



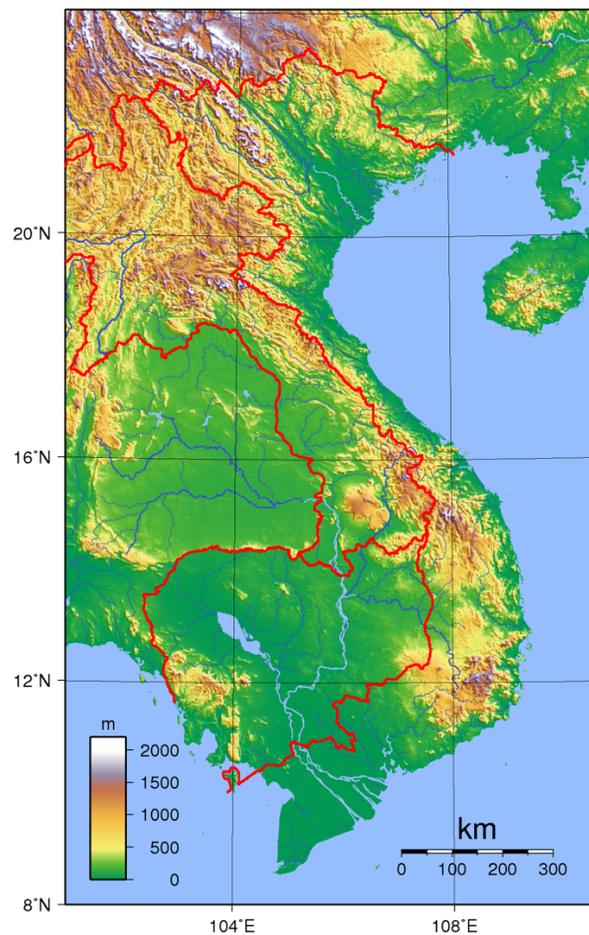
Concise Essay on The Khmer Kingdom in Cambodia, Vietnam, and Laos (9th-15th centuries)

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The Khmer Kingdom in Cambodia, Vietnam, and Laos (9th-15th centuries)

Origins. How did the Khmer Kingdom (9th-15th centuries) originate? In the early 9th century, the Khmer region of Southeast Asia was a highly unlikely candidate for future empire. The Khmer people were few, and they had no reputation of successful militaristic conquest. The trade-based Kingdom of Funan had recently collapsed because long-distance commerce on the India-China trade route had shifted to go around the Malay Peninsula and bypassed the Khmer coast. Power and wealth for the Khmer thus rested mainly on productive wet-rice agriculture and effective public administration. Both were based on techniques drawn from Hindu-Buddhist India. But most kingdoms in Southeast Asia had irrigated rice agriculture and Indianized cultures (except for north-central Vietnam, which was then under Chinese suzerainty and cultural influence). Khmer won the race to dominate mainland Southeast Asia for three centuries because their leaders innovated more and organized better than their competitors did.

The rulers of the Khmer Kingdom made excellent use of their natural resources. The physical geography of Indochina – the region now encompassing Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos – features interior mountains, coastal river valleys, and two major river deltas – the Red River Delta in north Vietnam and the Mekong River Delta in south Vietnam.



Source: *Wikimedia Commons*, available at
<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Vietnam_Topography.png>

Geographic Features of Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos

The principal natural resources of Indochina are the alluvial soils, water from river flooding and monsoon rains, and tropical temperatures that support rice-based agriculture. But archaeologists have not unearthed any evidence of the independent development of agriculture in Indochina. Instead, agriculture was introduced into Indochina by Austronesian settlers, who brought their agricultural systems – based mainly on rice, yams, chickens, and pigs – into Southeast Asia five millennia ago.

The three countries that make up Indochina – Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos – have been linked politically, militarily, and economically during most of their histories. But each country was settled by different ethnic groups at separate times, and those differences have influenced the patterns of interactions among the Vietnamese of Vietnam, the Khmer of Cambodia, and the Lao of Laos during and after the heyday of the Khmer Empire.

Five waves of migrants moved southward from China, Taiwan, and Tibet to populate Indochina. The first migrating group was the Melanesians whose diaspora began in southern

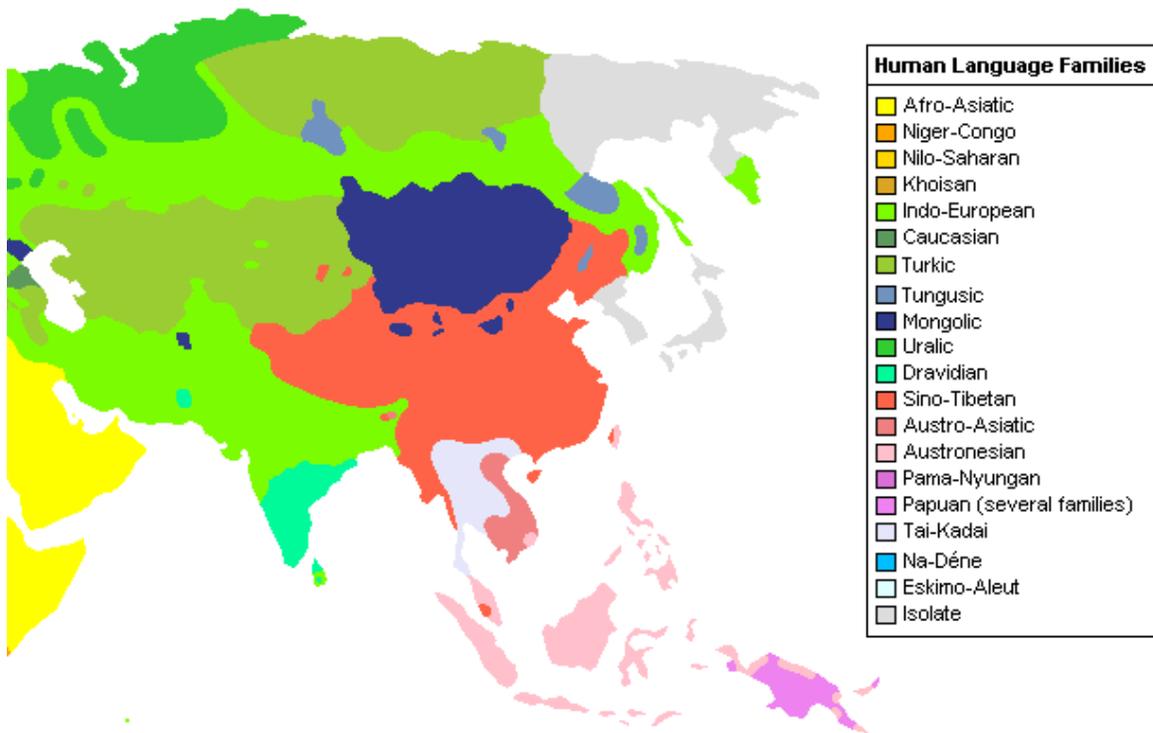
China probably 50,000 years ago. Only remnant Melanesian populations remain today in Southeast Asia, and they are politically insignificant. About 5,000 years ago, the Malayo-Polynesian peoples, speaking Austronesian languages, left Taiwan and replaced or absorbed the Melanesians in most of Southeast Asia. Although Austronesian speakers continue to dominate island Southeast Asia and Pacific Oceania, most Malayo-Polynesian peoples have long disappeared from mainland Southeast Asia except for the 325,000 Chams who live in Cambodia and southern Vietnam. After dominating the region for more than two millennia, the Austronesian people now have limited political influence in Indochina.

Perhaps 2,500 years ago, a third wave of migrants, the Mon-Khmer peoples who speak languages in the Austroasiatic family, began moving into Southeast Asia from China and settled much of Cambodia and southern Vietnam (as well as Thailand and southern Burma). The Khmers, who led the Khmer Kingdom and continue to predominate in contemporary Cambodia, and the Mons, now a

small minority in southern Burma, are direct descendants of that migratory group.

A fourth group, the Vietnamese people who speak a separate Austroasiatic language, began moving out of southern China into the Red River Valley and Delta of northern Vietnam about 2,300 years ago. Though confined to their heartland for 17 centuries, the Vietnamese began their southward expansion in the 15th century and today they dominate Vietnam. The last group of migrants into Indochina, the speakers of Tai languages began their exodus from Tibet and southern China about 2,000 years ago and accelerated it after the Yuan (Mongol-Chinese) Dynasty pushed them out of southern China in the 13th century. Tai-speaking peoples – the Lao in Laos and the Thais in Thailand – have gained power in Southeast Asia mainly during the past eight centuries. The history of settlement in Southeast Asia thus has been marked by a sequence of migratory invasions through which newcomers have absorbed and replaced previous occupants of the lands after

prolonged struggles for control. Both positive and bitter memories have evolved from that process.



Source: Wikimedia Commons, available at
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Language Families of Modern Asia, including Southeast Asia

Three significant kingdoms pre-dated the formation of the Khmer Kingdom in the Indochina region. China first intruded in northern Vietnam in the 3rd century BCE by incorporating northern Vietnam into a larger Chinese kingdom. In 111 BCE, the Chinese Han emperor declared a protectorate over northern and central

Vietnam that lasted until 939 CE. The Chinese rulers promoted Vietnamese agriculture by building dams and extending rice cultivation. But distance and the rugged mountains of the Annamite Cordillera separated northern Vietnam from the Khmer region, and Chinese-controlled Vietnam had little impact on the Khmer Kingdom except as a minor trading partner.



Source: *Wikimedia Commons*, available at
<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Map-of-southeast-asia_900_CE.png>

Khmer Kingdom (Red), Champa Kingdom (Yellow). and Tang Chinese Vietnam (Orange) – c. 900

Between the 2nd and 15th centuries, Champa Kingdoms ruled central and southern Vietnam. The Cham people were of Malayo-Polynesian ethnicity, and their language was in the Austronesian family. The Chams did not control either the Red or Mekong River Valleys or Deltas and thus were not able to generate large rice surpluses. To supplement the kingdom's wealth, the Champa kings regularly carried out raids into the Vietnamese kingdoms to the north and the Khmer areas to the west. Champa was the principal adversary of the Khmer Kingdom for six centuries, and the two powers were often at war with each other. But in 1471, the expansionist Vietnamese defeated Champa, annihilated the Chamish population, and appropriated most of the kingdom's territory.

The Kingdom of Funan, Southeast Asia's first great trading kingdom, was the direct ancestor of the Khmer Kingdom. Funan, a Hindu-Buddhist kingdom, flourished from the 1st to the 6th centuries in Cambodia and southern Vietnam. Funan was established by Mon-Khmer people who spoke Austroasiatic

languages. Its port of Oc-éo was an entrepôt for the growing commerce on the China-India-Arabia trade route. Funan went into decline in the 4th century because trading ships began to sail an all-sea route around the Malay Peninsula. Following the demise of Funan in the mid-6th century, the center of Khmer power shifted inland from the southern coast and the Mekong Delta.



Source: Wikimedia Commons, available at
<<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:FunanMap001.jpg>>

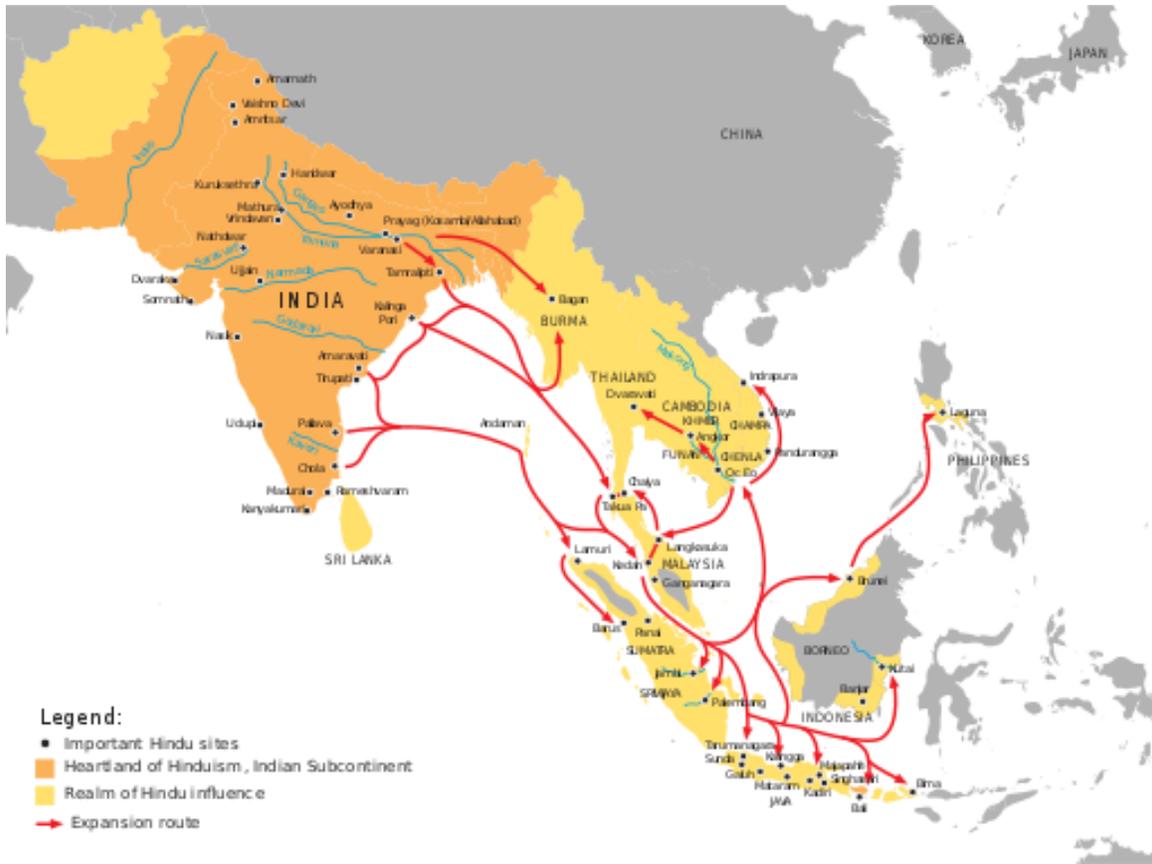
Kingdom of Funan at Its Peak, 3rd century CE

From 550 to 800, the Khmer people lived in numerous small kingdoms, known collectively as Chenla. In 802, Jayavarman II, an exceptional Khmer leader of one of the Chenla kingdoms, founded the Khmer Kingdom by defeating and expelling the Sailendras, a Javanese dynasty who had conquered Chenla two decades earlier. Jayavarman II, Khmer's founder-king, used military campaigns, marriage alliances, and land grants to consolidate and unify his kingdom. Like most successful founder-kings, he was both a strong military leader and a capable public administrator.

Wealth. What were Khmer's main sources of wealth and power – agriculture, foreign trade, and foreign conquest? Most of Khmer's wealth was generated by rice agriculture. The state taxed agriculture to transfer the wealth from the peasantry to the elite. The Khmer rice systems were decentralized, based on small fields, and used flood retreat, rainfed, or shifting cultivation technologies. New varieties of *indica* rice were introduced from India that gave higher yields than the *japonica* varieties that they replaced. Khmer

kings made land grants to nobles and temples, and both used animals for traction to improve rice yields. Temple societies expanded rice output by providing financing, technical information, and farm labor. Khmer rulers, nobles, and temples together improved rice yields and extended rice acreage and thus created a sizeable rice surplus that paid for the creation of religious monuments and the protection of the empire.

International trade was a supplemental source of wealth for the Khmer Kingdom. Khmer merchants engaged in regional trade with Champa (central-south Vietnam), Dai Viet (north-central Vietnam), the Mon kingdoms (southern Thailand and southern Burma), and the Tang, Song, and Yuan dynasties (China).



Source: Wikimedia Commons, available at https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Hinduism_Expansion_in_Asia.svg

Hinduism Expanded on the Asian Trade Routes

The high costs of transportation restricted trade to valuable, light-weight goods. The primary exports from Khmer were high-value products – elephant ivory, aromatic woods, and cardamom. Khmer imported luxury goods – porcelain, silk, crafts, and sugar. Foreign conquest of productive rice land also was an important source of wealth.

At its peak in the 12th century, the Khmer Kingdom controlled Cambodia, southern Vietnam, southern Laos, central-southern Thailand, and the northern Malay Peninsula.



Source: Wikimedia Commons, available at https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Map-of-southeast-asia_1300_CE.png

Khmer Kingdom (Red), Champa Kingdom (Yellow). and Dai Viet Kingdom (Blue) – c. 1300

The areas not under direct Khmer control paid annual tribute to the central government. Khmer power waned in the 13th century when the empire lost the Thai plain, Laos, and southern vassal states. By the 15th century, the area under Khmer control had shrunk to the Khmer heartland – the Tonle Sap and Mekong River Valleys and the Mekong Delta in today's Cambodia and southern Vietnam.

Control. What forms of political organization, economic sanction, military coercion, and religious persuasion did the rulers in the Khmer Kingdom use to extract wealth for the elite and maintain imperial power? The underlying bases of the new Khmer Kingdom were productive wet rice agriculture, Hindu temples devoted to Siva, a small elite who communicated in Sanskrit, a large peasantry who spoke only the Khmer language, and a system of corvée labor through which peasants provided regular labor services to nobles, the state, and temples. The forms of religious beliefs and political organization in the Khmer Kingdom were adaptations from India.

The Khmer religion was primarily Saivite Hinduism with some Mahayana Buddhism. Both were replaced by Theravada Buddhism in the 13th century. Hinduism and Buddhism were used by the royalty as political control mechanisms. Khmer monarchical government was an adaptation of the Indian concept of Devaraja, or God King. The universal monarch was head of the bureaucracy, the military, and the church. Indian culture also influenced Khmer social organization (elite castes), writing (in Sanskrit), religious rituals, and art and architecture.

Power and wealth rested principally on rice-based agriculture. The Hindu and Buddhist religions served as justifications for the elite to gain control of the rice surplus generated by better techniques of production, improved varieties of *indica* rice, and investments in irrigation and water control. The God King gave grants of land and bonded laborers to local nobles (*pons*) who in turn gave some of the land and bonded laborers to temple societies. That act of philanthropy earned religious merit for the nobles.

To earn religious merit, the God King also granted land and bonded laborers directly to the temple societies, which carried out construction and irrigation projects to open new rice-producing land. The rural masses either served as bonded laborers or as free farmers who earned their religious merit by paying taxes in kind and in labor time to the state and by making donations of produce and labor time to the temple societies. Religion, social structure, politics, rice production, and taxation thus were woven together intricately in a sustainable system of elite control of the masses.

Decline. What combination of bureaucratic decay, internal revolts, and external incursions caused the Khmer Empire to decline and shrink? The Khmer Kingdom went into severe decline in the 13th and 14th centuries. It overspent resources on religious monuments and temple societies, undercut its ability to rule tributary areas, weakened its military capability, and became vulnerable to foreign incursions from its old adversary, the Champa Kingdom, and its new enemies, the Thai kingdoms of Sukothai and Ayudhya.

Jayavarman VII (ruled 1181-1218) was the last of the great Khmer royal builders. He built the new city of Angkor Thom around the Bayon Temple. After Jayavarman's massive and costly building program, the Khmer Kingdom could no longer afford to devote endless royal resources to the construction of religious monuments.



Source: Wikimedia Commons, available at https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Map-of-southeast-asia_1400_CE.png

Kingdoms of Ayudhya (Purple), Khmer (Red), Champa (Yellow), and Dai Viet (Blue) – c. 1400

The Khmer Kingdom went downhill because of internal politics and external incursions. The increasing control of rice land and labor by the tax-free temple societies deprived the royal government of needed resources. The practice of royal polygamy caused succession disputes and factionalism among the nobility. Political instability at the center led to regional splintering, smaller tax collections, and the loss of tribute from vassal states. The declining rice surpluses could not finance the building of vast monuments, the construction and upkeep of 20,000 shrines, the support of 300,000 monks and priests, and the adequate defense of the empire. In the early 13th century, the Khmer rulers converted to Theravada Buddhism and undercut their Hindu-oriented theocracy. Under the new religion, there was no longer divine kingship, strict social castes, Hindu temples, or the need to earn Hindu merit by making donations. The Khmer imperial system of control thus unraveled because it devoted excessive resources to religious monuments and orders and then lost its socio-religious rationale. In the absence of an esteemed and well-organized

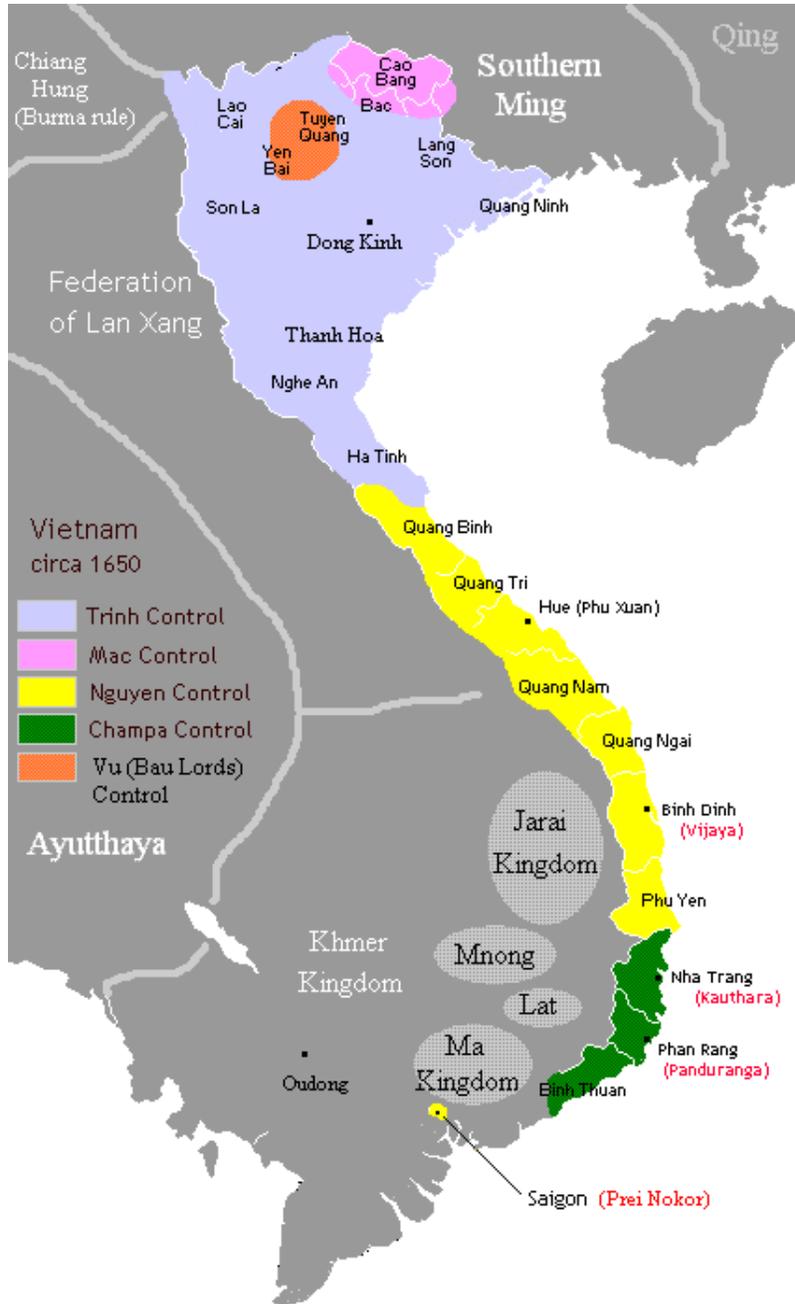
center, tributary regions and vassal states leapt at the opportunity to stop paying taxes and gain their freedom from oppressive imperial rule.

Foreign incursions also contributed to the decline of the Khmer Kingdom. Two new Thai kingdoms, Sukothai and Ayudhya, invaded the western part of the empire. Champa continued to attack the eastern part. Squeezed in the middle, the Khmers lost battles and increasing amounts of rice-producing and tribute-paying territory. The Khmer rulers panicked in 1431 when an Ayudhya army invaded their heartland, defeated their armies, and looted and sacked Angkor. In 1434, the Khmers abandoned Angkor and relocated their capital in Phnom Penh at the confluence of the Mekong and Tonle Sap Rivers. The Khmer leaders hoped to revive their flagging empire by reorienting it toward maritime commerce. They also expected that the new site would prove more defensible against periodic attacks from Ayudhya. Khmer survived, but only with a shrunken vestige of its former imperial grandeur.

Aftermath. After the fall of the Khmer Kingdom, what local or foreign groups succeeded to power in Indochina and how successfully did they wield power and extract wealth? Vietnam eventually became the dominant power in Indochina after the fall of the Khmer Kingdom, through a complicated, six-century pattern of conquest, expansion, decline, resistance, warfare, and recovery. China had ruled Vietnam for a millennium. In 939, when China was in crisis after the demise of the Tang Dynasty, Vietnam finally re-gained its independence. The new Vietnamese kingdom was called Dai Viet (great kingdom). Until the 15th century, the Dai Viet Kingdom was limited to the north-central parts of present-day Vietnam.

The Vietnamese conquest of Champa in 1471 opened the possibility of southward expansion. Vietnam conquered the south to gain additional rice land and control interior trade. By 1802, Vietnam had expanded to its present borders. The principal source of wealth and thus of imperial taxation was wet-rice cultivation. The main rice surplus areas were the Red River Valley and Delta

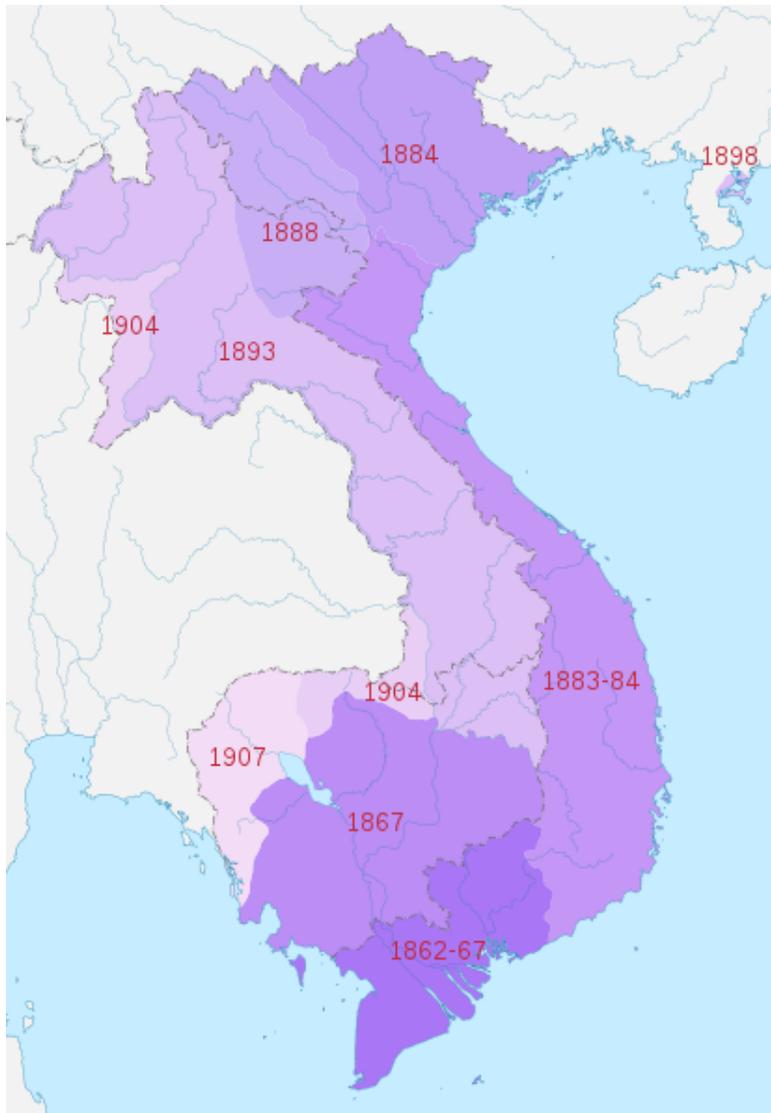
in the north and the newly-conquered Mekong River Valley and Delta in the south.



Source: *Wikimedia Commons*, available at <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Vietnam1650.GIF>

Partial Unification of Vietnam, c. 1650

By the mid-19th century, however, the Kingdom of Vietnam was politically unstable, had a tottering economy, and was militarily weak. Vietnam had pledged to be a vassal to China, but the Qing Dynasty in China was weak and unable to provide effective assistance to Vietnam. Vietnam thus was ripe for colonial takeover. Between 1858 and 1867, France established its Cochinchina colony to control rice-production in the Mekong Delta. Later, between 1873 and 1885, France imposed protectorates in the north (Tonkin) and in the center (Annam).



Source: Wikimedia Commons, available at
<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Map_of_French_Indochina_expansion.svg>

*French Conquest of Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos (Indochina) –
1858-2007*

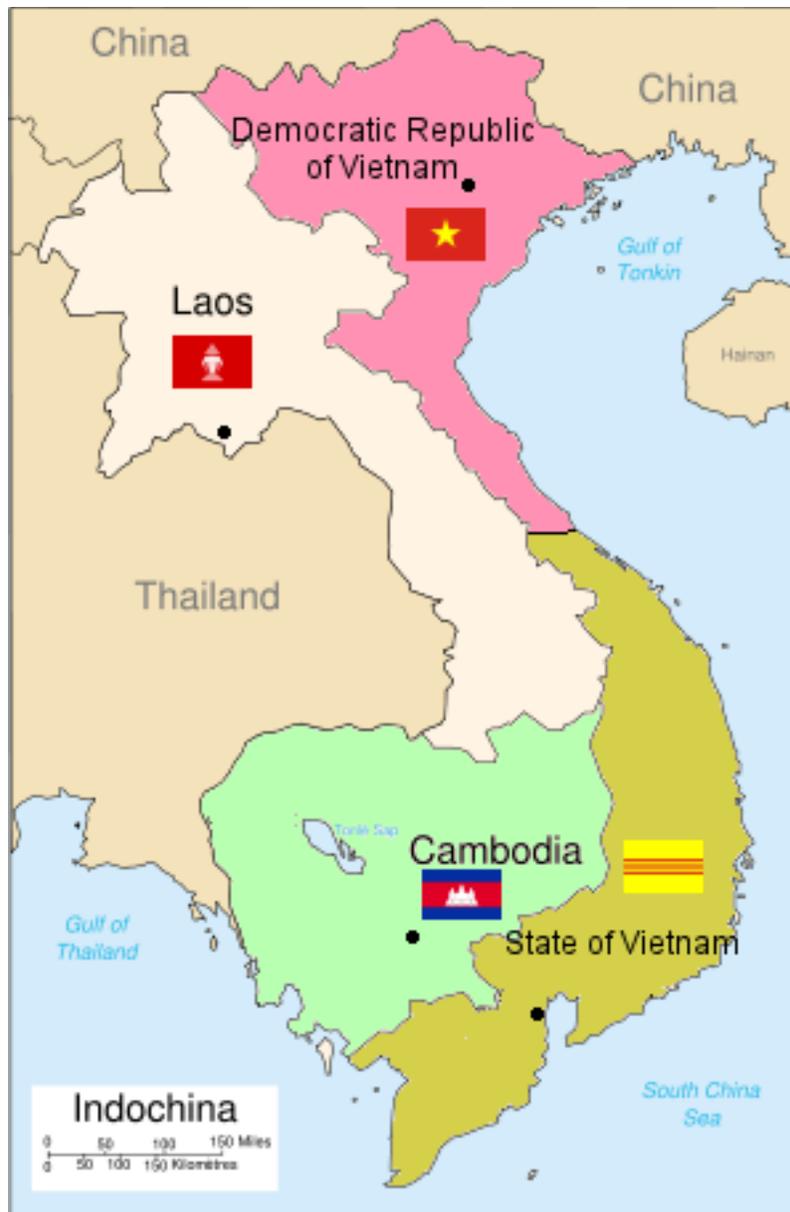
French colonial rule in Vietnam combined efficiency and brutality. French development of the Mekong Delta paralleled British policy in Burma's Irrawaddy Delta – colonial governments

invested in drainage and irrigation, impoverished laborers moved in from the north, and rice production and exports boomed. But France paid scant attention to the politically-explosive consequences of its strategy to expand rice output. By 1930, three percent of the landowners in Vietnam held half of the cultivated land, and three-fourths of the agricultural laborers were tenants or hired hands.

Vietnamese resistance to French colonial rule was carried out by two competing groups – the nationalists and the Communists. The nationalists stressed the need for political independence, whereas the Communists focused initially on land reform. The French eliminated most nationalist leaders in 1930 leaving the resistance field solely to the Communists. Led by a charismatic leader, Ho Chi Minh, the Communists formed the Indochina Communist Party (ICP) in 1930 and thereafter dominated the opposition to colonial France. Ho crafted a coalition between peasants, who desired land redistribution, and urban workers, who wanted higher wages and better working conditions. In 1941, Ho

formed the Vietnamese Independence Brotherhood League (Viet Minh). The Viet Minh, under Ho, took the lead in resisting Japanese and Vichy French rule during the Second World War. The American Government provided training and aid to the Viet Minh for their anti-Japanese resistance efforts.

Immediately after the end of World War II in August 1945, the Communists established the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) led by Ho Chi Minh. Thereafter, France attempted to reassert its political control in Vietnam. In 1946, negotiations between the DRV and France broke down, starting a costly eight-year conflict, the first Indochina War. The post-war Geneva Settlement (1954) emancipated all of former French Indochina – Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos – but divided Vietnam at the 17th parallel. The Soviet Union and China supported Communist North Vietnam, whereas the United States and its allies aided non-Communist South Vietnam.



Source: *Wikimedia Commons*, available at
<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:French_Indochina_post_partition.png>

Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos after the Geneva Settlement, 1954

The second Indochina war (1964-1975) was even longer and more brutal than the first, pitting North Vietnam and the Vietcong (southern Vietnamese supporters of the North), backed by the

Soviet Union and China, against South Vietnam and the allied countries of the Southeast Asian Treaty Organization (SEATO), led by the United States. The DRV's guerrilla warfare tactics exploited flexibility, maneuverability, surprise, and adroit use of limited resources. The US and its SEATO allies underestimated the political commitment of rural Vietnamese and mistakenly tried to impose a military solution, postponing popular socio-economic reforms, especially land reform. Political will overcame military firepower, and in 1975 the allies withdrew and Vietnam won the bitterly-fought war.



Source: Wikimedia Commons, available at https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Vietnam_war_1971-1973_map_fr.svg

Territory Controlled in the Vietnam-SEATO War, 1971-1973

By 1976, 35 years of war had devastated Vietnam. Between three and five million Vietnamese soldiers and civilians had lost

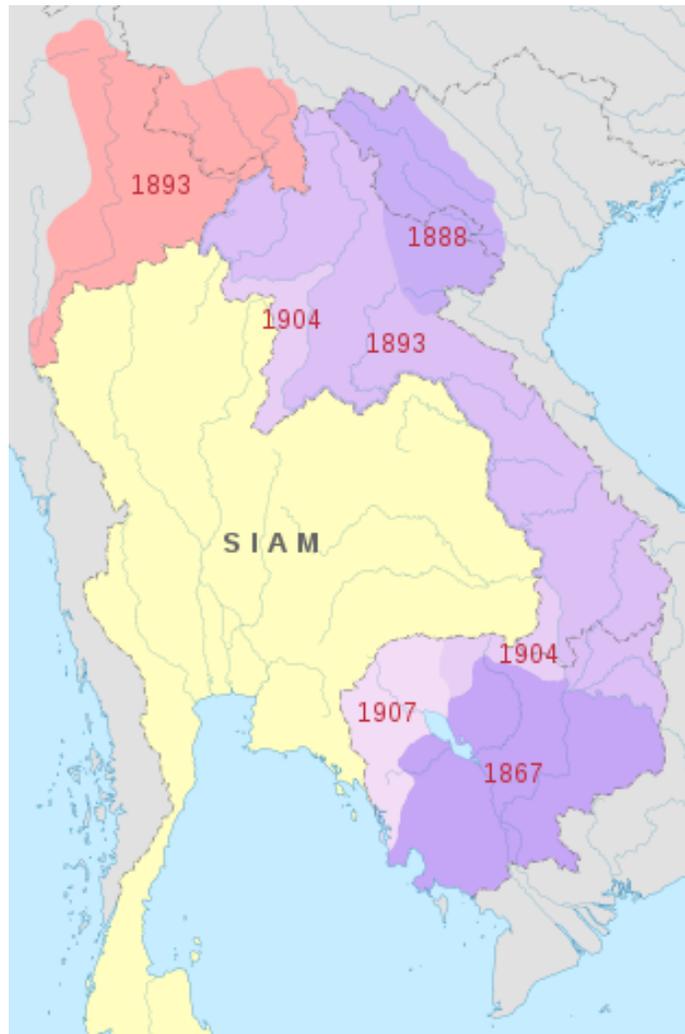
their lives, most of the country's roads, railroads, ports, dams, and dikes were damaged or destroyed, and many cities and villages lay in rubble. The economy stagnated between 1976 and 1980, due to war damage and the difficulty of integrating a distorted capitalist economy in the south with an over-planned economy in the north. Inefficient central planning and tight control of foreign trade and investment meant that Vietnam missed the chance to benefit from a booming international economy. In 1983, the Vietnamese government began experimenting with market-oriented reforms (*doi moi*). Following China's lead, Vietnam first allowed farmers to sell surplus production for profit. The Communist government then abandoned central planning, passed laws to attract foreign investment, and freed prices from central-plan control.

Those policy reforms brought remarkable results. High inflation persisted through the early 1990s, but thereafter the government held the annual rate of inflation below 10 percent. Between 1990 and 2019, the real (inflation-adjusted) annual growth rate of per capita income (GDP) averaged 5.6 percent – one

of the highest growth rates in the world. Poor people participated fully in Vietnam's recent boom, and income distribution became more equal. Increasing incomes for poor Vietnamese solidified their support for deeper policy reform, underpinning the dynamism of the economy. Although Vietnam has not fully eradicated poverty, it is well on its way to becoming another Asian tiger.

Cambodia has experienced even wider political fluctuations than Vietnam since the demise of the Khmer Kingdom six centuries ago. Cambodia's recent history has followed a pattern of decline, vassalage, near partition, colonial exploitation, disaster, and recovery. After its rulers relocated the Khmer capital to Phnom Penh in 1434, the small Khmer Kingdom steadily declined for four centuries. The Khmers were caught in a tightening vise between the Thais in the west and the Vietnamese in the east. The Thai kingdom of Ayudhya imposed suzerainty over Cambodia in the late 16th century, and for two centuries, the Cambodians paid annual tribute. In the 18th and 19th centuries, the new Thai Kingdom of Siam and the Kingdom of Vietnam regularly invaded

Cambodia and created political instability. The Thais snatched two northwestern provinces, and the Vietnamese took land in southeastern Cambodia.



Source: *Wikimedia Commons*, available at [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Map_of_Siam_\(territorial_cessions\).svg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Map_of_Siam_(territorial_cessions).svg)

Kingdoms of Siam (Yellow) and Cambodia (Dark Purple) – 1867

The beleaguered kingdom would likely have been partitioned between Siam and Vietnam if France had not intervened. King

Norodom thus invited France to establish a protectorate in Cambodia in 1863. France eventually turned Cambodia into an economically viable colony. The French developed large-scale rice agriculture in Battambang in the northwest. In the southeast, French entrepreneurs established rubber plantations. Agricultural taxes generated sufficient revenue to pay for colonial administration and transportation infrastructure.



Source: Wikimedia Commons, available at https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Indochine_fran%C3%A7aise.svg

French Expansion into Cambodia, 1863-1884

King Norodom Sihanouk was the dominant figure in Cambodia during the quarter century after the Second World War. In 1970, the Assembly removed Sihanouk from power because he was unwilling to evict Vietnamese troops from Cambodia, the economy was weak, and they resented his political control. The new government of the Khmer Republic was led by Lon Nol, formerly Sihanouk's leading general. Despite American support, Lon Nol lost a massive civil war with Communist guerrillas, the Khmer Rouge. More than 600,000 Cambodians died in that war, many from American bombs. In 1975, the Khmer Rouge installed Pol Pot as the head of government. The movement consisted of motivated, idealistic, and brutal schoolteachers and peasants. In a foolhardy attempt to create a socialist Utopia, Pol Pot banned cities, schools and books, organized religion, money, markets, and private property. At least one million people died from executions, overwork, and economic dislocation in the ensuing disaster.

In 1979, Vietnam invaded and the Khmer Rouge fled to Cambodia's western mountains or Thailand.



Source: Wikimedia Commons, available at
 <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Cambodia_anti-PRK_border_camps.png>

The Khmer Rouge Versus Vietnam, 1978-1989

The Vietnamese established the People’s Republic of Kampuchea (PRK) in 1979 and ruled for a decade. The new government restored order and reestablished freedom of movement, urban areas, primary schools, functioning markets, and banks. After the fall of the USSR in 1989, the Soviets ended aid to Vietnam and the Vietnamese removed their troops and left Cambodia. The United

Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia ran the country for eighteen months during 1991-1993, preparing for the election of a new National Assembly in 1993.

Hun Sen and his Cambodian People's Party (CPP) have won all six of the parliamentary elections, held every five years between 1993 and 2018. Hun Sen has served continuously as Prime Minister. His critics have charged him with authoritarianism, corruption, and election fraud. In October 2004, King Sihanouk abdicated his throne due to illness and was succeeded by King Norodom Sihamoni, his son. Cambodia's economy began to benefit from economic liberalization after the 1993 elections provided more political stability. Income per capita grew annually at 5 percent in the rest of the 1990s and then increased to 5.8 percent per year between 2000 and 2019. A boom in exports of garments, footwear, and wood products plus expanding tourism triggered that much-needed income growth.



Source: *Wikimedia Commons*, available at
<<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Cb-map.png>>

Contemporary Cambodia

The post-Khmer history of the small, land-locked state of Laos mimics Vietnam's pattern during the 15th-17th centuries – territorial expansion and staunch independence – and Cambodia's pattern in the 18th-20th centuries – Thai vassalage, French colonialism, disastrous warfare, and market-oriented recovery.

Lan Xang was the first large Lao kingdom.



Source: Wikimedia Commons, available at
<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Southeast_Asian_history_-_Around_1540.png>

Lan Xang and Its Neighbors, c. 1540

Fa Ngum, who founded Lan Xang in 1354, was skilled in warfare and public administration. Following a succession dispute in 1695, Lan Xang split into three successor kingdoms – Luang Prabang (north), Vientiane (center), and Champasak (south). The new Thai

Kingdom of Siam took over those three Lao kingdoms in 1777 and ruled them as tributary provinces of Siam. When Vientiane and Champasak rebelled in 1827, Siam quelled the revolt and abolished both kingdoms.

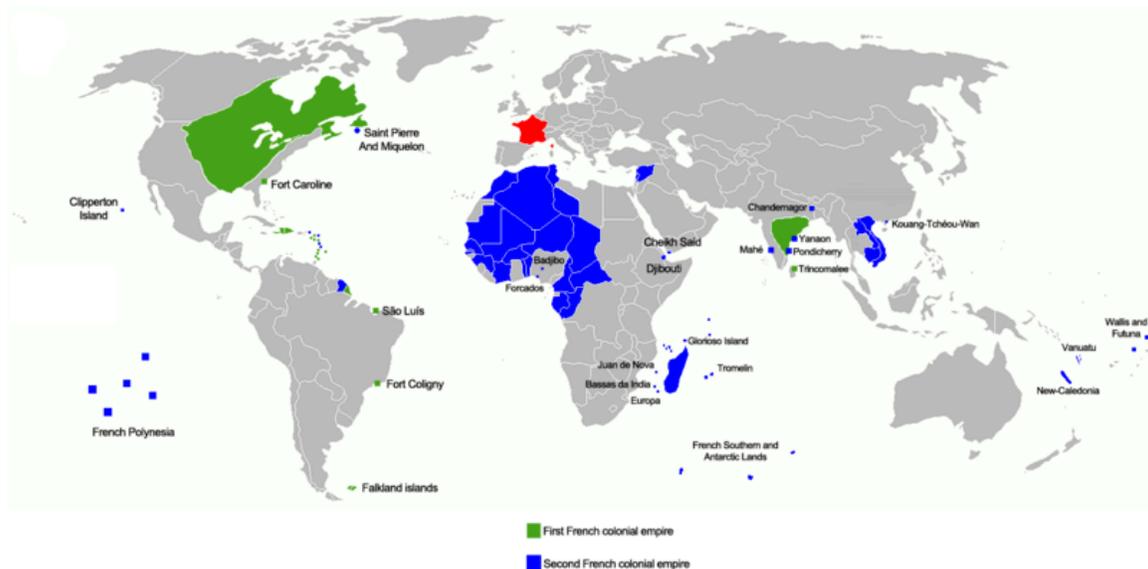


Source: Wikimedia Commons, available at
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*Three Lao Kingdoms –
Luang Prabang, Vientiane, and Champasak, c. 1750*

Luang Prabang retained its nominal independence in the 19th century by paying heavy tribute to Siam, Vietnam, and China.

France colonized Laos in 1893 as an extension of French Indochina and an appendage to its profitable colonies in Vietnam. But the colonial budget of Laos typically incurred large deficits that were covered with subsidies from Vietnam.



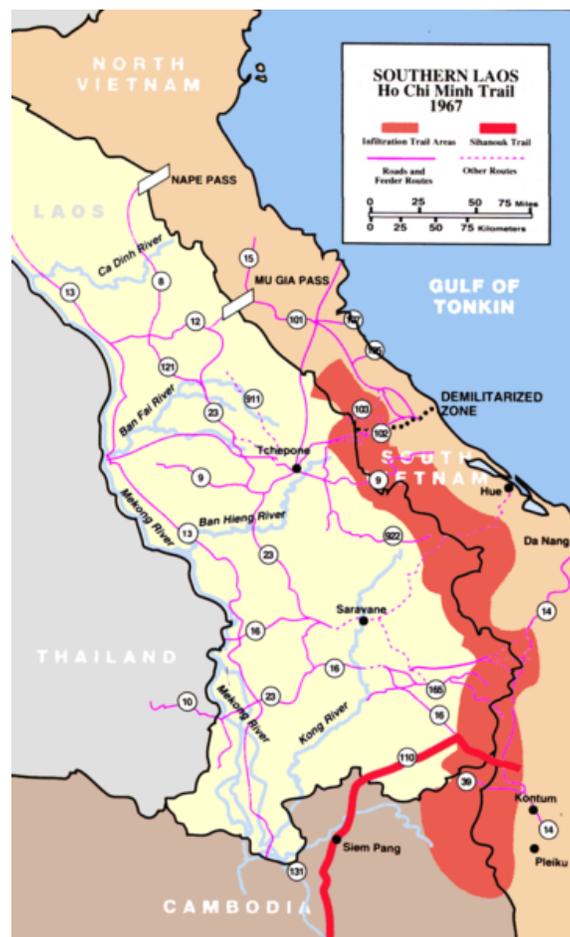
Source: *Wikimedia Commons, available at*
<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:131Etendue_de_l%27Empire_Fran%C3%A7ais.png>

Laos in France's Colonial Empire, 1893-1954

Following Japan's defeat in August 1945, the Lao Issara (Free Lao) movement briefly formed a government. But in 1946, France recaptured Laos and imposed another colonial government. After France lost the battle of Dien Bien Phu in 1954, the French left Indochina. The Geneva Agreement of 1954 accorded full

independence to Laos. For the next decade, Laos was rocked by political instability. Coalition governments were formed in 1957-1958 and again in 1962, but both collapsed within a year.

Between 1964 and 1973, Laos was subjected to the most devastating war in the nation's history. The war was an extension of the Indochina war between the United States and Vietnam.



Source: *Wikimedia Commons*, available at <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:HoCMT.png>

Southern Laos and the Ho Chi Minh Trail, 1967

More than two million tons of bombs were dropped on Laos, about two-thirds of a ton for every resident. More than 200,000 Laotians died and 750,000 survivors, a quarter of the country's population, became homeless. The war finally ended with the Laos Peace Accords in 1973, which established another coalition government in Laos.

In 1975, the Communist Pathet Lao carried out a revolution, dissolved the coalition government, abolished the monarchy, and established the Lao People's Democratic Republic (LPDR). Laos was tightly aligned with Vietnam and the Soviet Union between 1976 and 1989. The LPDR government experimented with central planning, extensive price controls, forced agricultural cooperatives, and the nationalization of industry. The Communist experiment was an economic failure, and the system led to massive corruption.

A New Economic Mechanism was introduced between 1986 and 1990. The Lao Party leaders adopted the Chinese model (already copied by Vietnam) of more open economic policies but continued Communist Party control of politics. Since 2016,

Bounnhang Vorachith, a former Vice-president, has served as President and General Secretary of the Lao People's Revolutionary Party – and thus as the *de facto* leader of Laos – and the head of government has been Prime Minister Thongloun Sisoulith, who formerly was Minister of Foreign Affairs.



Source: Wikimedia Commons, available at
<<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:La-map.png>>

Contemporary Lao People's Democratic Republic

Reforms in Laos opened the economy to increased foreign trade and investment. Thereafter, Laos enjoyed a sustained spurt of per capita income growth, averaging 3.8 percent annually between 1990 and 2000 and 5.4 percent per year between 2000 and 2019. Expanding exports of electricity, copper, rubber, gold, wood, garments, and video displays triggered that encouraging growth.

Lessons. What lessons for contemporary powers can be drawn from the experiences of the Khmer Kingdom and of successor governments in Indochina? The Khmer Kingdom rose in the 9th century, peaked in the 12th, and fell in the 15th. Two critical lessons can be drawn from the Khmer imperial experience. The Khmer people created a regionally powerful and long-standing empire against very long odds. One key to their success was the natural resource base of their heartland. They were fortunate to be located in the alluvial flood plain and delta of the Mekong River and its tributaries, especially the Tonle Sap River and Lake, which provided the base for very productive irrigated rice agriculture.

But the Khmers intelligently ran hard with that advantage. They organized an efficiently-operated and centralized politico-religious system, based on Saivite Hinduism and Mahayana Buddhism, to promote and tax rice production. Then they expanded gradually to control the southern coastal regions and the rice-rich central plain of Thailand. The Khmer elite understood that they had to invest and innovate to capitalize on their natural rice-growing base. For four centuries, their imperial government was well-organized and efficient.

But then things began gradually to deteriorate. Starting in the early 13th century, the Khmer Kingdom went into steady decline. The gradual fall of the empire contains a second lesson for contemporary nations. Balance among resource users is critical, but the Khmer society became unbalanced. The socio-religious system called for the kings, noble landowners, and farmers to earn religious merit by donating resources – rice land, bonded laborers, or rice – to the Hindu or Buddhist temple societies so that they could construct religious monuments and maintain orders of priests

and monks. But the Khmer kings went overboard and overspent the empire's resources on monumental religious architecture. Moreover, the tax-exempt temple societies eventually came into control of excessive amounts of productive rice-producing land and bonded laborers. Too much of the rice surplus then went to the church rather than to the state. Strapped for funds, the Khmer central government could no longer buy off nobles in court, support the military needed to control outlying areas and tributary states, and invest in the irrigation and transportation systems needed to maintain rice productivity. The system of imperial control came apart because of loss of balance – too many resources were devoted to religious monuments and temple societies and not enough to running the state.

Long after the Khmer Kingdom had disappeared into history, the region it had dominated became the scene of two tragic and brutal wars – the First Indochina War (1946-1954), in which Vietnam fought for its independence from France, and the Second Indochina War (1964-1975), in which Communist groups in

Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos fought against the United States and its allies and Vietnamese nationalists sought to reunify their country. Four important lessons emerge from those wars. The first lesson is that deeply felt political motivation can offset superior military force. Most rural Vietnamese strongly supported the goals of the victorious Vietnamese army. A second instructive principle is that poor people can fight with dogged determination for the things that affect their lives most directly – ownership of land, reasonable rates of taxation, national independence, and unification of their country. A third insight is that socio-economic realities can be much more important than political labels (such as Communism) when poor people are committed to a prolonged struggle. French and then American strategists overlooked the critical need to introduce economic reforms before attempting to impose military solutions in Indochina. A fourth critical lesson from the Vietnam wars is that once warfare begins, guerrilla tactics – flexibility in troop deployment, surprise in strategy, and constant attack and counter-attack – can overcome superiority in military

force and sophistication. Adroit guerrilla strategy plus widespread rural support allowed the Viet Minh to overcome high odds and win the wars.

The aftermath of shocking wars sometimes can be even more brutal than the wars themselves. When the second Indochina War spilled over into Cambodia in 1970, despite the attempts of Cambodian leaders to have their country remain neutral, the former heartland of the Khmer Empire was devastated for five years.

One-tenth of the Cambodian people perished in the conflict. After the war ended in 1975, the allies left Cambodia to its own devices.

The next four years proved even more calamitous for Cambodia than the war had been. The Communist Khmer Rouge government, led by Pol Pot, brutalized the country by carrying out a hare-brained experiment in social engineering. In a mindless effort to create a socialist Utopia, the Khmer Rouge banned cities, schools, religion, private property, markets, and money and forced most people to become rice-growing peasants. More than a million Cambodians died from executions in the “killing fields” or

from overwork or starvation. When Vietnam invaded Cambodia in 1979 and drove the Khmer Rouge into hiding in Cambodia's hills or refuge in Thailand, twisted Cold War psychology caused the United States and Thailand to join China in supporting the Khmer Rouge's guerrilla activities against the Vietnamese-supported puppet government in Cambodia. When wars are fought for the wrong reasons, the aftermath can bring strange and uncomfortable alliances.

A final lesson is the importance of political stability and sensible policy in underpinning economic growth and poverty alleviation. The Communist governments of Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos faced post-war devastation in their societies and economies. Inspired by their Soviet benefactors and advisors, all three governments quickly exacerbated an already desperate situation by imposing heavy-handed central planning. But in the late 1980s, the three countries gradually adopted the new and evolving Chinese model of socialism that stressed agricultural incentives, the ending of price controls, foreign trade and

investment, and private enterprise. First Laos and then Cambodia largely copied the reforms that Vietnam had initiated. As a result of sensible economic policies, between 1990 and 2019 Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos each enjoyed annual growth of income per capita at world-class rates (between 5 and 6 percent). All three Indochinese countries are still poor, but in the past 30 years they have made impressive strides to improve the lives of their people. Stability is essential, but policy matters too.