moving back into the lower Kok area in large numbers during the 1840s, by which time the potential attack routes into the Thai kingdom had altered radically. After several decades of relative peace on the northern frontier, the Thai government's main concern in 1840 was the route along which Thai territory was most vulnerable to Burmese attack. The mountainous and fiercely independent Kayah state, which straddled the Salween to the west and northwest of Chiang Mai—an almost insuperable barrier to the movement of Burmese troops—shielded Chiang Mai from that direction. After the British occupation of Burma's coastal territory south of the Salween in 1824, the entire western flank of the Thai kingdom ceased to be a potential invasion route, but Thai territory was still vulnerable to Burmese attack by way of the Shan States. The one remaining state that could serve as a launching site for a major attack against the Thai was Chiang Tung.

The depopulated territory immediately south of Chiang Tung posed a much greater potential threat. If the Burmese were to regain control of the fertile rice plains on the right bank of the Mekong, belonging to defunct Chiang Saen, this area could feed and supply Burmese armies en route down the Mekong into Lao territory or across the mountains into the Müang towns. For strategic purposes, it was vital to prevent the Burmese from regaining a foothold along the navigable part of the Mekong and from reoccupying the rich agricultural lands south of Chiang Saen. By the second quarter of the nineteenth century, moreover, the population of the western Müang towns was sufficiently large (possibly reaching 100,000 by 1830)²² to serve as a source of settlers for forward bases in the lower Kok valley, as a prelude to a renewed attempt to depopulate the Shan territory farther north.

Upper Mekong Resettlement, 1841-1850

In 1840 the Thai government divided responsibility for a plan of defence between Nan and the three western Müang towns. Their spheres of action were, respectively, the depopulated territories of old Chiang Khaeng and Chiang Saen.

In 1841 Nan officials built a wooden stockade on the deserted town site of Chiang Khong, which at that time was the principal landing place on the Mekong used by traders (Chinese from Yunnan, Shan from Chiang Tung, Lao from Luang Prabang) en route to Nan or Chiang Mai.²³ During the first year, the new town was provided with a small number of settlers, some from Nan and others induced to move there from Lü villages at the southern edge of Sipsòng Panna.²⁴ Early in 1842, after the

annual rice harvest, the resettlement program was quickly expanded. From the beginning, the population was mixed, including Müang farmers from Nan and Phrae, families of Lü and Shan who had been taken captive to Nan earlier in the century, and more Lü villagers who were induced to move down. In 1844 the resettlement scheme was extended to the upper part of the valley of the Ing River, which flows into the Mekong just below Chiang Khong. Resettlement in this area was facilitated by disorders in Sipsòng Panna in 1842, early in the civil war that persisted into the 1860s. Entire villages were induced to move down into this relatively secure area—which was regarded by Bangkok as a second line of defence behind the Chiang Khong outpost. Officials from Nan also attempted to round up the families of Lü and Shan who had fled north into Sipsòng Panna during the depopulation campaigns earlier in the century.²⁵ The right bank of the Mekong down-river from Chiang Khong had been settled by Lü captives taken in the earlier depopulation raids, thus providing a second line of defence on the Mekong itself and a source of supplies and manpower for Chiang Khong in the event of war.

When the edict was issued in May 1843 to reestablish Chiang Khong,²⁶ the site was already settled and a provisional administration was already in place. Another edict was issued the previous month reestablishing Chiang Rai and Phayao.²⁷ At this point, no steps had been taken to repopulate Phayao or the continuous plain that stretched north from this town to the Kok River.

For political and defensive reasons, the old site of Chiang Saen on the Mekong was not resettled. An attempt to take possession of the deserted capital, still claimed by both sides, would have been provocative and a cause for war. Also, the nearest Shan settlement was only five days' away, and it would have been difficult to defend a small Thai-controlled colony this far up the Mekong without a line of defensive settlements nearby. The outermost site chosen for the repopulation effort by the western Müang towns was thus Chiang Rai, on the south bank of the Kok River.

In 1844 the newly appointed Chiang Rai governor and officials from Chiang Mai led the settlers to Chiang Rai, taking with them oxen, stores of rice for the town granary, muskets for the town arsenal and other essential supplies to rebuild the town fortifications and support the settlers during their first year.²⁸ The new population arrived in February 1844, and religious ceremonies were performed the same month by 108 Buddhist monks to mark the refounding of the town. Villagers were assigned to all major sections of the deserted plain, which had reverted to forest during the previous four decades, and began clearing and planting the paddy fields for their first crop.²⁹

A second line of defence and source of supplies and manpower was created behind Chiang Rai. Half-way along the route from Chiang Mai, a fortified settlement with a stockade was established. Meanwhile, officials from Lampang began moving some of their villagers to the deserted Phayao site, where religious rites were conducted in April 1844 for the ceremonial refounding. Early in 1845 more villagers were led to Phayao by the Lampang Prince, who took with him an additional 1,500 able men to help rebuild the town walls.³⁰

Within a relatively short time, the Müang settlers gained possession of the most fertile portions of the reestablished towns and thus had control of the two river basins that flowed into the Mekong below Chiang Saen. Because of their relative geographical positions, the authorities at Chiang Khong were concerned primarily with Sipsòng Panna affairs, whereas Chiang Rai was perceived as a bulwark against the gradual southward movement of Shan villagers under Chiang Tung rule. None of the newly resettled towns had any acknowledged boundaries. The inhabitants lived in pockets of land that were suitable for rice growing and were separated by wide expanses of uncleared forest and hill country.

Only later in the nineteenth century do the records begin to reveal in much detail the economic relationships between the new settlers of the lowlands and the upland peoples. The montagnards shunned the flat plains that were of concern to the Thai government, and they were not directly affected by the repopulation scheme. It is reasonable to assume that they visited Müang market places and engaged in barter trade in the early years of resettlement. The Lahu (also called Musoe or Mussuh) living in the hills forming the watershed north of the Kok River later provided the Müang with reconnaissance reports on Shan activities to their north. But in general, there is little mention of hill dwellers in the records of this area for most of the century.

The principal achievement of the repopulation scheme was the establishment of a permanent population under Thai control in the upper Mekong basin. Bangkok officials wanted Chiang Rai and Phayao to have initial populations of about 1,000 able men each, and a smaller town (Ngao) to have about 600. Initial reports submitted by Chiang Mai and Lampang authorities claimed that they adhered to the original quotas. But an 1849 investigation by court officials revealed that only 454 able men were living in Chiang Rai, 350 in Phayao and 434 in Ngao, and that there was considerable reluctance among the Müang officials and farmers to carry out the scheme fully.³¹

Despite resistance from villagers who did not want to move and from officials in the parent towns who did not want to lose their villagers, the populations of the newly created towns expanded gradually during the succeeding half century in the direction of old Chiang Saen. Shan villagers likewise moved south into the same area, and villages from both sides eventually became interspersed in the paddy lands around the old townsite.

The ultimate goals of the upper Mekong repopulation program were threefold. Once the outposts were firmly established and had large enough populations, they could exert pressure on the two neighbouring dependencies of Burma. The policy at this time was identical to that of 1802–1813. It required the elimination of Chiang Tung as a political entity (thus creating the desired unpopulated zone) and the removal of its Shan inhabitants (thus expanding the populations of the reestablished towns). If this goal could be achieved, then the entire mountainous block of territory from the Salween to the Mekong would be devoid of people. It would serve as a barrier against future invasion and also cut Burmese communications with the remaining Lü kingdom. Finally, if the Lü capital at Chiang Rung were thus cut off from Burma, the Lü would have no alternative to acknowledging the Thai king as their suzerain.

None of these goals was achieved. After three unsuccessful attempts during 1850–1854 to take Chiang Tung, the Thai government renounced further intervention in the Shan States. The failure to establish larger permanent settlements more quickly was a major factor in the collapse of this military venture. The policy of gradually moving Lü villagers into Nan's enlarged territory, on the other hand, continued successfully until the mid-1850s and was halted only when some Lü leaders, who were working cooperatively with the Thai side, perished in the Lü civil war.

Lü Resettlement, 1849-1857

In 1849 many villages along the southern edge of Sipsòng Panna came under attack by competing forces in the Lü civil war, and large numbers of people fled south into the depopulated territory of old Chiang Khaeng. Since the kingdom was a joint dependency of Burma and China, direct military action in Lü territory was deemed unwise by the Thai government, which maintained good relations with China at that time. Thai officials were confident, however, that Chinese officials in Yunnan would not protest if the Thai acted discreetly to maintain order along the frontier and provide shelter for the distressed populace.³² Officials in Nan and Luang Prabang

were therefore instructed to round up villagers from troubled areas and to provide paddy lands and new village sites for them in territory that was under firm Nan control.

The Nan Prince was placed in charge of the resettlement scheme. According to the Nan officials, as many as 10,000 Lü refugees moved to temporary camps in the depopulated zone of Chiang Khaeng, immediately south of the Lü kingdom. The Nan Prince and his officials lacked the resources to feed and resettle such a large number of people. The poor harvest in late 1848 and the late arrival of the 1849 monsoon rains resulted in a serious shortage of food in Nan itself, and many of the refugees north of the Mekong were left to fend for themselves. Some moved east into Lao territory, others scattered in homeward directions, and a small proportion were moved to the right bank of the Mekong, around Chiang Khong and farther down-river.³³ Officials in Luang Prabang reported that 5,300 Lü villagers fled in their direction. The Lao designated Lü elders to take charge of individual village units, compile registers of their able men, and supervise resettlement in places that were securely under Lao control.³⁴

In May 1849 a senior court official from Bangkok arrived in Nan and took charge of the resettlement program. By the end of the relatively dry rainy season that year, an additional 1,900 Lü villagers were moved south across the Mekong, to new sites on the right bank, bringing with them their buffaloes, oxen and personal belongings.³⁵ Under conditions of drought and food shortages, even this limited effort strained Nan's resources nearly to the breaking point. Throughout 1850 officials in Bangkok attempted to monitor the movements of Lü refugee officials and the villagers who accompanied them, intent on rounding up as many as possible and moving them south into Nan territory.³⁶

It should be noted that the Nan princes of the nineteenth century controlled a territory that was much larger than modern-day Nan Province. Some of the Lü settled within the modern provincial boundaries, joining the former Lü residents of Chiang Khaeng who had been living there for nearly half a century. A larger number settled near the banks of the Mekong immediately to the north, on lands that later became part of French Laos. The majority, however, were moved to a river basin that subsequently became part of Chiang Rai Province, extending from Chiang Kham (on a tributary of the Ing River) down to Chiang Khong (Nan's main outpost on the Mekong).

The most powerful of the Lü governors at that time was Maha Chai, who administered a large Lü province east of the Mekong (consisting approximately of the La River valley immediately north of the modern China-Laos boundary). In early 1849 he fell into the hands of the Nan officials who were rounding up refugees and was persuaded to assist in the resettlement scheme and induce villagers from the southern rim of the kingdom to move to new sites in Nan territory.

When King Mongkut came to the throne in Bangkok in 1851, he continued the policy of rounding up stray villagers and inducing others to move into Nan territory. An edict instructed Nan officials to work with Maha Chai to reassure potential settlers of Nan's good intentions and to make every effort to protect the Lü and provide assistance for resettlement.³⁷ To encourage the skeptical, the edict stated that any Lü villagers who came willingly to Nan would subsequently be free to move back to their original homes if they really wished to do so. After spending much of 1850 and 1851 in Bangkok, discussing the resettlement program with Thai officials, Maha Chai returned to Nan early in 1852, accompanied by a senior Thai governor.

Meanwhile, at the Lü capital a new ruling prince had been installed jointly by the Burmese and Chinese in 1851, in an attempt to end the decade-long succession dispute. Because of events in Burma and Yunnan, however, he was soon cut off from his co-suzerains and came under strong pressure from Bangkok to recognize the Thai king also as a suzerain. Shortly after the arrival of Maha Chai and the Thai party in Nan, a British ultimatum was handed to the Burmese government (at the start of the second Anglo-Burmese war), and Burmese troops were recalled from the little frontier garrisons on and near the Mekong. Within weeks of the Burmese withdrawal, Chinese bandits from Yunnan began to attack the northern Lü towns, once again throwing this area into turmoil.

The Lü leaders found themselves further isolated because of the Thai expeditions into Chiang Tung in 1853 and 1854, which cut their line of communications to the west. During this interval, Maha Chai continued to implement the resettlement scheme by moving people from the southern Lü towns into Nan territory. Maha Chai eventually succeeded in persuading the Lü prince to acknowledge the Thai king as co-suzerain, and in April 1855 a party of Lü officials representing the ruling prince and Maha Chai arrived in Bangkok to make a ceremonial act of submission.³⁸

The successful removal of Lü villagers during the period 1849–1857 can be attributed both to the cooperation given by Maha Chai and to the temporary removal of one of the claimants to the Lü succession—Prince Uparacha—who fell into Lao hands in 1849. The claimant's captors in Luang Prabang sent him to Bangkok, where he was held from early 1850 to early 1856. Other members of the Lü princely family were held in Luang Prabang. At the request of the Lü tribute emissaries, the Lü leaders were allowed to return home, and civil war erupted again. Prince Uparacha was killed in battle in late 1857, and Maha Chai died in the fighting a year later.

In an almost exact repetition of events in 1849, a large number of Lü villagers led by a Lü prince fled south in 1857, were rounded up by officials from Nan, and moved into Nan territory for resettlement.³⁹ This was probably the final large-scale rounding up of Lü farmers during the civil war. After the deaths of the two Lü leaders who had cooperated closely with the Thai authorities for seven or eight years, the Burmese-supported faction emerged as the victors. Thereafter the Thai government seems to have lost interest, and the northern princely states ceased to send detailed reports on Lü political affairs to Bangkok.

Internal politics among the Lü were incompatible with the pattern of Thai political expansion that succeeded so well elsewhere. Thai policy in other princely states required the existence of powerful local leaders who found it in their own interests to ally themselves to the Thai court, thus bringing their people indirectly under the rule of the Thai king and under Thai military protection. If the Thai strategy in Chiang Tung had succeeded, all of the Lü territory would have fallen within the Thai sphere by default. In the interim, however, the more limited objective was to remove as many Lü as possible to areas already under effective Thai control. Officials in Bangkok thus monitored events in Lü territory closely but never found the opening needed to displace Burmese influence permanently. When the first French expedition reached the Lü capital at Chiang Rung in 1867, there were no traces of Thai influence. The explorers were received by the Lü ruler, whose chief minister customarily sat with a Burmese official and a Chinese mandarin at his sides, symbolizing the dual nature of Lü allegiance (Carné, 1872, pp. 206–207).

Lao and Phuan Resettlement

When the Thai government first began to extend its control over the Lao peoples, there were three Lao kingdoms in the Mekong valley: Luang Prabang, Vientiane and Champasak. Luang Prabang and Champasak apparently submitted without resistance, as there are no records of forced resettlement from these two states. Vientiane, the largest and most powerful of the Lao princely states, attempted without success to maintain its independence and was the only Lao princely state to suffer a loss of population when it became a Thai dependency.

Records for the 1770s and 1780s are scarce, but there are brief outlines of events in various chronicles and evidence from the late 1820s onward to show that many Vientiane Lao were moved in the late eighteenth century to the basin of the Prasak (a tributary of the Chao Phraya northeast of Bangkok) and elsewhere in the central plain region. A French missionary estimated that more than 3,000 Lao captives were brought to the outskirts of Bangkok in 1778 and that about 6,000 others in the same group had died during the forced march from Vientiane (Launay, 1920, vol. 2, p. 298). The following year the survivors were dispersed and settled probably in the provinces around Bangkok and those bordering the Gulf. Another colony, the Lao Song Dam or Black-Dressed Tai, was established in the late eighteenth century in Phetburi. They were captured during a Thai campaign beyond Luang Prabang into the region between Dien Bien Phu and the Black River of northern Vietnam.

The resettlement of more Lao from Vientiane (and also Phuan people of the plateau to the north) from about 1828 through the 1840s can be divided into two distinct policies. The first was the result of the conflict that arose between Bangkok and Vientiane in 1827, and the subsequent dismantling of the princely state. The Lao capital was destroyed and its populace was removed partly to the right bank of the Mekong, partly to the central Thai provinces and partly to the Müang towns. The towns on the right bank of the Mekong that were formerly administered by Vientiane were placed under the supervision of the Interior Minister in Bangkok, and a form of administration was instituted that suited the conditions of the region and the existing Lao social and political structure.

A rough estimate of the population of the Vientiane princely state during its final year was made by the senior Thai commander in the field. He thought that the entire state had more than 20,000 able men, and his resettlement proposals included sending half of them (plus 50,000 women and children) to the central plain near

Bangkok and dividing the other half between the upper Prasak basin and the towns south of the Mun River.⁴⁰ Thus the total population in 1827 might have been about 140,000.⁴¹

For most of the period from the time that Vientiane was destroyed until 1893 (when France gained possession of the left bank), the Thai government did not appoint officials to govern the left-bank lands of the defunct princely state. For lack of administrative records, therefore, very little will ever be known about this territory, which eventually became part of French Laos. There are, however, continuous records for the Champasak princely state. When Bangkok imposed regular taxation on the latter area in 1828, the able men were registered in the towns that constitute two of the southern provinces of modern Laos.⁴² The towns along the Se Done River (constituting modern Saravane Province) had a total of 1,800 male registrants and the towns along or near the Mekong (modern Champasak Province) had 4,703.

It should be noted, however, that these figures do not include the mountain and forest dwellers. Also excluded are the officials, Buddhist monks, the aged, the infirm and other untaxed adult Lao males. Roughly 45–48 percent of the total adult male population was exempt from taxation in sample data from several Lao towns (Breazeale, 1975, p. 308), and thus the tax figures probably reflect only about half of the total number of adult males living in the lowland rice-growing areas of these provinces at that time.

In 1837 a general register was compiled for 31 towns in the region worst affected by the administrative and population changes of the previous decade. The area comprised most of modern-day Northeast Thailand (excluding Nakhon Ratchasima and its subordinate towns), Champasak and Stung Treng, and a total of 80,000 able men were inscribed (Thiphakòrawong, 1961b, vol. 1, pp. 177–178, 180). This enumeration enabled the ministry to establish more precise tax quotas for each town and provided a means of control over manpower, because a number was tattooed on each man's wrist (an old Thai practice) to identify the town in which he was registered, paid taxes and performed *corvée* labour.

The founding of numerous new towns in this region reflected a change of policy in the early 1830s. The centuries-old anxiety over a Burmese invasion from the west and the south across the peninsula faded after the British acquisition of Burma's coastal provinces adjacent to Thai territory. Thai relations with Vietnam, on the other hand, were cordial, and the two countries exchanged diplomatic missions

regularly through the 1820s. The Thai-Vietnamese war that lasted from 1833 to 1847 was fought largely in Cambodia and about suzerain rights in Cambodia and the defunct Vientiane princely state. From the 1830s onward, therefore, the Thai government's strategic concern was the potential attack routes from the east—most importantly the overland and sea routes by way of Cambodia, but also the trails across the cordillera that led from central Vietnam to the Lao towns of the central and upper Mekong basin.

During the Thai-Vietnamese war, the people who were moved into the central Thai provinces, either from or across Cambodia, were mostly Cham Muslims and Vietnamese rather than Khmer.⁴³ Western Cambodia served not only as a defensive buffer during the Thai-Vietnamese war but also as a rich and fertile area where Khmer villagers could take refuge from the fighting. When the war began, the Thai policy was either to restore Thai suzerainty over the eastern half of Cambodia or to eliminate the Khmer princely state and remove the entire populace to the western Cambodian provinces where Thai control was undisputed.

This policy applied to the entire Thai-Vietnamese frontier in the Mekong valley, with the exception of the Champasak region, which was shielded from invasion by the vast and complex region of mountains at the southern end of the cordillera. With Vietnamese assistance, the Lao élite on the east bank of the Mekong, who were formerly under Vientiane rule, resisted Thai efforts to bring them under direct rule from Bangkok, and not until 1835 was a political settlement reached. By that time, the Thai government was seriously concerned about the possibility of a Vietnamese offensive in this area.

There were six routes across the mountains where Thai territory was most vulnerable. Four trails led into the three river valleys in the middle Mekong area that were part of the defunct princely state. Another trail led from Vietnam into the Phuan state, which occupied the plateau region north of the Mekong and was formerly a dependency of Vientiane. The sixth and longest route circled north of the plateau by way of Dien Bien Phu, which had the largest rice-growing plain along this frontier and therefore could have served as a staging point for armed attacks on nearby Luang Prabang or up the Mekong to the Lü settlements established by Nan. Depopulation of the left bank of the Mekong, in the region immediately west of the Vietnamese capital, Hué, was conceived in the same terms as in the Shan States. It was a means of stripping the countryside of all sources of food and manpower, thereby creating a strategic buffer across which an invading army would find it difficult to march.

For more than a decade, beginning in 1834, the Thai government made a sustained effort to remove the entire populace from the frontier routes, and the left-bank inhabitants became widely scattered among the Lao towns on the right bank of the Mekong and in the central Thai plain. Military expeditions were used sparingly, and the depopulation policy was carried out for the most part by sending local Lao officials from the right-bank towns annually during the dry season to persuade or force entire villages to move west across the Mekong. Some Lao were settled along the route that leads east from Bangkok to Cambodia, but most were moved to the right bank of the Mekong. By the 1850s, the results of the depopulation program were regarded by the Thai government as successful in the three middle left-bank valleys but only partly successful in the Phuan state, where the terrain was far more difficult and the local élite resisted efforts to make them move down from the plateau region (Smuckarn and Breazeale, 1998, chapters 1&2).

The number of people forcibly removed from the left bank can never be more than a matter of conjecture. Some extant reports mention exact numbers of people who were moved from some left-bank sites to specific places on the right bank, but no aggregate records were compiled. A Thai who had access to records extant in the 1890s estimated that 80,000 Lao were removed from the left bank around Vientiane alone, after the city was razed in 1828, and that the total number of Lao and Phuan affected by the long-term resettlement program might have been several hundred thousand.⁴⁴

Extant records are adequately detailed to show the broad patterns of resettlement resulting from the collapse of the Vientiane princely state. An exact chronology of the formal founding of new Lao towns on the right bank can be compiled from Interior Ministry records. The establishment of new towns, where no administrative centre existed before, and the subdivision of provincial towns into a system of satellite towns (each with a governor and full complement of officials, but subordinate to the provincial town), reflects the rapid expansion of the populace in this region beginning in the mid-1830s. By the 1860s, the pressure was in the opposite direction, and numerous satellite towns were established east of the Mekong as Lao farmers gradually moved back to the left bank, reoccupied deserted village sites and cultivated abandoned paddy fields.

In the mid-1870s, the Phuan state was caught in a conflict between Chinese marauders from the north and Thai and Lao armies coming up from the south to restore order. One of the last large-scale forced resettlements was the removal of

Phuan villagers in 1876 to the Thai central plain, which greatly reduced the population of the plateau area. The administrative centres of the plateau never ceased to exist, however, and a Thai commissionership was established there in 1886. The first modern effort to enumerate the population produced an estimate of almost 25,000 in 1889, including the principal non-Phuan minorities. The 1889 census was compiled by the local town officials and is reproduced in Table 2 as a rare example of data collection on frontier peoples during this period. This province is the only one in modern Laos with a boundary essentially unchanged since the period before the 1893 French acquisition of all territory east of the Mekong, and the Thai enumeration is remarkably close to the French estimate of 22,000 in 1900 for the same area (Pelet, 1902, p. 48).

Table 2. Phuan State (modern Xieng Khouang Province) census, 1889

Item	Official Class					Debt slaves (D)	Other males	Females	Total	
	Aged men	Elders	Juniors	Clerks	Able men					
By town and ethnic group										
Chiang Khwang										
Phuan	51	104	74	116	204	71	830	1,622	3,072	
Thai Hat	14	6	15	10	24	0	30	66	165	
Kha	0	22	5	8	40	25	330	500	930	
Hmong (A)	3	9	0	0	58	4	111	162	347	
Saen										
Phuan	15	71	12	60	150	25	465	680	1,478	
Kha	0	20	0	0	60	29	166	194	469	
Hmong	0	5	0	0	10	0	26	47	88	
Sui										
Phuan	10	70	6	46	253	15	223	530	1,153	
Lao (A)	34	87	74	65	201	0	123	343	927	
Kha (A)	40	50	50	44	247	0	205	452	1,088	
Hmong (A)	3	2	0	0	29	0	75	100	209	
Kat										
Phuan	9	16	2	2	147	10	30	119	335	
Khang										
Phuan	12	65	31	30	65	33	200	200	636	
Chiang Kham										
Phuan	80	350	400	100	1,500	55	495	1,950	4,930	
Kha	20	30	5	10	149	5	39	196	454	
Hmong	184	199	410	203	1,630	135	1,163	2,839	6,763	

Table 2 cont.

Item	Official Class					Debt slaves (D)	Other males	Females	Total
	Aged men	Elders	Juniors	Clerks	Able men				
<i>Mo</i>									
Phuan	25	40	17	12	63	0	140	175	472
Kha	5	13	17	7	15	5	16	105	183
Yao (A)	8	27	17	26	68	11	64	359	580
Phuan (B)	18	44	37	29	50	22	58	180	438
Phuan (C)	10	16	13	15	25	18	24	67	188
By ethnic group									
Phuan	230	776	592	410	2,457	249	2,465	5,523	12,702
Hmong	190	215	410	203	1,727	139	1,375	3,148	7,407
Kha	65	135	77	69	511	64	756	1,447	3,124
Lao	34	87	74	65	201	0	123	343	927
Yao	8	27	17	26	68	11	64	359	580
Thai Hat	14	6	15	10	24	0	30	66	165
Total	541	1,246	1,185	783	4,988	463	4,813	10,886	24,905

Source: NAT R5M29/4 Suriya Wongsā to Suriya Det, 24 Aug. 1889, enclosed census.

Notes: For a map of these towns, see Smuckarn & Breazeale (1988).

A. Imigrants from the Huaphan State

B. Immigrants from Phonphisai and Prachum Chalalai.

C. Immigrants from Borikhan.

D. Includes both males and females.

Elders = thao-phia khun-mün

Juniors = but-mün samun

Clerks = samian thanai

Repopulated Buffers: A Recurrent Historical Pattern

Northeast Thailand and Chiang Rai Province are the only Thai frontier regions where a complete chronology can be established for the founding of new administrative centres. (The dependency states handled their own administrative affairs, and their records have generally not been preserved.) There was a dramatic increase in the number of administrative centres in the central Mekong valley during the half century after the collapse of the Vientiane princely state. There are limitations to the use of time-series data on the founding of new towns (most of which were in the central Mekong valley), since many divisions of territory represent political factionalism rather than population change. In the absence of other kinds of data, however, the proliferation of administrative units provides at least a rough indicator of population change.⁴⁵

The pattern of withdrawing the left-bank populace to right-bank sites in the 1830s and 1840s is reflected in the increase in administrative centres in the region that comprises modern northeast Thailand. By mid-century some of the Lao villagers were crossing the Mekong again and moving east to join those who had successfully evaded earlier efforts to remove them. With only one exception (a Phuan town south of the plateau), no new provincial towns were established in the depopulated left-bank areas, but many satellite towns sprang up there in the 1850s and 1860s. The process of depopulation followed by repopulation is documentable for the nineteenth century, and this pattern seems to be an old one that reflects the stages in which the Thai kingdom expanded over a period of several centuries.

Some early events reported by Southeast Asian chroniclers are clearly drawn from the realm of fable. This characteristic of historical records may lead researchers to disregard any extraordinary claim that appears at first glance to be incredible. The Thai annals, for example, state that the entire populace of the upper half of the central plain was moved south in 1584 and resettled temporarily in the vicinity of the capital city. At first glance, this movement of people seems unlikely, if not impossible. The rationale, as explained by one of the foremost Thai historians, was a strategic regrouping of the populace for defence:

“Naresuan [the prince who was commander-in-chief and son of the Thai king] felt certain that his enemies in Pegu would launch an attack on the Thai kingdom in early 1585. As he deliberated about the defence of the kingdom, he realised that the Thai were outnumbered. If he established base camps to withstand attacks both in the capital and in the northern towns, as Thai commanders had done in the past, his forces would have to be divided up and attend to duties that were beyond their capacity. He realised that he could gain an advantage over the enemy only on the battlefields at Ayutthaya. He thus concluded that the only means of withstanding the attack was to move the entire populace and all forms of transport down to Ayutthaya, thereby organising a united resistance in a single place.” (Damrong, 2008, p. 41)

It is tempting to dismiss the basic premise in this account as too fanciful to be believed. But examined in the light of documentable resettlement schemes on a similarly large scale in the nineteenth century, the longer-term pattern of a fluid frontier is discernable and can be described as follows.

In the late sixteenth century, the provinces across the northern rim of the central plain may indeed have been largely depopulated and stripped of all kinds of transport equipment, beasts of burden and foodstuffs that might be of use to an invading army. When the likelihood of invasion diminished, the governors and other officials were allowed to return to the abandoned towns, and they took the farmers and their families north again. This region was known as the “northern Thai” provinces until the late nineteenth century.

The Müang leaders of the princely states farther north broke their links with Burma after the fall of Ayutthaya in 1767 and accepted Thai rule. Under threat of attack from Burma, however, the populace of Chiang Mai and Lamphun moved temporarily to one of the “northern Thai” provinces and then to Lampang territory. The populace of Nan and Phrae (the eastern half of the upper Chao Phraya basin) was likewise scattered during the conflict between the Burmese and Thai. Only around the end of the eighteenth century was the populace of the Müang towns firmly resettled.

The next step was the depopulation of a wide band of territory farther north, extending from the Salween across to the Mekong and beyond, and the strategic resettling of the Shan and Lü populace in the vicinity of Chiang Mai and Nan between 1802 and 1813. In the 1840s, the most fertile lands of this deserted zone were systematically repopulated, with a view towards shifting the protective “depopulated” zone even farther north, although the latter goal was never achieved.

In the 1880s, when boundary demarcation became an issue among Britain, China, France and Thailand, the Thai government attempted to move some of the resettled Lü once again, sending them north and into Chiang Khaeng - the area east of the Mekong, immediately south of the present China-Laos boundary. Envisaged as a means of strengthening Thai control over the disputed area, where all four governments had overlapping claims, these efforts were quashed by French intervention in 1893.

The way in which people have been forced to move back and forth between these bands of territory in recent centuries follows a clear pattern. In the late sixteenth century, the Thai kingdom effectively became reduced in size. Its northern frontier (the upper central plain) was abandoned but later repopulated. In the 1770s and 1780s a new unpopulated band (the Müang towns) appeared but was quickly repopulated early in the nineteenth century. The process involved the depopulation

of another band farther north, which extended approximately along the modern Burma-Thailand boundary from the Salween to the Mekong. This was the outermost band that the Thai government was able to depopulate effectively, although the process began again in the 1870s and continued into the 1880s with the establishment of Chiang Saen as a base of operations for a renewed effort to gain political control of Chiang Tung and Sipsòng Panna. The final cycle was halted only by external intervention and treaties that defined the modern international boundaries and froze the fluid frontier.

Notes

The following abbreviations are used to cite unpublished sources in archives.

- FO Foreign Office papers, Public Record Office, London
- IAF Indochine, Ancien Fonds (Indochina Archives, Old Series), in the French colonial ministry archives, Section d'Outre-mer, Archives nationales, Aix-en-Provence
- MAE Ministère des Affaires Étrangères [French foreign ministry archives]
- NAT National Archives of Thailand
- NLT National Library of Thailand, Manuscripts Division

1. First-hand observations are recorded in the Bradley journal, 24 November 1835, 9 December 1835, 30 April 1836 and 7 June 1836.
2. NLT R4/1224/53 Nakhon Phanom despatch, 14 May 1862.
3. TNA R5M58/103 Sonnabandit to Rama V, 25 Feb. 1891. FO 69/189 Beckett to Greville, 16 Apr. 1898.
4. The despatch series catalogued as TNA R5M2.12.kai.Chiang Mai, vol. 22, contains copies of parts of an 1890 census in Mae Hong Son, which lists a large number of Khamu from Luang Prabang who were long-time residents. MAE Nouvelle Série (NS) Siam 60, f. 117, contains an 1897 map of the Chao Phraya basin showing the distribution of Khamu and other minority groups at that time.
5. MAE NS Siam 58 Defrance to Hanotaux, 31 July 1896.
6. MAE NS Siam 72 Grand to resident superior, 24 Jan. 1908.
7. MAE NS Siam 73 minister to de Margerie, 14 Sep. 1908.

8. MAE Asie 1918-1929 Siam 4 memo. by de la Brosse for the governor general, 12 July 1919.
9. MAE NS Siam 72 Grand to resident superior, 24 Jan. 1908. MAE Asie 1918-29 Siam 1 Notton to Poincaré, 10 Apr. 1922.
10. MAE NS Siam 64 Lugan to Ferrand, 10 Mar. 1899.
11. MAE NS Siam 39 Suzor to Klobukowski, 24 Dec. 1901.
12. MAE NS Siam 71 Guénot to Bangkok minister, 14 May 1907.
13. NLT R3/1192/22 mema., various dates in 1830, on the distribution of Vientiane people sent by way of Paklay to the central plain.
14. NLT R3/1192/22 memo., 3 Nov. 1830.
15. NLT R3/1193/18 memo. concerning a Champasak despatch received in 1832.
16. An excellent study of resettlement in Northern Thailand during this period and continuing into the early nineteenth century is provided by Grabowsky (1999).
17. Thiphakòrawong 1960: 284 states that 5,000 people were taken from Sat in early 1802. NLT R1/1164/1 edict to Chiang Mai, 6 Oct. 1802 gives the number 6,000. R1/1170/1 Deposition by Phimsan, 28 Oct. 1808 says part of the populace was driven farther north in the Shan States.
18. TNA R5M2.12.kai.Chiang Mai 26 register entry regarding a despatch from Pracha to Sonnabandit, n.d. [May 1890].
19. Wyatt (1994, p. 99). Thiphakòrawong (1960, p. 310) says 23,000 people were removed. Bangkok's share were settled in Ratburi and Saraburi.
20. The 1805 campaign was carried out by armies from Nan and Luang Prabang, which attacked as far north as the Lü capital at Chiang Rung. Thiphakòrawong (1960, p. 320) states that the army rounded up 40,000 to 50,000 men, women, and children for resettlement in Nan. Annual entries can occasionally be traced to extant documents, and estimates such as these were almost certainly quoted from provincial or military despatches. The numbers thus have a factual basis, even though the commanders may have exaggerated them to give the appearance of greater success. The annal of Chiang Khaeng translated by Grabowsky and Wichasin (2008, pp. 32, 106–167) describes these events briefly, but the Lü text provides no quantitative data. This study also provides a helpful map (2008, p. vii) showing the territory ruled by the princes of Chiang Khaeng.
21. NLT R3/1210/156 edict to Nan, 19 Sept. 1848. TNA R5M58/174 Damrong to Rama V, 26 Dec. 1894. Wyatt 1994: 105 (which says 6,000 captives were taken to Nan during 1812–1813).
22. In 1830 a British visitor estimated that Chiang Mai and Lampang each had 40,000 to 50,000 inhabitants. The three western Müang towns claimed to have a combined population of 104,000 which he thought was not much more than the truth (Richardson journal, Dec. 1829 – Mar. 1830, ff. 30, 38). In 1837 another British visitor estimated the populations to be 50,000 in Chiang Mai, 30,000 in Lampang, 10,000 in Lamphun, 30,000 in Nan, and 5,000 in Phrae (Parliamentary Papers, 1868–1869, p. 38). In 1844 a French priest estimated a maximum population of 20,000 people for Chiang Mai city and the surrounding plain (*Annales de la Propagation de la Foi* 18, p. 56). For purposes of calculating the potential military forces that

could be mobilized in 1849, the Thai government estimated the populace of Chiang Mai to be 30,000 (among whom 7,300 were able men) and of Lampang to be 26,000 (among whom 6,000 were able men) (NLT R3/1210/22 edict to Chiang Mai, 2 Feb. 1849). By comparison Chiang Tung in 1820 claimed to have a mere 1,500 able men available for mobilization (Mangrai 1981: 267).

23. NLT R3/1209/29 Chiang Mai despatch, 5 Feb. 1848.
24. NLT R3/1204/20 Nan despatch, 5 Nov. 1841; edict to Nan, 30 Mar. 1842. R3/1205/29 Nan despatch, 15 Nov. 1842.
25. NLT R3/1206/44 edict to Nan, 1 June 1844. R3/1206/12 report from Nan to Phichai, 17 Oct. 1844.
26. NLT R3/1205/47 edict to Nan, 5 May 1843.
27. NLT R3/1205/21 memo., 10 Apr. 1843., 25 Apr. 1843. R3/1206/57 Chiang Mai despatch, 6 Oct. 1844.
28. NLT R3/1207/236 deposition by Sitthi Mongkhon, 8 Oct. 1845.
29. NLT R3/1206/57 Chiang Mai despatch, 6 Oct. 1844.
30. NLT R3/1206/13 Lampang despatch, 15 Jan. 1845.
31. NLT R3/1210/22 edict to Chiang Mai, 2 Feb 1849.
32. NLT R3/1211/33 undated memo, which refers to R3/1211/38 despatch, Phong officials to Nan, 9 Jan. 1850.
33. NLT R3/1210/49 Phichai despatch, 8 Feb. 1849. R3/1209/53 deposition by Governor Maha Chai, n.d. [mid-1849].
34. NLT R3/1211/94 Luang Phrabang despatch, 27 July 1849.
35. NLT R3/1211/94 synopsis of Nan despatch, 11 Nov. 1849.
36. NLT R3/1212/35 mema., various dates during 1850.
37. NLT R4/1213/8 edict to Nan, 11 Sept. 1851.
38. NLT R4/1216/15 synopsis of Phichai and Uttaradit desps., 6 Apr. 1855.
39. TNA R5M2.12.kai.Nan 2 Nan Prince to Sing Prince, 29 July 1888.
40. NLT R3/1189/4-khai Front Palace Prince despatch, ca. early July 1827.
41. This estimate assumes that another 50,000 women and children were resettled in the Prasak and Mun basins, although the commander's report mentions only able men destined for these areas. The Vientiane princely state at that time consisted of all the left- and right-bank towns along the Mekong, from Chiang Khan down to Khemmarat, and part of the upper Chi River basin in present day Northeast Thailand.
42. NLT R3/1192/14 Preliminary and revised registers of silver levy quotas due for the year 1828/9 from the east Lao and Khmer towns.

43. According to Thiphakòrawong (1960, pp. 33, 34, 47), two important Khmer settlements already existed in the central plain. After a Khmer attack in 1771, in which two southeastern coastal provinces (Chanthaburi and Trat) were depopulated by armies from Cambodia, the Thai launched a counter offensive and moved about 10,000 Khmer from Cambodia to Ratburi, southwest of Bangkok. The other was the entourage of 500 retainers in Bangkok under the Khmer prince, Ang Eng, who reigned 1783-1797.
44. MAE NS Siam 60 Hardouin to Hanotaux, 24 July 1897.
45. See the sketch maps in Breazeale (1975, pp. 339–341) for new provincial towns and satellite towns founded in the nineteenth century in the course of the Mekong basin resettlement programme.

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