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## Imperial diplomacy: the French Montigny Mission of 1856–57

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### Abstract

In 1856–7 the French diplomat Charles de Montigny visited the three countries of Siam, Cambodia and Vietnam, hoping to establish some form of formal relations with all three. While he was able to sign a full diplomatic and commercial treaty in Bangkok, his negotiations with the Cambodian and Vietnamese rulers were largely fruitless. Even so, Montigny’s visit prepared the ground for future French intervention and can be considered as the beginning of French implantation in Southeast Asia. Yet this article argues that his mission must be understood not as an episode of “gunboat diplomacy” resulting in “unequal treaties”, but rather as an example of largely non-coercive diplomacy occurring within an imperial framework.

**Keywords:** France; imperialism; diplomacy; Vietnam; Thailand; Cambodia

In 1855, when the British diplomat Sir John Bowring signed his famous treaty with the Siamese Court, the British were already a strong presence in Southeast Asia, having gained control over much of present-day Burma after acquiring the Straits Settlements. Conversely, their global rivals, the French, had nothing between their small collection of possessions in India and their recently acquired islands in what would become French Polynesia. Within less than a decade, however, France had occupied southern Vietnam and established a protectorate over Cambodia, laying the foundations for the colony of French Indochina. Although the beginnings of that colony are usually linked to the Franco-Spanish invasion of Vietnam in 1858–9, in fact the French presence in the region began with the diplomatic mission of Charles de Montigny in 1856–7.

Montigny’s mission, although well-documented in French sources, has received relatively little attention in English-language scholarship.<sup>1</sup> His success in Siam has been overshadowed by Bowring, on whose coattails he was riding, to a large extent. His ultimately unsuccessful attempt to bring Cambodia under French influence becomes more or less lost in the story of the establishment of a fully fledged protectorate there only a few years later. For Vietnam, his even more fruitless negotiations have been dramatically overshadowed by the 1858 invasion. While Montigny had very mixed results in his attempts to establish relations with the rulers of these three countries, his mission constituted an important episode in what can be called “imperial diplomacy”. The

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<sup>1</sup> J. Cady, *The Roots of French Imperialism in Eastern Asia* (Ithaca, 1954) is still a good treatment of this period. The most detailed account in English is Neon Snidvongs, ‘The Development [sic] of Siamese Relations with Britain and France in the Reign of Maha Mongkut, 1851–1868’ (unpublished PhD dissertation, University of London, 1961), Chapter IX.

nineteenth century is infamous as the period of ‘high imperialism’, of ‘gunboat diplomacy’ and of ‘unequal treaties’ imposed by force. This article will argue, however, that Montigny’s agenda in Southeast Asia cannot be fitted neatly into any of these categories and must be viewed through a more complex lens.

## Background

The mid-1850s saw an important change in the geopolitics of mainland Southeast Asia. Britain won the second of its three wars with Burma, while Siam, the ‘regional superpower’, began actively pursuing diplomatic relations with European countries and the United States. The empire of Đai Nam (Vietnam) was equally present on the West’s diplomatic radar, while both Britain and France were eyeing the smaller Cambodian kingdom. (By contrast, the territories that were later combined into Laos were largely *terra incognita* to Europeans at this time.) The British were at the forefront of diplomatic initiatives on the mainland, but by the 1850s the French were pushing hard to catch up. Their involvement in the imperialist campaigns against China and the concessions they had gained thereby had whetted their appetite for expansion in Asia. At the same time, they were acutely conscious of their lack of even a refuelling station in the region; their small Indian possessions were not suitable, and they possessed no other Asian territory east of the Indian Ocean islands of Île de France and Bourbon, present-day Mauritius and Réunion respectively.<sup>2</sup> Their newly acquired Polynesian possessions were too far away to be strategically useful for Asia and were instead linked more closely to French activities in the Americas.<sup>3</sup>

François Guizot, Foreign Minister under the July Monarchy of Louis-Philippe (r. 1830–48), had argued convincingly in the 1840s that France already had enough commitments in different parts of the world without taking on new responsibilities in the Far East. While he fully recognised the need for territory east of India, he preferred the Pacific rather than the South China Sea, and the occupation of the Marquesas Islands and Tahiti was sufficient for French needs at the time.<sup>4</sup> With the advent of the Second Empire under Napoleon III (r. 1852–70), however, the French government began to think more seriously about strengthening its presence in Southeast Asia. Ideally it hoped to acquire territory that could be transformed into a French Singapore, Hong Kong or Batavia. At the same time, the new Empire’s close ties to the Catholic Church, along with growing attention in Europe to religious persecution in China and Vietnam, gave France an excellent opportunity to assert its ‘protection’ over Asian believers. Paris had begun to explicitly assert this right under Louis-Philippe; under Napoleon III both political interests and strong lobbying by missionaries caused the government to take it even more seriously.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>2</sup> This point is made explicitly in a November 1855 letter from the Minister of the Navy to the Minister of Foreign Affairs, in H. Cordier, *La politique coloniale de la France au début du Second Empire (Indo-Chine, 1852–1858)* (Leiden, 1911), p. 35 (downloaded from gallica.bnf.fr; henceforth all books from this source will be indicated by ‘Gallica’).

<sup>3</sup> An account of the acquisition of the Marquesas and Society Islands in the 1840s is in F. Guizot, *Mémoires pour servir à l’histoire de mon temps*, vol. 7 (Paris, 1865), Chapter 11 (Gallica); see pp. 467ff. for the original government documents.

<sup>4</sup> Guizot’s comments on French commitments are in an undated archival document, quoted in A. Septans, *Les commencements de l’Indo-Chine Française d’après les archives du Ministre de la Marine et des Colonies, les mémoires ou relations du temps* (Paris, 1887), p. 128 (Gallica). Tahiti and the surrounding islands were “low-hanging fruit” which France could acquire with minimum effort—having lost out to the British in New Zealand—and only a few squawks of protests from London. Guizot, *Mémoires*, pp. 44–6, discusses their strategic significance.

<sup>5</sup> For examples of missionary pressure on the government, see Cordier, *Politique coloniale*, pp. 14–16 and 36–7. Guizot spoke in the National Assembly of France’s potential role as protector of Catholicism at least as early as 1844 (*Mémoires*, p. 79).

Siam was the most logical target for diplomatic initiatives, as it was larger and much more open than either Cambodia or Vietnam, particularly since King Mongkut (Rama IV, r. 1851–68) had taken the throne. In 1855 the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MAE) began planning an initiative, eventually designating as plenipotentiary Charles de Montigny. He had spent most of his career first in the military and then in the civil service but had been appointed Vice-Consul of Business (roughly equivalent to a commercial attaché) in Shanghai in 1847 and was subsequently promoted to Consul. A decade of service in China made him an ‘old Asia hand’ by French standards, and he also enjoyed close personal ties to Napoleon III.<sup>6</sup> Initially focused on negotiating a treaty with the Siamese comparable to the one Bowring had just completed for Britain, the mandate given to Montigny was gradually expanded to include exploratory contacts first with Cambodia and then with Vietnam. Armed with these instructions, Montigny set sail from Europe in April 1856, reaching Singapore in mid-May.

### Siam

Montigny’s mission was plagued from start to finish by logistical difficulties related to the availability of warships of adequate size—and armature—for his needs. Upon reaching Singapore, he had to make formal written requests to the French Navy for a second ship to escort him to Bangkok, while a third would be required for Vietnam. Three ships were eventually placed at his disposal, but only for short periods and not all at the same time; this problem would have serious consequences for the final stage of his mission.<sup>7</sup>

Montigny was following hot on the heels of the British and Americans at a time when the Siamese under Mongkut were increasingly open to formalising relations with Western powers. The final version of Bowring’s treaty had been negotiated and ratified just a few months before by Harry Parkes, and the American envoy Townsend Harris had departed Bangkok even more recently.<sup>8</sup> By the time Montigny arrived, the first British consul was already *en poste*. Most of the ‘heavy lifting’ in negotiations had already been done by Bowring and Parkes, and Montigny’s superiors in Paris had recommended the Anglo-Siamese agreement as a basis for his negotiations, along with treaties France had recently signed with China and the Sultan of Muscat. If unable to obtain any further concessions, he was authorised to use the Bowring document as an exact template.<sup>9</sup>

The question of religious freedom in Siam, while not an issue for the British, had significance for the French, because of the presence of a multi-ethnic Catholic community under the leadership of French missionaries as well as their concern over ongoing persecution in China and Vietnam. Although the Siamese were generally quite tolerant of Christian missionaries, the contingent sent by the Missions Étrangères de Paris (MEP) had experienced a rare incident of trouble late in the reign of King Rama III (r. 1824–51). Most—though not all—of the MEP Fathers had refused a royal order to perform Buddhist merit-making acts to stop a plague in the kingdom, and several were expelled. Although the missionaries were once more *persona grata* after Mongkut’s

<sup>6</sup> Cordier, *Politique coloniale*, pp. 28–34. C. Meyniard, *Le Second Empire en Indo-Chine (Siam-Cambodge-Annam)* (Paris, 1891), pp. 101–19 (Gallica), provides a detailed biography of Montigny.

<sup>7</sup> Correspondence regarding the deployment of ships is in Cordier, *Politique coloniale*, pp. 29–31, 35–6. Montigny claimed that the Siamese had expressed doubts to local missionaries as to whether France actually had a navy, having never seen any of their ships (p. 94, quoting Montigny’s 18 May 1856 letter to the French Minister of Foreign Affairs).

<sup>8</sup> See N. Tarling, ‘Harry Parkes’ negotiations in Bangkok in 1856’, *Journal of the Siam Society* LIII, 2 (1965), pp. 153–80, and ‘The mission of Sir John Bowring to Siam’, *Journal of the Siam Society* L, 2 (1962), pp. 91–118.

<sup>9</sup> The two sets of instructions from Paris—one focused on commercial issues and one on political and religious matters—are in Cordier, *Politique coloniale*, pp. 38–51, 53–6.

succession, the MEP was sufficiently alarmed to push for the inclusion of religious freedom clauses in the treaty.<sup>10</sup>

To a large extent Montigny's experience in Bangkok seems to have been somewhat smoother and less frustrating than those of his Anglo-Saxon counterparts. Even so, there was no shortage of delays, along with the relentless hospitality and detailed protocol of the Siamese Court. Montigny was able to improve on Bowring's treaty in a few specific ways, and he left Bangkok in August, generally satisfied with his achievements and confident that France's national honour and interests had been duly upheld. The treaty guaranteed access to Siamese territory for French naturalists and other scholars, which would eventually open the door to exploration as well—although it is not clear whether Montigny was thinking that far ahead. It also included specific guarantees for religious liberty for missionaries and local Catholics.<sup>11</sup>

Montigny was of course very much aware that the French were still catching up with the British, who had not only beaten them to Bangkok in 1855 but had got there decades earlier with the agreement negotiated by Henry Burney in 1826, much of which was now superseded by the Bowring treaty. In his post-Bangkok report to his Ministry in Paris, Montigny boasted of having effectively replaced Britain in the hearts of the Siamese elite. "When I arrived," he wrote in November 1856, "I found Siam to be English; when I left, I had made it French." He particularly emphasised an alleged Siamese desire to have France as a friendly counterpart to the greatly feared British. This fear, he believed, was so strong that if he had chosen to offer to make Siam a French protectorate, the Siamese would have accepted enthusiastically.<sup>12</sup>

Montigny's main disappointment was his failure to obtain a letter of introduction from the Siamese King to his Vietnamese counterpart, despite having strongly pressured both resident missionary Bishop Jean-Baptiste Pallegoix and Mongkut himself for such a letter. Pallegoix had told him (quite correctly) before his visit that a letter was highly unlikely given the state of enmity between the two kingdoms. Montigny declared himself "bitterly sorry" and in his report to Paris he was dismissive of the Bishop (whom he viewed as excessively pro-Siamese) and decided to rely on a more junior missionary, Father Larnaudie, to be his translator. In a private conversation with Montigny, Mongkut told him that there was basically no longer any communication between the two enemies. Yet Montigny persisted, even providing the undoubtedly bemused King with a draft letter of introduction from the "Prime Minister" of Siam to his Vietnamese counterpart; he was apparently unaware that neither country had such a position.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>10</sup> The incident under Rama III is found in *Phratchaphongsawadan Krung Rattanakosin chabap Ho Samut haeng Chat: Ratchakan thi 3 Phrabat Somdet Phranangklao Chaoyuhua Ratchakan thi 4 Phrabat Somdet Phraçhomklao Čhaoyuhua* [Royal Chronicles of the Bangkok Dynasty, National Library Edition: Rama III King Phranangklao [and] Rama IV King Mongkut] (Bangkok, 1963), pp. 327–8; the missionaries' account is in a letter dated 9 Sept. 1840, in *Annales de la Propagation de la Foi* (henceforth *APF*), XXII (1850), pp. 151–2 (Gallica). The MEP's November 1855 letter to the MAE is in Cordier, *Politique coloniale*, pp. 36–7. A historical overview of issues with Catholic missions is in T. Winichakul, 'Buddhist apologetics and a genealogy of comparative religion in Siam', *Numen* 62 (2015), pp. 75–98.

<sup>11</sup> Cordier, *Politique coloniale*, pp. 90–105 has a copy of the treaty as well as Montigny's explanations of specific articles to his superiors in Paris. The French treaty included a limitation on the Siamese government's right to ban the export of rice in times of shortage, and Montigny claimed this as his personal achievement (p. 102), but in fact Parkes had already wrung this concession from the Siamese before the final ratification of the Bowring treaty (Tarling, 'Mission', pp. 102, 111).

<sup>12</sup> The quoted November 1856 letter is in Cordier, *Politique coloniale*, p. 79; a September 1856 letter refers to his conversation with a Siamese minister (p. 104).

<sup>13</sup> See *ibid.*, pp. 72–4 for the correspondence with Pallegoix; the meeting with Mongkut is in Meyniard, *Second Empire*, pp. 233–4, and the draft letter on p. 237. Montigny's initial complaint to Paris, dated 19 June 1856, is in Cordier, *Politique coloniale*, pp. 75–6; a harsher letter from November is on p. 104.

## Cambodia

When Montigny left Siam for Cambodia, he seems to have been riding high on the success of his negotiations there and convinced that he should maximise his opportunities during his visit. His original orders were to reach an agreement with King Ang Duang (r. 1848–60) confirming long-term religious freedom and also to “deal with a small issue”, as he put it—namely the lack of any French response to an earlier Cambodian initiative. In 1853 Ang Duang had sent one of his officials to Singapore to deliver a letter and some presents intended for Napoleon III to the French Consul. By the time of Montigny’s mission three years later, however, no response from Paris had been forthcoming. The diplomat’s rather delicate task was to try and tactfully explain this silence.<sup>14</sup>

The degree of religious freedom in Cambodia was roughly comparable to that in Siam: generally high but with occasional exceptions. Bishop Jean-Claude Miche, the most senior of the small group of missionaries working there, was the driving force behind Cambodia’s inclusion in Montigny’s itinerary. Writing to Pallegoix shortly before the envoy’s arrival, Miche commented that “we [Catholics] are supposedly free, but this alleged freedom is highly precarious, as it is based on the whims of those who rule over us and can be undermined by the most petty provincial official”<sup>15</sup>

The Bishop did acknowledge, however, that “we have never been on better terms with the King [Ang Duang]”, and there are two incidences of this goodwill which are not mentioned in later French sources. The first is the account of an MEP missionary who was vacationing in Singapore between two stints in Cambodia. According to him, in late 1855 Ang Duang sent a small group of boys to be educated in Catholic schools in Singapore and Penang so that they would learn English and presumably eventually return to serve the royal government.<sup>16</sup> The second is more curious, a Thai translation of a letter between two MEP missionaries that discusses their loan of money to the Oudong Court to buy arms to fight the Vietnamese.<sup>17</sup>

Upon Montigny’s arrival in the Cambodian port of Kampot in the final days of September, he found both Miche and the warship *Capricieuse*, which had been with him in Siam but had sailed earlier. The welcome news from Miche that Ang Duang would be travelling from Oudong (the capital at the time) to meet him was somewhat negated by the report that a Siamese “spy” had been identified among a group of supposed Cambodians whom the Bangkok Court had asked the *Capricieuse* to help repatriate. This Siamese admitted to being an agent of one of Mongkut’s brothers, but Montigny concluded—almost certainly correctly—that his presence must have been sanctioned by the King himself. Montigny sent him away and settled in to wait for Ang Duang’s arrival. Within a few days, however, word came from Oudong that the King was unwell and that Montigny was instead invited to the capital to proceed with treaty negotiations. Oudong was several days (by elephant) from Kampot, and Montigny had to weigh the relative importance of pursuing his initiative with Cambodia and continuing on to Hué.

<sup>14</sup> On the letter and gifts, see Meyniard, *Second Empire*, p. 359. Montigny’s reference to a “small issue” is in his March 1856 letter: Cordier, *Politique coloniale*, p. 67. No scholar has found any written document spelling out Montigny’s instructions for Cambodia, which were perhaps conveyed to him orally in Paris; P. Lamant, ‘Les prémices des relations politiques entre le Cambodge et la France vers le milieu du XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle’, *Revue Française d’Histoire d’Outre-Mer* 72 (1985), p. 175 (downloaded from [www.persee.fr](http://www.persee.fr))

<sup>15</sup> Miche’s letter of 16 June 1856, quoted in Meyniard, *Second Empire*, p. 357. Lamant, ‘Prémices’, mentions Miche’s initiatives dating back to 1848 (p. 169). Unlike Siam, Cambodia had no Protestant missionaries.

<sup>16</sup> Letter by Father Laffitte, 24 December 1855, *APF*, XXVIII (1856), p. 359. There is no indication of what became of these boys.

<sup>17</sup> The translated letter, dated 12 February 1856, is in Thai National Archives (henceforth TNA), Fourth Reign, 1217/2. The Cambodians are said to have gone through the missionaries to contact the French Consul in Singapore to request both arms and training in their use.

He decided in favour of the latter and reluctantly prepared his departure along with Miche, who had previously worked in Vietnam and was to be his interpreter there.<sup>18</sup>

All did not seem lost, however, as a large delegation arrived from Oudong shortly thereafter with authorisation for Miche to negotiate a treaty which Ang Duang had supposedly promised to sign. Montigny drafted a treaty in French and Khmer versions to be sent back to Oudong. Although much shorter and less detailed than the agreement with the Siamese, it laid down principles of freedom of access and movement for French subjects within Cambodia, as well as granting France the right to take timber from the local forests for only a nominal fee. There were two articles covering freedom of religion for missionaries and local Catholics, with the additional stipulation that, given Catholicism's long history in the country, it should be henceforth considered as one of the "*religions de l'État*", most probably indicating that it would be considered as legitimately Cambodian rather than 'foreign'. Montigny also took the opportunity to lecture the assembled officials on the "feelings of well-intentioned interest" in Cambodia which had brought him there and to emphasise the crucial need to formalise both commercial relations with France and religious freedom for Christians.<sup>19</sup>

Perhaps the most important feature of the draft treaty was an appendix whereby the King formally ceded the island of Koh Traal (the present-day Vietnamese island of Phú Quốc) to France. Although territorial gain had not been part of Montigny's original agenda, he later maintained that the Siamese had on several occasions insisted that France should acquire the island (then under Vietnamese control) and that Ang Duang had made a case for this as well. In the end, Montigny told the King that he was not officially authorised to accept a territorial concession but would inform his government of the offer. This was just as well since, at the time, the island was in Vietnamese hands and therefore not really Ang Duang's to give away.<sup>20</sup>

The draft treaty is also significant for the language which Montigny used in the appendix (putatively written by the Cambodian side but clearly drafted by himself) to articulate what he obviously felt were—or at least should be—Ang Duang's sentiments towards France:

French occupation of [Phú Quốc] will be seen as a very good thing by myself and my subjects, as it will place a powerful friend beside us who, by their presence alone, will protect us from the troublesome attacks of the Vietnamese, our natural enemies. In this respect, [French] possession [of the island] will be equally satisfying to my overlord, the ruler of Siam, by placing the French—his friends and allies—between himself and the Vietnamese. I hope that the powerful ruler of France will accept this [territorial] cession and understand the loyalty and sincerity of my initiative; his agreement will make us very happy. The island, located as it is at the mouth of the rivers and canals which crisscross the kingdoms of Siam, Cambodia, and Vietnam and extend up to the provinces of China and Tibet, under [French] rule will soon become the most important trade emporium in the Far East.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>18</sup> These events are summarised in Meyniard, *Second Empire*, pp. 381–91; Montigny's own account is in Cordier, *Politique coloniale*, pp. 119–20. Note that Montigny had already received criticism from Paris for delays in his mission (Lamant, 'Prémices', p. 176).

<sup>19</sup> Meyniard, *Second Empire*, p. 399; for the draft treat, see pp. 403–9. Cordier, *Politique coloniale*, pp. 121–2.

<sup>20</sup> The cession of the island is in an Appendix to the draft treaty, in Meyniard, *Second Empire*, pp. 406–9. This Appendix seems to have been removed from the copy of the document filed in the French archives, based on the version reproduced in Lamant, 'Prémices', pp. 192–4. Montigny's account of his conversations in Bangkok is in Cordier, *Politique coloniale*, pp. 122–4. His refusal of the island is in his 17 October 1856 letter to Ang Duang, in Meyniard, *Second Empire* pp. 410–11.

<sup>21</sup> Meyniard, *Second Empire*, p. 409. Montigny's knowledge of local geography is questionable: the only river which has the expanse he describes is obviously the Mekong, but Phú Quốc is a considerable distance away from its mouth.

Since Miche was to accompany him to Vietnam, Montigny entrusted the draft treaty and the responsibility for having it signed by Ang Duang to two junior missionaries. In his written instructions to them, he spelled out six points to be conveyed to the King:

- 1) His acceptance of the treaty would make a good impression on Emperor Napoleon.
- 2) If he refused, “he [would] soon have to agree with France—and probably other countries as well—on commitments which, instead of being voluntary, [would] be...forced on him and which he [could] not refuse” unless he wished to adopt the same hostile stance as the Vietnamese.
- 3) The proposed treaty was “perfectly legitimate and unobjectionable to even the most touchy suzerain and [was one of the] inherent rights of the Cambodian ruler’s clear sovereignty”. Moreover, Montigny promised to personally explain to Mongkut that this was his personal initiative and that it would be of great benefit to the Siamese because henceforth they would be separated from their traditional Vietnamese enemies by some degree of French influence. This would provide an “almost certain guarantee” of a successful bilateral relationship with Vietnam. Ang Duang was not to worry at all about Mongkut’s attitude because Montigny would “take full responsibility for everything”. Nor should he forget that once he became a “friend and ally” of France, he would necessarily acquire that same status in the eyes of his neighbours.
- 4) Montigny had been quite upset at Ang Duang’s failure to meet him in Kampot, which had yet to be satisfactorily explained. (Apparently the King’s story of a sudden outbreak of boils had not been convincing.) Unless the King signed the treaty, France would be forced to conclude that Cambodia had no interest in developing ties with them.
- 5) Montigny would have been happy to negotiate with the Cambodian ministers who came from Oudong, but he had been “unable to find a true Cambodian among any of them”. They demonstrated such ill will towards him that he seems to have concluded that they were all tainted by Siamese influence and incapable of displaying what he felt were Cambodia’s true feelings about the French.
- 6) Unless Ang Duang signed the treaty, Montigny would be forced to give a “very unfavourable account” to Paris. Moreover—and this was perhaps the sharpest cut of the entire message—he would be forced to view the King as a “simple provincial governor” under Mongkut’s authority. On the assumption that this was not the case and that Ang Duang would surely sign, Montigny concluded by helpfully suggesting some exotic animals to be sent as presents for Napoleon III.<sup>22</sup>

Armed with this bundle of carrots and sticks, the two missionaries set off for Oudong, where they apparently had to cool their heels for several days before being granted an audience with Ang Duang. Completely reversing his previous stance, the King now rejected the draft treaty. According to their account, he angrily criticised Montigny for refusing to visit Oudong, while denying that he had ever had any intention of travelling to Kampot himself. He refused to consider ceding the island because “it no longer belongs to me” and because such a step would provoke war with the Vietnamese. When the missionaries attempted to cite the successful conclusion of the Bowring treaty as a precedent, Ang Duang retorted that “the King of Siam does as he pleases and so do I” and that nothing compelled him to follow Mongkut’s example.<sup>23</sup> Ang Duang later gave his own version of this audience in a letter to Bangkok. According to him, he had flatly told the

<sup>22</sup> Montigny’s instructions are summarised in *ibid.*, pp. 416–18.

<sup>23</sup> An account of the missionaries’ audience with Ang Duang is in *ibid.*, pp. 420–2.

missionaries that Montigny's failure to make the trip to Oudong indicated a lack of good faith and that a bilateral treaty could not be signed without full-fledged negotiations between the two sides. He gave a similar explanation in a November letter to Montigny, which the latter would not see until much later.<sup>24</sup>

Montigny only learned of the complete failure of his Cambodia initiative the following March. Writing to his colleague in Shanghai a few days after his departure from Kampot, he boasted that "I had perfect success in Siam and Cambodia—wish me luck for [obtaining] the same success in Cochinchina."<sup>25</sup> It is perhaps fortunate that he was unaware of this fact when he sailed for the port of Tourane (present-day Đà Nẵng); he would confront more than enough disheartening obstacles once he arrived there in early 1857.

### Vietnam

Of the three countries Montigny was tasked to visit, Vietnam was by far the least receptive to his mission, for several reasons. First of all, historically speaking, successive dynasties had only considered one country as worthy of genuine 'foreign relations' (*bang giao*): China. Every other polity with which they had formal contacts—and these were relatively few in number—was characterised at best as a tributary or vassal (like Cambodia) and at worst as an enemy or 'pirates' (like Siam). Second, partly because Western countries did not fit easily into any of these categories, they were acceptable as visiting traders but were not viewed as potential diplomatic partners, much less as possible allies or protectors.<sup>26</sup> These two perceptions set Vietnam apart from the Siamese, Cambodians and almost any other Southeast Asian power at the time.

Third, and perhaps most importantly, among the various Western powers with whom the Vietnamese had contact, at the time of Montigny's mission the French were arguably the least welcome. By the mid-nineteenth century France was most closely associated with the hated 'heterodox religion', Catholicism. Except for a few Spanish Dominicans, the missionaries in the country were all Frenchmen from the MEP. In the 1830s the image of Christianity in the eyes of the Vietnamese elite had worsened from ideological subversion to full-fledged treason when a young missionary named Marchand was (probably wrongly) accused of involvement with a major rebellion in southern Vietnam and subsequently executed.<sup>27</sup>

The escalating persecution of Catholics under Emperor Thiệu Trị (r. 1841–47) was a continuation of the policies followed by his father Minh Mạng (r. 1820–41). Ironically, in 1840 Minh Mạng had actually sent a diplomatic mission to Europe to explore possible ties with France. However, lobbying by the Church and sympathetic newspapers persuaded the government of Louis-Philippe to refuse any meetings with the Vietnamese envoys, precisely on the grounds of past persecution. It does not seem to have occurred to anyone in Paris that responding to Minh Mạng's extraordinary initiative might have laid the foundations for a bilateral relationship that would ultimately make things easier for Vietnamese

<sup>24</sup> Text of letter in *ibid.*, p. 428; see also Snidvongs, 'Development', pp. 517–19, based on Ang Duang's 3 January 1857 letter from the Thai archives.

<sup>25</sup> Letter to René de Courcy dated 18 November 1856, from the latter's unpublished memoirs, quoted in Meyniard, *Second Empire*, p. 493.

<sup>26</sup> These observations are based on a close reading of the Vietnamese chronicle *Đại Nam Thực Lục* [True Records of Đại Nam, henceforth *ĐNTL*] (Hà Nội, 2002–7) for the period 1841–56. I hope to explore Vietnamese perceptions more thoroughly in a future article.

<sup>27</sup> J. Ramsay, 'Exploitation and extortion in the Nguyễn campaign against Catholicism in the 1830s–1840s', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* XXXV, 2 (2004), pp. 316–18. Ramsay argues persuasively that Marchand's personal correspondence suggests he was neither physically healthy nor emotionally stable enough to have taken any deliberate part in the rebellion.



Christians.<sup>28</sup> The combination of the diplomatic snub and the successive incidents of the 1840s sent a clear message to the Court in Huế. An entry in the official chronicle for 1848 notes that while American, British and Portuguese ships were welcome to come and trade, the French were not, because they had “made trouble”.<sup>29</sup>

The “trouble” cited in the chronicle alludes to several incidences of French gunboat diplomacy for more than a decade before Montigny’s arrival. In 1843 and 1845 French naval vessels had shown up at Tourane to demand the release of captive missionaries, which they obtained without actually resorting to force. In 1847 there was a more violent confrontation, again over the persecution issue. Two gunboats first captured and then destroyed five Vietnamese warships when local officials proved insufficiently responsive to the French commander’s written appeal for religious freedom.<sup>30</sup>

The issue of religious persecution loomed large in the instructions given to Montigny by his superiors in Paris. He was told to express to the Court the French government’s “strong displeasure” at the latest anti-Christian edict issued by Emperor Tự Đức (r. 1847–83) in 1856. He was to remind the Vietnamese of the “friendly relations” which had existed between their countries in earlier years (referring to a small group of French missionaries and mercenaries who had supported the Nguyễn during a civil war in the late eighteenth century); it was now up to Vietnam to restore these relations. The ambivalent situation in which France found itself is well reflected in the following excerpt from Montigny’s instructions, delivered to him in December 1855:

In short, Sir, you should not give voice to any threats on which we could not honourably follow through [because lacking in military strength] and that you will not have the material means of carrying out, since under the present circumstances His Imperial Majesty’s government does not intend to retask any of its naval forces in the Far East region for the purpose [of attacking the Vietnamese]. But you are to take a stance with the Vietnamese government which will be strong yet moderate, to make them understand that if they do not listen to you, the Imperial Government will be extremely displeased and will act accordingly. However, our knowledge of the Cochinchinese [Vietnamese] character gives us every reason to hope that simple arguments will be enough to have the most salutary effect.<sup>31</sup>

The rather contradictory nature of these earlier instructions extended to the end of the letter, where, despite the importance of Montigny’s mission, he was instructed to spend “as little time as possible” in Vietnam and to hasten back to Shanghai. By the time he reached Singapore, however, Paris had apparently had second thoughts and gave him a more substantial agenda. The French Consul passed him a new communication granting him full powers to negotiate with Huế, if possible, a treaty of friendship and trade.<sup>32</sup>

It is not clear to what extent Montigny took recent history into account beyond his conviction that he needed to show up with enough gun power. As he put it in a letter to Admiral Guérin, commander of French naval forces in Asia, “the moral support [*sic*] of a couple of warships will be indispensable not only for me to obtain any degree of

<sup>28</sup> R. P. Delvaux, ‘L’ambassade de Minh-Mang à Louis-Philippe 1839 à 1841’, *Bulletin des Amis du Vieux Huế* XV, 4 (1928), pp. 257–64; Delvaux suggests as well that the Vietnamese visitors did not conform to French diplomatic protocol.

<sup>29</sup> *ĐNTL, tập 7 (quyển II)*, p. 67. Although this was a commentary by later editors, it is inserted in reference to a specific incident involving European ships to explain the Court’s thinking at that point in time.

<sup>30</sup> G. Taboulet, *La geste française en Indochine: Histoire par les textes*, vol. 1 (Paris, 1955), pp. 342–7 has details on these incidents.

<sup>31</sup> Cordier, *Politique coloniale*, pp. 55–6, quoting MAE letter of 21 December 1855.

<sup>32</sup> Meyniard, *Second Empire*, p. 137; Cordier, *Politique coloniale*, pp. 59–60.

success in my [mission] but also to keep myself, my aides, and my whole family from being murdered".<sup>33</sup> Once again the French Navy's logistical limitations came into play: three warships were designated for his mission, but it was deemed impossible for all of them to be deployed to Vietnam at the same time. The first gunship, *Catinat*, reached Tourane on 16 September 1856. The second ship, *Capricieuse*, arrived on 24 October, still without Montigny, and it stayed only three weeks before it had to depart for Macao because its supplies—most crucially wine—were running low. Montigny on the *Marceau* would only arrive in January 1857, bad weather having forced the ship to make a huge detour by way of Borneo and Manila.<sup>34</sup>

We are able to have a clear picture of the encounters between the *Catinat* and *Capricieuse* and the Vietnamese thanks to detailed accounts written by their respective captains. The *Catinat* under Captain Le Lieur was carrying a letter from Montigny, to be delivered to local officials by Charles Fontaine, an MEP missionary formerly based in Vietnam who had apparently relocated to Macao. The ship was greeted in Tourane by mandarins from the provincial government, who were informed that the French wished to present a "letter of peace". After several days, impatient with the lack of response, Le Lieur moved the ship to a location near Hué, where he delivered another copy of the same message. The letters were returned to them, however, and "left [by him] on the beach".<sup>35</sup>

Sailing back to Tourane, Le Lieur found that the letters he had delivered to the mandarins there had been returned from Hué as well. Although the Vietnamese declared themselves willing to meet with Montigny, Le Lieur told them that returning the imperial letters unopened was an insult tantamount to an act of war. Worried about the prospects of a Vietnamese attack and noting heightened military activity, he landed troops and made a pre-emptive strike on the local forts, virtually destroying them. Only one Vietnamese and no Frenchmen lost their lives, but the violence was sufficient incentive for the Vietnamese to offer to open treaty negotiations immediately. Le Lieur said he had no authority to do so, but he persuaded the mandarins to resend the letters, and after some wording changes to satisfy the Vietnamese side, the documents were sent back to Hué.<sup>36</sup>

The specific changes which needed to be made reflected a serious perception gap between the two sides. Vietnamese rulers traditionally considered themselves as 'emperors', and in written documents for domestic consumption they used the Sino-Vietnamese term *hoàng đế* (Ch. 皇帝). In dealing with the Chinese court, however, the 'emperor' was consistently downgraded to a 'king' (*quốc vương*, Ch. 國王). The French, even well into the colonial period, tended to refer to the Vietnamese ruler as '*le Roi*', and the letter brought by Montigny also used this term, whereas Louis-Napoleon was of course '*l'Empéreur*'. This was completely unacceptable to the Vietnamese, and the letter had to be corrected before it could be sent on to Hué.<sup>37</sup>

Arriving a few weeks later, *Capricieuse* Captain Collier fully endorsed Le Lieur's actions, which, although exceeding the original instructions given by Collier himself, were in his opinion ultimately justified insofar as they had "convinced the [Vietnamese] that they were entirely in the wrong" and left them more favourably disposed towards negotiations. Meeting a delegation of officials, Collier conveyed what could be called a very mixed

<sup>33</sup> Letter dated 19 March 1856, in Cordier, *Politique coloniale*, pp. 67–8.

<sup>34</sup> H. Cordier, 'La France et la Cochinchine, 1852–1858: La mission du *Catinat* à Tourane (1856)', *T'oung Pao* VII, 4 (1906), pp. 481–514.

<sup>35</sup> Le Lieur's account, dated 1 October 1856, in *ibid.*, pp. 497–505. The letter, addressing a non-existent Prime Minister of Vietnam, is in Cordier, *Politique coloniale*, pp. 115–6.

<sup>36</sup> Cordier, 'La France', pp. 497–505.

<sup>37</sup> The issue is mentioned in the report by Captain Collier, 9 November 1856, *ibid.*, p. 508.

message: “I assured them of my friendly intentions while making it clear that I would not tolerate impertinence from any mandarin.” The forts, however, would remain in French hands until a treaty was signed.<sup>38</sup>

One might have expected a diplomat to tread more carefully than his naval colleagues, but Montigny, once he arrived on the *Marceau*, chose not to speak softly and began waving a very big stick. His subsequent report to his superiors in Paris gives a clear picture of his thinking:

It is not for me to judge [the actions of the two ship captains], but I must admit the destruction of artillery, forts, and undefended gun batteries which were not even manned by a garrison, did not leave [the Vietnamese] favourably disposed towards us. This premature act of hostility, which has yet to be fully justified, deprived me of a powerful [potential] course of action later on. However, since a coercive approach had [already] been adopted, it absolutely had to be maintained, at least in terms of the tone of correspondence [with the Vietnamese] and of the firmness and strength with which [this incident] had begun. Commandant Collier’s correspondence, unfortunately, failed to maintain the level of boldness needed to justify and validate the initial actions [by Le Lieur]; the Vietnamese authorities gradually regained their self-assurance, and by the time of my arrival, they had regained the haughtiness and childish boastfulness which, like the Chinese, they possess in abundance.<sup>39</sup>

Joined by senior missionary Bishop François Pellerin, Montigny began pushing the Vietnamese hard. He did not wish to hold negotiations there in Tourane unless four high-ranking ministers were present, “in conformance with the diplomatic rules set down among all the world’s civilised nations”. Nor was it acceptable to negotiate with an envoy bearing only the imperial seal; he demanded someone equipped with credentials equivalent to his own. Messages were sent back and forth, including threats to send the *Marceau* steaming up the river to the capital and/or to leave the outcome of the negotiations in the hands of a French naval commander.<sup>40</sup>

The Vietnamese did not appreciate Montigny’s blustering—and said so. When he questioned the envoy’s credentials, the latter retorted that “he was not a child and had all the necessary powers; that if I [Montigny] wished to get matters settled and make peace, he was ready to do so; that if I wanted war, we would fight”.<sup>41</sup> Eventually, however, the two sides managed to sit down and actually begin working through a draft treaty. The version proposed by the Vietnamese began with a reference to Louis-Napoléon having “humbly begged” Tự Đức to make peace, a favour which the latter granted “out of mercy”. Montigny stood up angrily to express his opposition to these “laughable lies”, which were then deleted from the text.<sup>42</sup> He in turn submitted a draft which, in addition to trading rights for the French, contained several articles on religious freedom. Interestingly, Montigny later related that the missionaries had begged him *not* to include such clauses because they were afraid of the repercussions of these demands for themselves and their flock. He made what he felt was a suitable compromise by

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, pp 505–10 (quotation from p. 508). Correspondence between Collier and the Quảng Nam *Tổng đốc* (governor) is on pp. 510–14.

<sup>39</sup> Montigny’s report to Paris, 14 March 1857, in Cordier, *Politique coloniale*, p. 150.

<sup>40</sup> The letters exchanged in January 1857 are in *ibid.*, pp. 152–7; the quotation is from the report cited in the previous footnote.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 154.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 159.

stipulating religious freedom for Frenchmen in Vietnam in general without specific reference to the missionaries.<sup>43</sup>

What finally derailed the negotiations was the scope of the proposed rights to be granted to the French. The Vietnamese suggested an arrangement similar to the Canton system which had existed in China prior to the opening of treaty ports.<sup>44</sup> Frenchmen would have access only to Tourane, and could only stay there for a few months at a time. This, the negotiator stated flatly, was the best offer he could make at this point, but “if the French behaved themselves, later they could be given more”. Montigny denounced the Vietnamese conditions as “childish” and insisted that French citizens should be allowed to settle in any port throughout Vietnam and that France should be permitted to station consuls in the major cities as well. Despite Montigny’s continued threats, the envoy refused to seek new instructions from Hué, and “thus”, in the Frenchman’s words, “ended two weeks of negotiations which were painful and harmful for our national dignity”. He departed for Singapore shortly thereafter, leaving behind him a letter of warning for the Vietnamese Court about the possible consequences of their failure to cooperate and telling them to halt all religious persecution or suffer the consequences when France decided to take action.<sup>45</sup> And that was that.

### Analysis

French historian Pierre Lamant, though essentially sympathetic to Montigny and his mission, makes the following rather sardonic assessment:

Was Charles de Montigny the best qualified person for this mission? While he unquestionably had some degree of experience in China, what did he know about Siam and the kingdoms of Indochina? Apparently not much. But did Paris have a more competent diplomat available? Probably not.<sup>46</sup>

Lamant is essentially correct. France in the early Second Empire, with only a few officials in India and a handful of diplomats in China, was poorly equipped to take on a mission like Montigny’s. In order to lay the groundwork for relations with three different Southeast Asian powers, Paris had to rely on a Consul from Shanghai. (The British, by contrast, had a much larger pool of diplomats and officials with experience in the region.)

Montigny was ill-suited for his mission in several respects. First and most crucially, he was not a career diplomat; his experience was limited to the Consulate in Shanghai, where his activities were heavily commercial. Although part of the French delegation that negotiated the 1844 Treaty of Whampoa with the Qing, he had held only a junior position and may not have been involved in negotiations. Moreover, given that Whampoa was the French version of the highly coercive and unfair Treaty of Nanjing, this background would not have equipped him well for Siam.<sup>47</sup> His Asian experience was concentrated in Shanghai, where he had established the French Settlement and focused on protecting

<sup>43</sup> The draft treaty is in *ibid.*, pp. 162–9. For Montigny’s explanation, see his 19 March 1857 letter to MAE, p. 173. Such a provision, of course, would have done little or nothing for Vietnamese Catholics.

<sup>44</sup> See R. Edwards, ‘The old Canton system of foreign trade’, in *Law and Politics in China’s Foreign Trade*, (ed.) Victor Li (Seattle, 1977), pp. 360–79.

<sup>45</sup> The letter dated 6 February 1857, is in Cordier, *Politique coloniale*, p. 170; Montigny’s summary of his remarks to the Vietnamese is on pp. 160–1.

<sup>46</sup> Lamant, ‘Prémices’, p. 174.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.* Lamant suggests that Montigny spent most of this first visit to China collecting information for a businessman’s guide to Shanghai which he published the following year.

the interests of French traders and missionaries. The highest-ranking official with whom he apparently dealt was a *daotai* (circuit intendant)—roughly equivalent to what would now be called the mayor of greater Shanghai. One has the impression from his correspondence that the Siamese, Cambodian, and Vietnamese officials whom he encountered were to him little more than local versions of this *daotai*. He is quoted as describing Vietnam as “China minus its greatness, power and means of getting things done”.<sup>48</sup> This last comparison is particularly telling, since Montigny was used to dealing with a China already weakened by the Opium War and unequal treaties.

Second, even Montigny’s admirers admitted that he was extremely stubborn—“hard-headed” in Miche’s words—and that he tended to take initiatives of his own and, in some cases, disregard instructions from his superiors.<sup>49</sup> Take, for example, his ill-advised attempt to obtain a Siamese letter of introduction to Tự Đức. Not only was he contemptuously dismissive of Pallegoix’s thoroughly justified opposition to his suggestion, he seems to have gone so far as to bring it up in a personal conversation with Mongkut.<sup>50</sup> Such persistence along a misguided path cannot have endeared him to his Siamese hosts, and a similar attitude is reflected in his dealings with the Cambodians and Vietnamese.

Finally, Montigny demonstrated a total lack of willingness to make any concessions to his negotiating partners. He pushed and pushed, seeing any sort of concession or even a departure from protocol as an unacceptable insult. When any Asian demonstrated a similar sense of pride or protocol, on the other hand, they were dismissed as “childish”, “uncivilised” or “tricky”.<sup>51</sup> Even his insistence that the Bangkok treaty should be written only in Siamese and French with no authorised version in English, while perhaps understandable in terms of national linguistic pride, was counterproductive. As there were no French speakers among the Siamese elite, they tended to rely on Anglophone friends (including Protestant missionaries) to provide document translation—precisely the people that France wished to exclude from its affairs in Bangkok.<sup>52</sup>

Of the three countries, Siam was arguably the one where Montigny was least in a position to do serious damage, and indeed Bangkok was really the only ‘success story’ of his mission. As noted above, he was essentially following in the slipstream behind his British and American counterparts, and the treaty he signed did not go far beyond theirs. If one considers the broader diplomatic objectives of his stay in Bangkok, however, he does not seem to have been particularly skilful. By side-lining Pallegoix to some extent in favour of a more junior colleague as interpreter, for example, he failed to utilise the talents of a man who was both the *doyen* of the Siam-based missionaries and the King’s close friend

<sup>48</sup> Quoted in Taboulet, *Geste français*, p. 397. The last phrase (*moyens d’action*) would seem to refer to the possibility of foreign powers exercising pressure on the government concerned. Montigny’s first posting in Shanghai is chronicled in C. Maybon and J. Fredet, *Histoire de la Concession Française de Shanghai* (Paris, 1929), pp. 13–59 (Gallica).

<sup>49</sup> P. Duke, *Les relations entre la France et la Thaïlande (Siam) au XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle d’après les archives des Affaires Étrangères* (Bangkok, 1962), p. 13, quoting Miche’s 21 March 1857 letter to his MEP superiors in Paris. Miche went on to remark that ‘although completely devoted to missionaries and the interests of [the Catholic] religion, with his annoying character [Montigny] messes up everything and turns everyone against him’. Cordier, who is fully supportive of Montigny’s objectives on his mission, makes a similar characterisation (*Politique coloniale*, pp. 34–5).

<sup>50</sup> Mongkut’s undated letter to Ang Duang is in *Phratchathalekha Phrabat Somdet Phračhomklao Čhaoyuhua* [Letters of King Mongkut] (Bangkok, 1977), p. 66.

<sup>51</sup> See, for example, the comment by Meyniard, *Second Empire* (p. 152), whose account relied heavily on Montigny’s own writings and undoubtedly reflected his views. There is an excellent discussion of such perceptions in A. Turton, ‘Disappointing gifts: Dialectics of gift exchange in early modern European–East Asian diplomatic practice’, *Journal of the Siam Society* CIV (2016), pp. 111–27.

<sup>52</sup> Cordier, *Politique coloniale*, p. 102. Meyniard, *Second Empire*, pp. 464–5, mentions the reliance on Anglo-Saxons for document translation.

and Latin tutor.<sup>53</sup> This snub would not have been lost on Mongkut. Nor does Montigny seem to have been particularly impressed by the King himself, who appears in his accounts as an unprepossessing and even somewhat comical figure preoccupied largely with exchanges of gifts and heightening his personal prestige.

More importantly, perhaps, Montigny completely misjudged the Siamese elite's attitudes towards Britain and France. While they were not as hopelessly Anglophile as he and other Frenchmen believed, their respect for the British was certainly driven by more than just fear—the factor cited most frequently in the main published account of his mission.<sup>54</sup> He was almost certainly correct in his belief that Siam wished to have France as a potential counterbalance to the British, as this would become the basis for Bangkok's foreign policy for the foreseeable future. However, this did not mean that the Siamese wished to “throw themselves into [French] arms”, as the chronicler of his visit put it, nor that they desired anything remotely resembling a “protectorate”. He was apparently told explicitly by the Minister known as the *Kalahom* that Siam wished to have France as “a friend and protector to protect them, when needed, against a very invasive neighbour”, referring to British Burma.<sup>55</sup>

Montigny genuinely believed that his skilful handling of the Siamese would eventually place France in a position to establish a protectorate, which would be “more significant and more beneficial” to French interests.<sup>56</sup> However, he seems to have taken at face value a number of Siamese statements almost certainly crafted to earn his goodwill, such as their affirmation that he merited a grander reception than his American and British counterparts on the grounds that France “was not only great and powerful but full of justice and acting out of feelings of friendship towards the Siamese which had never been denied”.<sup>57</sup> Moreover, he was probably unaware that they had made the exact same remark about America's possible “third party” role to Townsend Harris, who seems to have taken it with a larger grain of salt than his French counterpart. Nor can Montigny's extravagant claim to have “found Siam British” and “left it French” be taken at all seriously.<sup>58</sup>

What Montigny accomplished in Bangkok, then, was neither more nor less than Bowring/Parkes and Harris: to put in place a framework for diplomatic and commercial relations. As for his mission to Cambodia, there is general agreement among both contemporary writers and later scholars that it was a failure, but just who was to blame is open to discussion. Colonial-era writers sympathetic to Montigny—which is virtually all of them—echoed his view that Siamese treachery and the Cambodian *volte-face* that it allegedly produced were at fault. Twentieth-century writers, although somewhat less hostile towards

<sup>53</sup> Mongkut, while still a prince in the monkhood, had done Pallegoix the honour of attending his consecration as Bishop (*APF*, XI [1839], p. 547).

<sup>54</sup> I am referring here to Meyniard, who as noted above, relied heavily on Montigny's personal papers, although it is not always clear when he is citing the diplomat and when he is expressing his personal views. Given his repeated references to alleged Siamese fear and dislike of the British, it is difficult not to infer that these were Montigny's sentiments as well. This was a well-worn theme that the French had also been repeating in their dealings with Vietnam for half a century.

<sup>55</sup> Montigny's 22 September 1856 letter to MAE, quoted in Cordier, *Politique coloniale*, p. 79. The comment on throwing themselves into French arms is from Meyniard, *Second Empire*, p. 241.

<sup>56</sup> Cordier, *Politique coloniale*, p. 104. Writing to his minister in May 1857, Montigny evoked a vision of an eventual French protectorate extending throughout mainland Southeast Asia (quoted in Duke, *Relations*, pp. 13–14).

<sup>57</sup> Meyniard, *Second Empire*, pp. 167–8. This was allegedly the conclusion of a meeting of high-ranking officials, as explained to Montigny. According to Meyniard (p. 313), the Siamese demonstrated so much favouritism to him over the Anglo-Saxon diplomats that it was an “embarrassment”.

<sup>58</sup> Montigny letter to Paris, 20 November 1856, in Cordier, *Politique coloniale*, p. 105; T. Harris, *The Complete Journal of Townsend Harris, First American Consul General and Minister to Japan*, (ed.) Mario Cosenza (Garden City, NY, 1930), pp. 111–12, 121, 148.

the Siamese actions, nevertheless tend to uphold the view that the French mission was sabotaged in Bangkok and Oudong.<sup>59</sup>

The Siamese role in these matters was obviously critical. Bangkok was Ang Duang's overlord, and Montigny clearly recognised this, as he pointed out in his subsequent letters to Mongkut. However, the extent to which he understood the nature of this suzerainty is questionable. Even though he apparently realised that he should not waltz off to Cambodia without informing Mongkut of his intentions, he does not appear to have discussed his agenda with the King in any meaningful way.<sup>60</sup> Nor should he have been shocked that Mongkut might want to send an official along to observe developments—the alleged “spy”. Montigny was perhaps not unjustified in thinking that he could have been informed of this agent's presence, but his reaction must surely have seemed exaggerated in Siamese eyes. Between March and August 1857, after the completion of his mission, he exchanged a series of letters with the Bangkok Court which—in impeccable diplomatic terms—criticised Siam's behaviour as deceitful and uncivilised.<sup>61</sup>

Thai documents offer a rather different perspective. As early as 1854, when Bowring's visit to Siam was in the works, Mongkut and Ang Duang exchanged letters discussing the feasibility of Cambodia eventually signing a treaty with a European power. There is no suggestion that Mongkut opposed such an action; he was in fact pushing the Oudong court to at least consider the matter. The Cambodians seem to have been fairly reluctant: Ang Duang expressed doubt as to their ability to deal with “arrogant” Westerners and emphasised his preference to rely on Bangkok's overlordship.<sup>62</sup> In 1856, Mongkut wrote to inform him of Montigny's impending visit and discussed the logistics of sailing to Kampot and then travelling by land to Oudong.<sup>63</sup>

Neon Snidvongs' dissertation, which draws on a greater volume of correspondence between the two rulers than was available to this author, confirms the lack of evidence for Siamese coercion. The letters show that Mongkut encouraged his vassal to pursue negotiations, and explained the recent Franco-Siamese treaty with reference to the possible benefits of a similar agreement for Cambodia. Mongkut told him that if Montigny offered “reasonable” terms along the lines of the Siamese treaty, then he should go ahead and negotiate one, but that if he had any doubts or suspicions about French intentions, then he should wait to discuss the matter with Bangkok.<sup>64</sup> The letters cited by Neon suggest that Mongkut was mainly discussing the prospects of a commercial treaty rather than the political and diplomatic ramifications of a full-fledged Franco-Cambodian accord. It seems likely that what Montigny proposed to Ang Duang went far enough beyond the scope of trade and customs duties that the King did not feel comfortable signing off on it. Certainly, his report to Mongkut makes it clear that the proposed agreement

<sup>59</sup> This is notably true of Taboulet and Lamant. Duke, who does not use any Thai sources for Montigny's mission, accepts the French version, as does Khin Sok, *Le Cambodge entre le Siam et le Viêtnam de 1775 à 1860* (Paris, 1991), who narrates the entire episode based on Meyniard and missionary correspondence. Only Neon Snidvongs, who uses both French and Thai archival documents, reaches a different conclusion, and her interpretation parallels my own (Snidvongs, ‘Development’).

<sup>60</sup> Colonial scholars somewhat unfairly criticised Montigny for being ‘naïve’ in informing Mongkut of his planned visit to Cambodia; see Taboulet, *Geste français*, p. 388 and Cordier, *Politique coloniale*, p. 113.

<sup>61</sup> These letters are reproduced in Meyniard, *Second Empire*, pp. 448–55 and 465–72.

<sup>62</sup> TNA, 1216/48, 1216/49.

<sup>63</sup> *Phraratchahattalekha*, pp. 63–7. No date is given for the letter but it seems to have been written around the time of Montigny's departure from Bangkok.

<sup>64</sup> See the discussion in Snidvongs, ‘Development’, pp. 508–13, citing correspondence from late 1856 and early 1857. The tone of this correspondence differs dramatically from the letters Mongkut sent to Norodom a few years later when the French were aggressively pursuing a protectorate in Cambodia explicitly intended to supplant Siamese overlordship; see, for example, *Phraratchahattalekha*, pp. 105–17 and 124–7.

was too important to be endorsed so casually without any face-to-face meeting with a French representative.<sup>65</sup>

The real question is just what Montigny could legitimately expect to accomplish in Cambodia. His idea that Ang Duang enjoyed sufficient “independence” from Bangkok to be able to sign a treaty on his own was unrealistic and ill-advised. Southeast Asian vassals did not normally sign treaties, and given that every Cambodian ruler in recent history had been chosen and crowned by either the Vietnamese or the Siamese—in Ang Duang’s case by both—Mongkut would have expected to be involved with any Franco-Cambodian agreement. Montigny almost certainly failed to grasp this reality and thus saw the Siamese as deceitfully interfering in his dealing with Ang Duang. Bishop Miche, who should have known better, reportedly told the King that he could and should demonstrate that he was a sovereign ruler and not just a Siamese “provincial governor” by negotiating a treaty himself.<sup>66</sup>

French interpretations of his attitude at the time (and his earlier letter delivered to Singapore) notwithstanding, Ang Duang cannot possibly have seen himself as a “free agent” who could negotiate his way out of Siamese and Vietnamese clutches and into the French embrace.<sup>67</sup> Not only did he have close, long-standing personal ties with Mongkut, such a “declaration of independence” could not have been achieved without a conflict between France and Siam, of which Cambodia would be the main victim.<sup>68</sup> Ang Duang owed his throne and, to some extent, the relative autonomy which his country enjoyed *vis-à-vis* the Vietnamese directly to Siamese support and intervention on his behalf. Throughout the 1850s he corresponded regularly with Mongkut, who had his own agents reporting from Cambodia as well. At the time of Montigny’s visit, Oudong was preoccupied with Vietnamese activities along their shared border. Whatever the King’s private feelings about Siamese overlordship, there is no indication (outside of French imagination) that he wished to shift his allegiances from Bangkok to Paris.<sup>69</sup> In his letter to Montigny after the latter’s departure, he made it clear that any formal agreement would require the approval—and indeed the command—of his suzerain.<sup>70</sup>

The main issue on Ang Duang’s mind seems to have been irredentism, namely his hope of reclaiming at least part of the Mekong Delta, all of which had once been Cambodian territory. He appears to have anticipated eventual French intervention in Vietnam and apparently hoped that it would lead to the return of at least some of the lost provinces. This issue looms large in colonial-era Cambodian chronicles, as well as his letters to both the French Emperor and to Montigny himself.<sup>71</sup> Interestingly, there is a discrepancy

<sup>65</sup> Snidvongs, ‘Development’, pp. 517–9. Neon suggests—quite correctly, to my mind—that the French “preferred to read into this natural resentment [on the part of the Cambodians] another act put on for the benefit of the Siamese” (p. 519).

<sup>66</sup> Meyniard, *Second Empire*, p. 461, apparently quoting Miche’s own account of the conversation.

<sup>67</sup> This is the interpretation of *ibid.*, who refers to Ang Duang’s alleged “separatist” ambitions (p. 86). As with the Siamese, the same author suggests (p. 377) that the Cambodian ruler also wished to “throw himself into French arms”.

<sup>68</sup> His close relationship and reliance on Mongkut is clearly reflected in their correspondence; see *Phraratchahatthalekha*, pp. 63–7, where Mongkut refers to him as a “true Thai” (*Thai thae*); and *Thai sataban kasat Khmaen* [Thai enthronement of Khmer kings] (Bangkok, 1962), pp. 32–49.

<sup>69</sup> His dependence on Siamese support is clear in his exchanges with Mongkut regarding the Vietnamese threat; see, for example, TNA, 1217/9 and 1218/39.

<sup>70</sup> Meyniard, *Second Empire*, p. 428.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 428 (Montigny) and 429–32 (Napoleon); both letters are dated 25 November 1856. The lost territory is also mentioned in an 1855 letter from Ang Duang to Mongkut (TNA, 1217/9). An important 1928 Cambodian chronicle describes the King as anxious to build ties with the French in order to get back the lost provinces, if necessary by fighting alongside them against the Vietnamese; Eng Sut, *Ekkasar mohaborous Khmae* [Documents of Khmer heroes] (Phnom Penh, 1969), pp. 1087–8. Theara Thun (personal communication) confirms that irredentism is mentioned by most contemporary texts as the driving force behind Oudong’s initiatives to France.



between the French version of the letter to Napoleon III (drafted by Miche) and the translation (presumably from the Khmer) which appears in the Thai chronicle's account of these events. Both versions enumerate all of the lost Cambodian provinces and ask that if the Vietnamese attempt to cede any of them to France, the latter should refuse. However, the Thai translation specifically distinguishes between the territory west and east of Saigon; the latter, it says, has been under Vietnamese control long enough that there is no point in trying to get it back.<sup>72</sup>

It seems likely that Ang Duang never seriously intended to sign a treaty with Montigny—though he may have been prepared to discuss one. His comment to the missionaries that he could not negotiate since Montigny had failed to travel to Oudong is quite reasonable. When he told them that he could not sign a treaty without Bangkok's prior approval, this was almost certainly more truthful than his boast that he did as he pleased without reference to Mongkut's wishes. Despite Montigny's view of events, it is highly unlikely that a cooperative Ang Duang suddenly changed his stance because of a threatening message from Bangkok. One can speculate that perhaps the Cambodians gave the missionaries a 'creative' interpretation of Mongkut's attitude precisely to explain their actions—invoking the potential wrath of a superior authority would have been a logical and very Asian way to justify their behaviour. His letters to Ang Duang would have been written in Thai, which the Cambodia-based missionaries could not read, and so the latter were more or less at their hosts' mercy in interpreting Siamese intentions.<sup>73</sup>

Montigny later complained to Paris of having received inadequate instructions for Cambodia, and his complaint was probably well-founded.<sup>74</sup> That said, he forged ahead with an initiative that was clearly too much too soon. If he had not been so impatient to leave for Vietnam, a visit to Oudong might well have laid the foundations for a more permanent relationship within parameters acceptable to the Siamese. His mission certainly seems to have left a minimal impression in Cambodian historiography. The chronicle texts written during the colonial period basically ignore him completely and focus instead on Ang Duang's attempts to establish direct contacts with Paris through Singapore. Although the first national history textbook (published in 1952) does refer to Montigny, it mentions only that he came to Cambodia but proceeded no further than Kampot before leaving for Vietnam.<sup>75</sup>

Although Montigny's visit to Vietnam was intended to achieve some degree of *rap-prochement* with the Huế court, it had precisely the opposite effect. If the gunshiers' arrival had been better coordinated and he had followed the instructions from his superiors cautioning against the actual use of force, he might have been successful. However, relying on a naval captain to deliver his message to a Court that was, if anything, even more obsessed with protocol than the Siamese was a fatal error. Le Lieur's interpretation of the return of Napoleon's letter unopened as an 'insult' was seriously misguided: the Vietnamese would have been unwilling to open a letter from a foreign sovereign in the absence of the envoy

<sup>72</sup> C. P. Thiphakorawong [Kham Bunnag], *Phratchaphongsawadan Krung Rattanakosin Ratchakan thi 4 chabap Čhao Phraya Thiphakorawong (Kham Bunnak)* [Royal Chronicles of the Bangkok Dynasty, Fourth Reign, version (written by) Čhao Phraya Thiphakorawong (Kham Bunnag)] (Bangkok, 2004), pp. 142–6. The other peculiarity of the Thai translation, which I cannot explain, is that the pronouns it uses for 'I' and 'you' in Ang Duang's letter are so intimate as to be rude; it seems impossible that the Khmer text would have done so.

<sup>73</sup> Mongkut spoke warmly of Miche to Ang Duang but noted that their conversations were held through an interpreter because they had no common language (*Phraratchahatthalekha*, p. 66).

<sup>74</sup> Lamant, 'Prémices', p. 175, quoting Montigny's 8 May 1857 letter to his Minister in Paris.

<sup>75</sup> Ministry of Education of Cambodia, *Bangsavatar nai Prades Kampuchea* [Chronicle of Cambodia] (Phnom Penh, 1952), pp. 88–9. Theara Thun (personal communication) confirms that the earlier chronicles do not mention the mission. Even the textbook devotes a paragraph and a half to correspondence with Mongkut about Montigny's impending visit but only one sentence to the event itself.

himself. The captain's reaction to this action, combined with his assumption of Vietnamese aggressive intentions, effectively eliminated any goodwill that his hosts may have felt. Nor would the appearance on French ships of missionaries formerly posted to Vietnam—who at best were *persona non grata* and at worst were enemies to be rounded up—have gone over well with the Huế Court.<sup>76</sup>

Montigny's conviction that he should build on Le Lieur's forceful initiatives rather than trying to counteract their impact was equally ill-advised, and he proved very adept at shooting himself in the foot. The Court had virtually no experience with Western-style diplomacy, and there was no reason for him to insist that he should be dealing with four Vietnamese counterparts or that they must possess plenipotentiary credentials fully equal to his own. Once negotiations were underway, he committed the diplomatic blunder of insisting on more than the other side was willing to give while refusing to make any concessions. From the Court's perspective, it was perfectly reasonable to open their territory to French visitors on a trial basis and in one particular place, as China had previously done with the Canton System. If Montigny had been less bull-headed and accepted Vietnamese terms, he may have opened the door to a peaceful and durable French presence in the country, which could in turn have eventually led to greater mutual trust and better treatment for Catholics.

All three episodes of the Montigny mission appear in the Vietnamese chronicles for Tự Đức's reign. For the *Catinat*, the annals spend more time recounting the Court's anger at the local officials who had failed to defend Tourane against the French, who in turn were criticised for having "caused trouble" because of their "discourteous" handling of the letter's delivery. When the *Capricieuse* arrived with the promise of Montigny's eventual visit, Tự Đức commented to his officials that Westerners tended to go back on their word and ordered reinforcements to be sent to Tourane. When the envoy finally arrived and insisted on going to Huế to negotiate, the Emperor's response was that his behaviour appeared "casual and stubborn". There is no mention of actual negotiations, and Montigny is not even identified by name—an honour that is at least given to the two gunship captains.<sup>77</sup>

## Legacy

As already noted, Montigny's main success was the establishment of full diplomatic relations with Siam, thus making France a key player in the region even before it began to acquire territory. However, his optimism about counteracting the pro-British sentiment of the Siamese elite proved to be misplaced. There are at least three reasons why the French never matched their British rivals in terms of influence among the Siamese.

First, France gradually lost prestige in Siam after 1871 once it was no longer an empire. When King Chulalongkorn (r. 1868-1910) began to send first his brothers and then his sons and nephews to Europe for their education, they went almost without exception to monarchies, notably Britain and Germany. The Siamese elite were known for their fondness for networking with European royalty. France, as a republic, was not deemed a suitable place for young royals, and the only prince educated there was the future King Prajadhipok (r. 1925-35), who spent two years at a military academy in Paris—at a time when he was not expected to inherit the throne. The royal family remained almost single-mindedly Anglophile; only under King Bhumibol Adulyadej (r. 1946-2016) and his sister

<sup>76</sup> The officials appear to have been equally suspicious of the Vietnamese soldiers (former Siamese war captives) whom Montigny had brought from Bangkok to help with interpretation. Their account of these events, written after their return to Siam, mentions several queries by the mandarins as to who they were and what they were doing on a French ship (TNA, 1218/131).

<sup>77</sup> ĐNLT, tập 7 (quyển XV), pp. 465-7, 470, 485.

Princess Galyani Vadhana, who had been raised in Geneva, was there any significant interest in French language and culture in the Palace.<sup>78</sup>

The second reason was a succession of French Consuls (and later Ministers) in Bangkok who were often perceived as arrogant and pushy. This is not to say that Britain and the United States never appointed such men, but Paris seems to have had a particular talent for sending agents who annoyed the Siamese. Their character and actions were closely linked to the broader context of French expansionism in Southeast Asia, the third and arguably most important factor which undermined their relations with Siam. Within two short years of Montigny's mission, France captured and colonised three provinces of southern Vietnam, bringing Cambodia back onto its imperial radar. Although Ang Duang died in 1860, he had already made contact with the French authorities in Saigon, and they began actively to court his successor Norodom (r. 1860-1904) while simultaneously invoking Vietnamese suzerainty to justify their own agenda in Cambodia. This position was a hard sell in Bangkok, particularly since the French pushed Vietnamese claims while denying those of the Siamese. As France's position in the region grew stronger, however, its Consuls in Bangkok (first Francis de Laporte de Castelnau and then Gabriel Aubaret), took the lead in pushing Siam to renounce its authority over Cambodia. The process would be repeated in the early 1890s under Minister Auguste Pavie, when an episode of genuine gunboat diplomacy forced the cession of Lao territories east of the Mekong.<sup>79</sup>

The impact of French territorial grabs on Siamese opinion cannot be overstated. Although it is now acknowledged by some revisionist Thai scholars that the Lao and Cambodian territories were not, strictly speaking, 'Siamese', they were certainly perceived as such at the time, and their loss was deeply and bitterly resented for decades afterward.<sup>80</sup> Thai irredentism led to the brief but hard-fought war with French Indochina in 1940-41 whereby Bangkok regained control over chunks of Lao and Cambodian territory until 1946. It is instructive to compare the aggressive French policy in Laos and Cambodia with British expansion in the Malay Peninsula. Greater respect for Siamese suzerainty in the northern Malay states and British willingness to bide their time until Bangkok was psychologically ready to renounce that authority paid considerable dividends in Anglo-Siamese relations.<sup>81</sup>

While Montigny did not have success in Cambodia, he did at least enable the French to get their foot in the door, which opened more widely after the invasion of Cochinchina. In 1863, under Norodom, France was able to establish a formal protectorate. Although he was no less indebted to the Siamese than his father, the proximity of the French and significantly weakened Vietnamese suzerainty emboldened him to sign the treaty. Even so there was vacillation: in 1864 he signed a secret agreement with Bangkok which virtually nullified the protectorate treaty. The French successfully persuaded Siam to abrogate this agreement, however, and eventually its rights over Cambodia as well, although in return Bangkok held onto the western provinces of Battambang and Siem Reap for 40 more years.

<sup>78</sup> Queen Sirikit (1932-) also lived on the Continent during her youth when her father was Siamese Minister in Paris.

<sup>79</sup> These events are discussed in more detail in B. Lockhart, 'Suzerainty versus sovereignty: Establishing French empire in Indochina', in *Empire in Asia: A New Global History*, vol. 2, (eds.) Donna Brunero and Brian Farrell (London, 2018), pp. 107-36.

<sup>80</sup> See T. Winichakul, *Siam Mapped: A History of the Geo-body of a Nation* (Honolulu, 1997).

<sup>81</sup> Good studies of these events include P. Tuck, *The French Wolf and the Siamese Lamb: The French Threat to Siamese Independence, 1858-1907* (Bangkok, 1993); J. Chandran, *The Contest for Siam, 1889-1902: A Diplomatic Rivalry* (Kuala Lumpur, 1977); and K. Suwannathat-Pian, *Thai-Malay Relations: Traditional Intra-regional Relations from the Seventeenth to the Early Twentieth Centuries* (Singapore, 1988).

There is not a direct link of causation from Montigny's visit to the 1863 treaty, but the latter at least completed what he had tried to put in place.

In the case of the Vietnamese, it is difficult to identify any positive results from the French mission. If Montigny had arrived with the first gunboat instead of the last, his letter would have received due consideration from the Nguyễn Court and negotiations might have been less strained.<sup>82</sup> What concessions and agreements might have resulted is an interesting question. On the one hand, the Vietnamese chronicles show clearly that Huế remained open to commercial and diplomatic contacts with Westerners as long as they were respectful and peaceful. On the other hand, by 1857 the succession of hostile encounters specifically with the French had shown them to be precisely the kind of foreigners of whom the Vietnamese were most wary.<sup>83</sup>

Writing to Paris in March 1857 after his departure from Vietnam, Montigny gave the following assessment of his visit:

Although this time I did not succeed in negotiating a treaty with the Vietnamese Empire due to a lack of means of action, nevertheless my mission there was not fruitless: two weeks of regular negotiations, the presence of our warships for four straight months, the significance of my [draft] treaty and the delivery of my [threatening] note...leave me certain that this time the Vietnamese government has learned to take France seriously and that, at least for a time, our merchant ships and our citizens will be able to go to Cochinchina without fear of a poor reception. However, in order to safeguard our commercial interests and our national pride in these places, it is urgent for us not to lose any time in imposing [sic] the treaty that I was only intended to suggest...<sup>84</sup>

As far as Vietnamese Catholicism is concerned, it is very clear from missionary accounts that the gunboat incidents linked to Montigny's mission made their situation worse, not better. As veteran MEP Bishop Pierre Retord sardonically observed shortly afterwards, "Our wonderful compatriots have left us under the tiger's claws, with no rescue in sight, after having stirred him up against us."<sup>85</sup> During the years after the first French intervention in 1843 in the name of religious freedom, Vietnamese interrogations of missionaries and local Catholics began to go beyond the regular accusations of practising a banned religion to include more pointed questions about their connections to the French King and possible foreign actions against Vietnam.<sup>86</sup> During the months between Montigny's departure and the French invasion in August 1858, persecution continued apace, and Retord's metaphor about the angry tiger proved very apt.

By the time of Montigny's visit, some missionaries were already calling for French military intervention in Vietnam; his diplomatic failure (blamed on alleged Vietnamese stubbornness and isolationism) and its fallout for Catholics were to make their calls more strident, both in MEP correspondence and in the metropole. Clerical interests in France

<sup>82</sup> The lead French diplomat in Beijing, Alphonse de Bourboulon, sent Paris an extended criticism of Montigny's failed mission, making precisely this argument. His 1 September 1857 letter is in Cordier, *Politique coloniale*, pp. 177–93.

<sup>83</sup> This observation is based on a reading of the *Đại Nam Thực Lục* during Tự Đức's reign. The previous gunboat incidents at Tourane had pushed the Vietnamese to upgrade their coastal defences.

<sup>84</sup> Montigny to MAE, 14 March 1857, in Cordier, *Politique coloniale*, p. 171. A letter written a few days later (19 March) has a more detailed discussion of the reasons why his own mission was not accomplished (pp. 171–2).

<sup>85</sup> APF, XXX (1858), p. 229; Retord's report on the events of 1857 is on pp. 225–31.

<sup>86</sup> APF for the period 1843–56 contains numerous examples of such interrogations from the testimonies of missionaries and converts.

began actively lobbying for a full-scale military campaign, and these demands became part of a broader imperial agenda taking shape in 1857–8. After extended discussion by a special commission established to consider the ‘Cochinchina question’, the Second Empire took the fateful decision to seize Tourane. The events of 1858–9, partially fuelled by the fallout from Montigny’s visit, would launch the process of French colonisation.<sup>87</sup>

As noted at the beginning of this article, interactions between Western and Asian powers during the nineteenth century are usually characterised as a sequence of unequal treaties and invasions resulting from ‘gunboat diplomacy’. In recent years historians have experienced what one scholar has called a “fetishism of treaties”, lumping together agreements with Asian powers, indigenous communities and African chiefs, and suggesting that these documents were characterised by “fraud and treachery”.<sup>88</sup> Even somewhat revisionist perspectives of the treaties focus largely on “resistance” and “negotiation” on the part of the “indigenous” to what are assumed to have been inherently unfair and usually coercive agreements.<sup>89</sup>

That many of the treaties signed in Southeast Asia between 1500 and 1900 were both unjust and more or less imposed on the non-European signatories is not in doubt. That said, it must also be acknowledged that some of them, at least, were signed on a voluntary and more or less equal basis. This was the case for several Dutch and English treaties with powers like Johor and Aceh, where the outcome—at least over the short term—was a genuine alliance that could be translated into direct military support. During the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries the Dutch VOC and British East India Company were closer to enjoying a *primus inter pares* status in regional geopolitics than to exercising colonial hegemony. This was certainly the case for Siam throughout its history of interaction with the West down to the time of the Bowring Treaty.<sup>90</sup> Some authors have cited Bowring’s use of a British gunboat to infer coercion, but to ride in a warship was one thing and to actually deploy or threaten to deploy its guns was something very different.<sup>91</sup> Mongkut would in fact later criticise Charles Hillier, the first British Consul after the signing of the treaty, for making unreasonable demands and constantly threatening to call in a gunboat if they were not met.<sup>92</sup>

Montigny claimed in a May 1857 letter that the Siamese and their neighbours “have such a fear of English invasions that they see conquerors everywhere” but this claim

<sup>87</sup> See Vo Duc Hanh, *La place du Catholicisme dans les relations entre la France et le Viet Nam de 1851 à 1870*, vol. 3 (Leiden, 1969). One authoritative colonial source argued that the main reason for the decision to invade was “the insult brought against our flag and our plenipotentiary in the Bay of Tourane”; J. Silvestre, ‘Politique française dans l’Indo-Chine: Annam (IV)’, *Annales de l’École Libre des Sciences Politiques* XI, 1 (1896), p. 50.

<sup>88</sup> S. Belmessous, ‘The paradox of an empire by treaty’, in *Empire by Treaty: Negotiating European Expansion, 1600–1900*, (ed.) S. Belmessous (Oxford, 2014), p. 12; the “fetishism” remark is from M. van Ittersum, ‘Global constitutionalism in the early modern period’, in *Handbook on Global Constitutionalism*, (eds.) A. Lang, Jr. and A. Wiener (Northampton, 2017), p. 47.

<sup>89</sup> See the studies in Belmessous (ed.), *Empire by Treaty* and S. Belmessous, *Native Claims: Indigenous Law against Empire, 1500–1920* (Oxford, 2011).

<sup>90</sup> See D. van der Cruysee, *Siam and the West, 1500–1700* (Chiang Mai, 2002); an excellent overview for the region is found in P. Borschberg, ‘Treaties in Asia’, in *Handbuch Frieden in Europa der Frühen Neuzeit/Handbook of Peace in Early Modern Europe*, (eds.) I. Dingel et al. (Boston, 2020); I thank Prof. Borschberg for providing me with a copy of his chapter. The seminal work by C. Alexandrowicz, *Introduction to the History of Law of Nations in the East Indies* (Oxford, 1967) remains an important study.

<sup>91</sup> See, for example, G. Gong, *The Standard of ‘Civilization’ in International Society* (Oxford, 1984), pp. 210–13. Gong’s comment (p. 210) that the Bowring treaty “closely resembled” the treaties imposed on China and Japan is exaggerated.

<sup>92</sup> Mongkut’s 1857 letter to Siamese diplomats overseas, *Phraratchahatthalekha*, pp. 546–7. It is clear that he was irritated but not intimidated. Hillier avoided provoking a serious crisis in Anglo-Siamese relations by dying of cholera shortly after his arrival; other annoying foreign diplomats were less obliging.

reflected his own Anglophobia more than the genuine threat perception of the Bangkok elite.<sup>93</sup> Much of Mongkut's private correspondence from this period is available, and it consistently demonstrates wariness of Western imperialism but not fear. The Siamese were close and generally astute observers of developments in the region, particularly in Burma, and were cautiously optimistic that they could handle the foreigners better than their neighbours. Even privately, Mongkut was much less vocal about English aggression than about Burmese "stupidity" (*ngo*) in dealing with it.<sup>94</sup> He seemed satisfied with what had been achieved through the Bowring, Parkes and Montigny treaties and even stipulated that these should be the template for agreements with other European powers.<sup>95</sup>

While Montigny's (and Bowring's) dealings with Siam cannot be considered as gunboat diplomacy, French actions in Vietnam in 1856–7 are certainly more deserving of the label. Yet even here Montigny's blustering and threats were ultimately unsuccessful; Nguyễn Vietnam was not (quite yet) Qing China, and it would take the full force of an all-out invasion to overcome their resistance to French bullying. Even Cambodia at this point was still largely immune to European pressure, protected by its status as a dual vassal of both Vietnam and Siam. Montigny could not march in and dictate a treaty; even the protectorate eventually established in 1863 reflected Norodom's agenda as much as it did that of France.

The most careful and nuanced studies of what Michael Fisher has called the "asymmetrical interactions" between European and Asian powers recognise the complexity and diversity of strategies and policies involved.<sup>96</sup> Montigny's mission must certainly be understood in the context of France's growing expansionist ambitions under the Second Empire. At the same time, however, it should also be seen as an example of genuine—though only partially successful—diplomacy, albeit in an imperial context.

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<sup>93</sup> Cordier, *Politique coloniale*, p. 124. Some scholars argue that by the mid-nineteenth century the gradual *rapprochement* which eventually became the *Entente Cordiale* meant that global Anglo-French rivalry had become less meaningful; see, for example, D. Todd, 'Transnational projects of empire in France, c. 1815–c. 1870', *Modern Intellectual History* XII, 2 (2015), pp. 265–93; and A. Watson, 'European international society and its expansion', in *The Expansion of International Society*, (eds.) H. Bull and A. Watson (Oxford, 1984), pp. 13–32. This argument holds true for parts of the world, but not for mainland Southeast Asia, where competition between the two powers remained a potent force through to the end of the century.

<sup>94</sup> See, for example, an undated letter (apparently written in 1852) from Mongkut to one of his brothers (*Phraratchahathalekha*, p. 55) where he is critical of Burmese King Mindon (r. 1853–78) for failing to realise that European merchants operating in his country had powerful governments behind them. The Siamese deliberately adopted a deferential and even self-abasing tone in dealing with Western rulers, in stark contrast with the perceived 'arrogance' of Chinese and Vietnamese emperors. His correspondence with Queen Victoria, Napoleon III and American Presidents clearly demonstrates this approach; such letters can be found in S. Pramoj and K. Pramoj, *The King of Siam Speaks* (Bangkok, 1987).

<sup>95</sup> Mongkut's 1857 letter to Siamese diplomats, *Phraratchahathalekha*, p. 569.

<sup>96</sup> M. Fisher, 'Diplomacy in India, 1526–1858', in *Britain's Oceanic Empire: Atlantic and Indian Ocean Worlds, c. 1550–1850*, (eds.) H. Bowen, E. Mancke and J. Reid (Cambridge, 2012), p. 249. Fisher's chapter provides an excellent overview of the Indian context. For Southeast Asia, see Borschberg, 'Treaties' and G. Koster, 'Of treaties and unbelievers: Images of the Dutch in seventeenth-century and eighteenth-century Malay historiography', *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* LXXVIII, 1 (2005), pp. 59–96.