

# The Effects of Franco-Siamese Treaties on Ubon Ratchathani Urban Landscape Transformation

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## ABSTRACT

In the written history, Ubon Ratchathani, most documents point out that the urban areas have developed and changed because of the administrative reforms from Bangkok since the reign of King Chulalongkorn, Rama V. While this domestic cause has certainly been at play, there is another cause connected to foreign colonisation of the Indochina area. French troops forced Siam to accept the Franco-Siamese treaty in 1893, which affected the boundaries of Siam near the Mekong River. This article will address the effects of Franco-Siamese treaties on the Ubon Ratchathani urban landscape, and will highlight the urban elements which currently contribute to the urban attributes.

**Keywords:** *Franco-Siamese Treaties, historic urban landscape, transformation, Ubon Ratchathani*

## INTRODUCTION

The Recommendation on the Historic Urban Landscape by United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) adopted on the 10<sup>th</sup> of November 2011 in Paris is aimed at preserving the quality of the human environment and enhancing the productive and sustainable use of urban spaces, while recognizing their dynamic character, and promoting social and functional diversity. It integrates the goals of urban heritage conservation and those of social and economic development. It is rooted in a balanced and sustainable relationship between the urban and natural environment, between the needs of present and future generations and the legacy from the past (UNESCO, 2011, p. 3). In addition, it considers cultural diversity and creativity as key

assets for human, social and economic development (UNESCO, 2013, p. 9). Hence, beyond the notion of the historic centre, this approach supports the value of elements which occur later, and as a part of the history which can be interpreted as being part of the city's character. This approach will be the framework for study the Ubon Ratchathani urban landscape transformation. It supports the way to understand the value of heritage in the city throughout its physical changes.

Ubon Ratchathani, or simply Ubon, is a province located at the boundary area in the northeast of Thailand or Siam in the past, the former name of the Kingdom of Thailand. The province is close to the Mekong River and two neighbouring countries, Laos and Cambodia. The city has been set in the

centre on the northern Mun riverbank since the late eighteenth century, when it was settled by Laotian people who moved from Vientiane to Nongbua Lumphu, and then to Champasak, and finally to the area where Ubon city is located today. The official establishment of Ubon Ratchathani took place in 1792, in the reign of King Phutthayotfa Chulalok, Rama I. (Book Committee, 1992, pp. 5-10) The city was originally heavily influenced by the culture of the Laotian people who settled the city. However, the current Ubon city's attributes, both tangible and intangible, have changed due to many diverse factors from inside and outside its boundary; often from the national and international causes.

The colonisation from western countries of the Southeast Asia affect the Siam's evolution during the reign of King Chulalongkorn, Rama V. The competitive drive over sovereignty on the boundary area of Siam, British on the west side and France on the east side, forced Siam to the Franco-Siamese crisis in 1893 (Winichakul, 2013, p. 163). In the same time period, King Chulalongkorn resolved to improve the country, not only in Bangkok, but also in many cities located far from the capital city including Ubon. At first, King Rama V sent some noblemen from Bangkok to control Ubon, but they were unable to make executive decisions on every situations. He therefore sent his younger brothers -- Prince Krom Luang Pichit Preechakorn and Prince Krom Luang Sarnbasiddhi Prasonga -- to reform the administration and develop this area. They were given full authority to govern in the name of the King (Book Committee, 1992, pp. 19-44). Those changes affected the urban development, infrastructure and society that define Ubon today.

The Ubon Ratchathani urban landscape transformation happened in the period of French colonisation of the Indochina area. The demand for resources at that time brought about both negotiation and war between France and Siam, including the Paknam war in 1893. France sent two of its ships, up the Chao Phraya River, and turned their guns towards Bangkok. That situation forced Siam to accept French sovereignty on the land where the Kingdom of Laos are found today (Sablon du Corail, 2011, pp. 243-245). Even though the goal of the Franco-Siamese treaties was about control of the land on the left bank of the Mekong River, they also affected the opposite side, which was the boundary of the Kingdom of Siam. Thus, subsequent changes to the Ubon Ratchathani urban landscape were related to these Franco-Siamese treaties.

Historical evidence shows that there were both tangible and intangible changes to the original urban attributes of Ubon resulting from the Franco-Siamese treaties. This article will focus on development of and changes to Ubon Ratchathani urban landscape from 1893 to today. The main purpose of the Franco-Siamese treaties is related to the control of the left bank of the Mekong River. This was a crisis situation, and it lasted for a long time in this area. On the one hand, most academic writings point to the negative effect of Siam's loss of sovereignty over some areas. However, this article will highlight the other aspects which occurred in Ubon; the city located in the frontier of Siam even though that land was not the focus of these treaties.

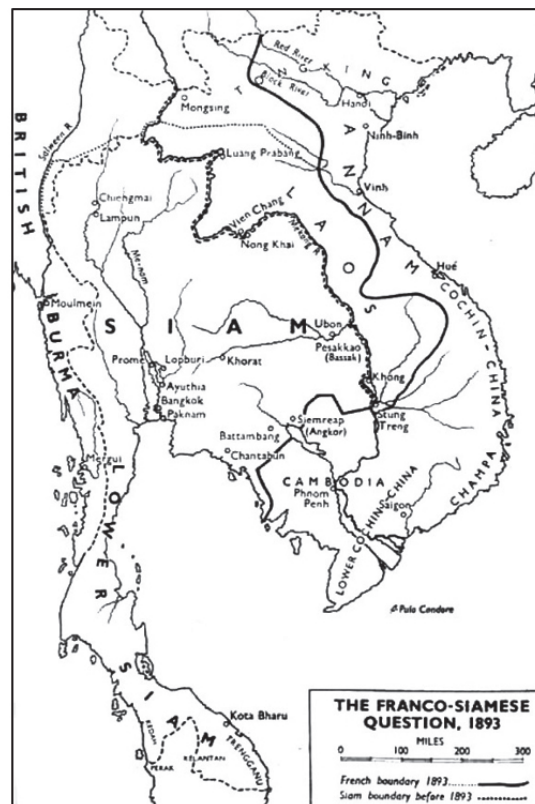


Figure 1:  
Siam territory map in 1893 and the location of Ubon Ratchathani city  
(Source: A history of South-East Asia by D.G.E. Hall)

## UBON RATCHATHANI'S CITY ATTRIBUTES BEFORE THE FRANCO-SIAMESE TREATIES

According to the literature review, there are Ubon Ratchathani historical reference sources by local and foreign people. They explained the history, politic, nature, culture, people, society and belief since the settlement time and cover the period of Franco-Siamese crisis. The information from each document is provided with the same and different information in details. However, they do not have the settlement map; therefore, the study method necessitates information conglomeration and layering on the current map to trace back the urban landscape development.

The survey data from Étienne Aymonier showed the image of the Ubon city on the settlement area. He was a French surveyor who was in Ubon from the 2nd to the 24th of December, 1883. He described Ubon as a small city, recently founded. The city was built on the northern bank of the Mun River, which rose in a gentle slope to form a rather high knoll, clear of the highest rises of the water. The fortunate location had rapidly transformed Ubon into a significant regional centre. The city was set out in a rectangular shape and surrounded by an unimposing moat on the three sides of its enclosure facing land, measuring about 2,500 meters lengthwise by 500-600 meters in width. There were three longitudinal streets, parallel to the Mun River; a host of small transversal streets divided the city into small quarters, which were further subdivided by walls or by clusters of houses (Aymonier, 2000, pp. 42-44).

He also discussed the city structure and ethnic makeup at that time. The Khum, or residence of the Chau (local ruler) in the centre of the city, was surrounded by a brick wall. Opposite this wall, several Chinese shops had displays of fabric, crockery, safflower, and other items. There were a thousand houses in Ubon and eighteen pagodas, several of which had brick walls coated with lime, and roofs covered with planks, which was a luxury in a country where thatch, wood and bamboo generally comprised all the materials used for house construction. He also said that the population in Ubon was almost entirely Laotian, but included several Chinese, some Siamese, and a few Khmers and Burmese (Aymonier, 2000, p. 44). His record provides general information about the physical and social urban elements of that place and time,

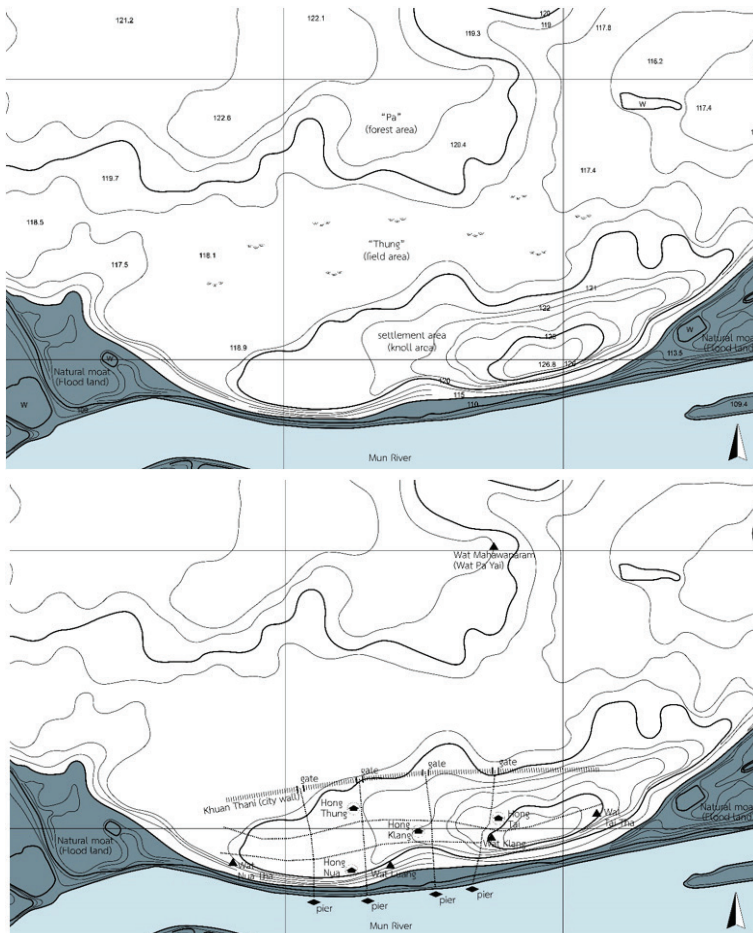
along with an explanation of the morphology of Ubon Ratchathani; that is, what city looked like.

In addition, French missionaries' letters are cited in the book *History of the Christianity Propagation in Siam and Laos*, which shows that the propagation of Christianity in Ubon city started in 1881, at the same time as some conflicts were arising between Siam and France. Constant Jean Prodhomme and Francis Xavier Marie Guego were the French missionary leaders who travelled from Bangkok to Ubon with the goal of spreading Christianity. Their mission was successful, and Christianity thrives in Ubon city even now. Christianity was the new belief in this area, and its introduction in Ubon was the first step for Christianity in the northeastern region of Siam, before expanding to the other provinces, Nakhon Phanom and Sakon Nakhon, along the boundary area on the right bank of the Mekong River (Costet, 2006, pp. 453-482).

The missionaries stated that they arrived with a caravan at Ubon on the 24th of April 1881. They stayed at a government building initially, and then moved outside the city wall to set up the Christian area on land that had been abandoned for more 10 years because local people believed that it was inhabited by devils. The missionaries, on the other hand, thought that the area simply was not in sanitary condition, which had affected people's health and livelihood (Costet, 2006, pp. 461-470). The place was covered with many trees, close to the natural moats and lower area than the city settlement inside the city wall; therefore, the place could flood when the level of the Mun river was high in the rainy season. Even though it was not the ideal setting, the Christian community still established itself in that area.

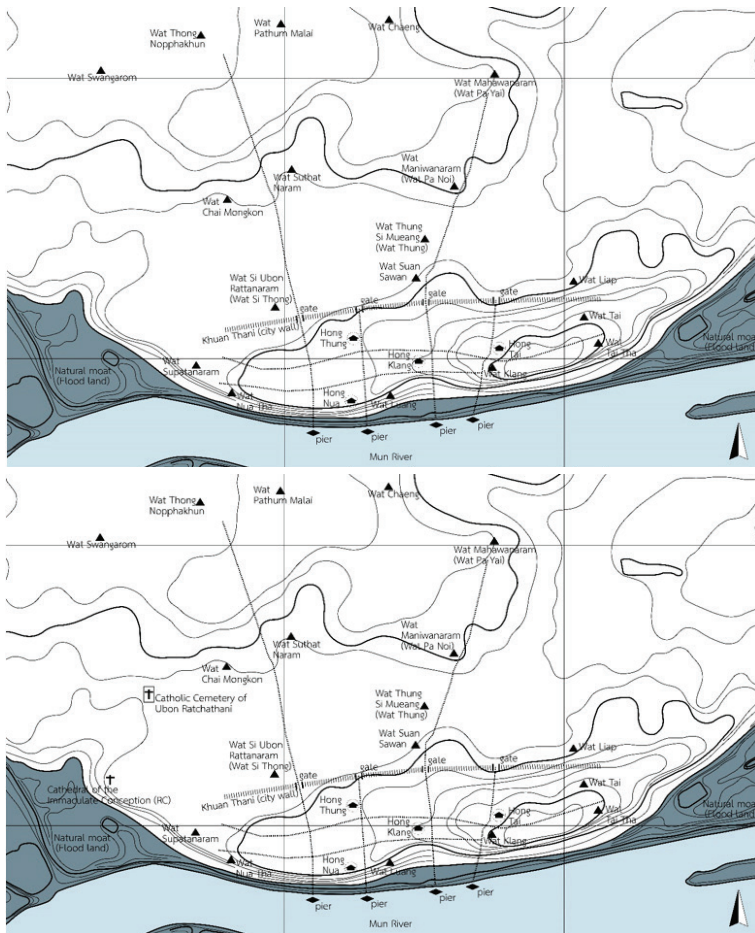
Moreover, the book *Ubon Ratchathani 200 years* give some more detail about the physical of Ubon city in the settlement area. The book explained that there was a soil dam built as a city wall, called "*Khuan Than*", and four wooden gates on the north boundary of the city. It also provides information about the location of the local rulers' residence, called "*Hong*", and the group of temples, called "*Wat*" (Book Committee, 1992, pp. 14-17). After layering the location of the urban landscape elements which are the local rulers' residence, temples, city wall, gates, traffic routes, piers, forest and field area on the topography map, the city image will appear and show the city's attribute. The location of the rulers' residence and temples interpret the relationship between the location

In addition to the map, there are some historic drawings and photos which show the character of the architectural style in the city at that period. These historical documents show Ubon Ratchathani city attributes before the Franco-Siamese treaties began. It, in fact, provide the starting point for showing the differences between *before* and *after* and explain the route of urban characteristic today.



Map in the period of 1778-1789; The urban elements in the first settlement area. The boundary was set on the knoll area close to the Mun River.





Map in the period of 1789-1890; The boundary was expanded towards the north area follow the location of the temples. The walkway route to the north divided the field to smaller area.

Map in the year of 1881; The Christian area was set up on the west side, outside the boundary of the first settlement.

**Figure 2:**  
The layering of the urban landscape elements on the topography map to describe the Ubon Ratchathani city's attribute before the Franco-Siamese treaty 1893  
(Source: Lalida Boonmee)



**Figure 3a & 3b:**  
Example of the architectural style in Ubon Ratchathani city before the Franco-Siamese treaty 1893; Left – the residence of the Chau, Right – Wat Luang, the first temple in the city where were built at the settlement period  
(Source: Left; Louis Delaporte, Right; Bamphen Na Ubon)

## THE TRANSFORMATION OF UBON RATCHATHANI CITY FROM THE FRANCO-SIAMESE TREATIES

A treaty is a contract in writing between two countries. Some treaties are imbalanced because the military situation at that time and the relative power of each country might force one party to accept disagreeable terms. It is difficult to change or amend a treaty after it is signed; therefore, the effects that follow often create unexpected results, both positive and negative. The Franco-Siamese treaties since 1893 discussed in this article have affected many cities in the Kingdom of Siam in both direct and indirect ways.

There were a number of Franco-Siamese treaties. The first was signed on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of October, 1893. King Chulalongkorn accepted the treaty because of the effects of the Paknam war. This first agreement was so unfair for Siam that its government asked for a revision; consequently, there was another treaty in 1904 (Hall, 1968, pp. 694-701). Even though Ubon Ratchathani was not a focus area of the Franco-Siamese treaties, there were the indirect effects on the urban landscape in many ways, as follows:

### i. Transformation into the military strategic area

According to the third proposal of the Franco-Siamese treaty of 1893, the Siam government was prohibited from having any military camps in Battambang, Siem Reap and provinces in the territory within 25 kilometres on the right bank of Mekong River (Theerasasawat, 2009, p. 48). This affected Ubon, which is an important city near the 25-kilometre zone. It became a strategically important military area for protecting the country's sovereignty. Consequently, the military camp of Monthon Lao Kao was set on the area of Thung Si Mueang, the field area outside of the city in the north. Then, the military camp moved to establish as the Army military camp in Warin Chamrap, a district on the other side of Mun River (Na Ubon, 1996, p. 111). In 1922 the Royal Thai Air Force established an airmail run to Ubon. (Young, 1995, p. 32 cited in Whyte, 2011, p. 23) The airport was used during the Franco-Thai War and the Greater East Asia War, then it was established as the Air Force military camp officially in 1962 (Wing 21 RTAF, 2019).

As discussed, Ubon had become a strategic military area, with military camps and institutes in the city and Warin Chamrap district. The camps were large and set near the city, so they became an important part of the city fabric, and they limited the physical growth of the city. The Air Force military camp limits the building high in the city, and the Army military camp impacts the environment near the camp in Warin Chamrap, both part of the effect of the military strategy on this area since the Franco-Siamese treaties.

### ii. Increase in diversity of religion and ethnicity

Even though the treaties did not specify that France would set up a consulate in Ubon, the French government did so. The agreement did state that France had the authority to place consulates in Nan, Korat (Nakhon Ratchasima) and other locations in Siam, as France saw fit (Theerasasawat, 2009, p. 34). The consulate established in Ubon affected the ethnic makeup of the city because the French consulate had autonomous jurisdiction to permit Vietnamese, Khmer and Laotian stay. Therefore, the city saw an influx of foreigners who eventually settled down in Ubon. That has influenced the social diversity in the city ever since.

The Franco-Siamese treaties also brought a new religion to Ubon. At the time, the French missionaries did not want people to see the propagation of Christianity as being connected to French politics. Regardless, the arrival of the missionaries coincided with conflicts between Siam and France, which allowed the missionaries to travel to Ubon without the need for a requirement from the Siamese government.

Prior to the arrival of Christianity, religion in Ubon was primarily comprised of Buddhism and Spiritual Beliefs. The presence of eighteen temples among just 1,000 houses in the city is good evidence that Buddhism was well-entrenched in this area. In addition, throughout the year, the locals observe twelve Isan traditional festivals. These monthly celebrations clearly show that people believed in and respected spirits. These beliefs and its co-existence with Buddhism continue among the local people to this day.



Figure 4:  
The location of Ubon Ratchathani city, near the 25-kilometre zone on the right bank of Mekong River  
(Source: Edit from Suwit Theerasasawat)

When the French missionaries and their caravan arrived in Ubon, they received a positive welcome from Chau, who came from Champasak and was not a relative of the first Chau who founded Ubon. He allowed them to stay at the local government building, and then, later on, to settle in a different building in the area called “Bung Kataew.” This was located in the forest on the west side of the city’s boundary. They propagated Christianity among the Laotian people. Even though the effort was not easy, the Christian community expanded.



Figure 5:  
Military areas both the Air Force military camp and the Army military camp affect to the urban growth area until now  
(Source: Edit from Royal Thai Survey Department, RTSD)

Moreover, since Prince Krom Luang Sarnbasiddhi Prasonga control the Ubon city, he changed some traditional practices of both the local ruler and citizens, such as cancelation of the Rocket festival (or *Boon Bang Fai*) and changes to the Candle festival – changes which persist in Ubon city today. The inclusive nature of the local culture results in these traditional practices in Christian, Buddhist and Spiritual Beliefs still expressed in the city.





Figure 6:  
Example of the traditional practices in Christian, Buddhist and Spiritual Beliefs  
(Source: Lalida Boonmee)

### iii. Transformation into the administrative centre for *Monthon Lao Kao*

According to the first Franco-Siamese treaty in 1893, the land of Champasak, set on the right bank of Mekong River, was located in the Kingdom of Siam. Due to many conflicts between Siam and France after the first treaty was signed, so there was a new negotiation in Paris in 1902. One of the requirements from France was to have control over the land of Champasak while Siam wanted to revise the treaty; therefore, Siam accepted that request. The new treaty, eventually signed in 1904, gave control of Champasak to France, as well as the other cities on the left bank of Mekong River at that time (Theerasasawat, 2009, pp. 71-79). As a consequence, Ubon became a boundary province and a centre for the neighbouring areas, and remains so today.

Prior to the treaty, the strategy for developing the country in the reign of King Chulalongkorn affected

many cities, including Ubon Ratchathani. The king set a circle, called *monthon*, by connecting cities together, and nominating one significant city to be the administrative centre for the administrative area; in addition, each *monthon* would be governed by the High Commissioner from Bangkok. The area of Ubon city and the region was designated *Monthon Lao Kao*, and Prince Krom Luang Pichit Preechakorn was the commissioner from 1891. In fact, the centre of *Monthon Lao Kao* had to be set at Champasak; however, Prince Krom Luang Pichit Preechakorn chose to stay in Ubon Ratchathani and control the area from there (Book Committee, 1992, p. 23). This administrative reform transformed the Ubon urban landscape.

*Monthon Lao Kao* was controlled by Prince Krom Luang Pichit Preechakorn for two years. After that, on 13 October, 1893, 10 days after the Franco-Siamese treaty had begun, Prince Krom Luang Sarnbasiddhi Prasonga came to govern this area instead (Book Committee, 1992, p. 26). His goals were to improve the city and present the power of the Kingdom of Siam in this area. There was significant





Figure 7:  
The government buildings and the urban fabric by dividing large areas into smaller  
(Source: Lalida Boonmee)

development of the urban system development in his period: (i) development of the road, from the pathway to the street, capable of supporting carriages and rickshaws (ii) the government buildings on the land of local ruler, and (iii) infrastructure management.

The development in the urban system started with the city's expansion beyond the *Khuan Thani*, which is the name for the city walls in the local language. Roads were constructed by following the old patterns, connecting to the temples in the forest area around the city. These changes affected the urban fabric by dividing large areas into smaller neighbourhoods. Additionally, there was the zoning layout for government buildings in the area where the local government was the owner. Because these government plots were large and grouped together in the same area, the land use by the government would affect urban growth in later times.

#### iv. Introduction of formal infrastructure to Ubon Ratchathani

In the Franco-Siamese treaty of 1904, there were issues about the transportation which connected Siam with the land on the left bank of the Mekong River. France requested for the agreement to negotiate if Siam government desire to construct port, waterway and rail transit line which connected Bangkok to wherever on the Mekong River area.

France requested for the cooperation to get rid of the natural barrier in the Mun River, in the zone between Pimoun and Mekong River near Ubon. In addition, France pointed out that transportation to Champasak or Luang Prabang would use the train line instead of the difficulty in shipping on the Mekong River if agree that be needed. After the acceptance to the treaty in 1904, both Siam and France government agreed to build the land route instead of the explosion the natural obstacles in the Mun River because it was difficult and costly. Thus, these sets of circumstances brought the rail transit to Ubon. (Wipacpotchanakit, 2003, pp. 424-427).

After the construction of Nakhon Ratchasima train station was completed in 1901, Siam government desired to construct the rail transit line to Ubon Ratchathani and Udon Thani in 1917. The Ubon Ratchathani train station was completed and opened officially in 1930 (Wipacpotchanakit, 2003, pp. 416-419). The location of train station was built in Warin Chamrap, the district on the opposite bank of Mun River. Then, Siam constructed a road to connect with the road by France at Chong Mek, where the border point is located (Wipacpotchanakit, 2003, p. 427).

This infrastructure affected the urban landscape. It affected the economy in Ubon, even though the train station is not in the city. The commercial area took place in the first settlement; consequently, the city's physical character was transformed from the cluster of houses to the row house instead. Moreover, the development from train transportation called

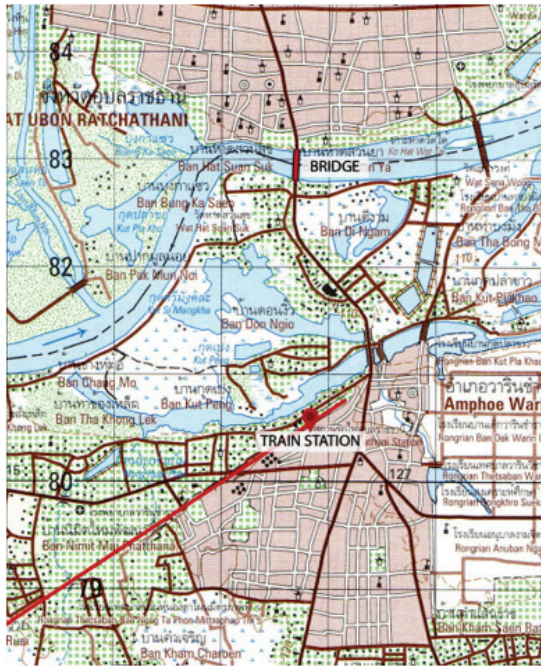


Figure 8:  
The train station in Warin Chamrap and bridge affects the economy in Ubon  
(Source: Edit from Royal Thai Survey Department, RTSD)



Figure 9:  
Commercial area in Ubon Ratchathani city in 1931  
(Source: A photographic record of the provincial inspection tours during the years prior to the 1932 revolution, Published by Office of Permanent Secretary for Interior)

for better infrastructural connection between Ubon city and Warin Chamrap. Then, the bridge was built in 1954. After that, the transportation by boats became unimportant and the piers disappeared. This connection contributed to Ubon's expanding perceived boundary.

## v. Introduction of the western architectural style to Ubon Ratchathani

There was a new local architectural style which developed after the Franco-Siamese treaties. The new style arose in conjunction with the arrival of Christian missionaries. At first, the French missionaries bought an old Laotian style building to house the first church when they were getting established in the city. Once their presence in the area stabilized, they decided to build the new church using western architectural style. As can be seen in Figures 10, the church did not look exactly like the western style in France or greater Europe because this building was built by local artisans who had

adopted Christianity. In addition to the church, there were some other western style buildings in the area.

There was, for example, the French Consulate, built in the city after the signing of the Franco-Siamese treaty. This building is no longer standing and there are no known photos of the consulate building; however, there are some people still alive who have seen the French Consulate building. After a search of church archives, a local missionary recommended meeting an elderly woman living in the neighbourhood of the church. Based on information gathered in an interview, it was found that the interviewed woman is a daughter of one of the artisans who built the church, and that she has been living in this area since she was young. She had often seen the French Consulate, and said the consulate looked very much like the monastery of the missionary had before renovation (T. Khaisorn, personal communication, May 20, 2018).

Besides the western buildings in the neighbourhood of the Christian area, the Siam government buildings were also built in a western style. The first city hall of Ubon Ratchathani, built in the western style, was





Figure 10:  
Disappeared building; The second Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception (RC)  
(Source: The Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception)



Figure 11:  
Existing building; Before the renovation of the Office of the Rector and the monastery of the minister of the Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception (RC)  
(Source: Book of Ubon Ratchathani Municipality)



Figure 12:  
Existing building; The row houses in the neighbourhood of the Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception.  
(Source: Lalida Boonmee)



Figure 13:  
Existing building; The first Ubon Ratchathani City Hall built in 1918, which now functions as the national museum. This building's architectural style was brought from Bangkok. (Source: Lalida Boonmee)

constructed according to drawings brought from Bangkok, showing how Siam was aiming to make progress while being influenced by the West. The western architectural style in the past represented the development of many areas of the Kingdom of Siam, similar to Bangkok.

Nowadays, a number of those buildings have been torn down because people were not aware of their significance. It was thought that those buildings were old, and that new buildings were needed. Therefore, the remaining buildings from that period are of great importance. These relics of the past represent, as they do, examples of the early western architectural influence in Ubon.

## CONCLUSION

The French colonisation of the Indochina area since 1893 affected the neighbouring areas on both banks of the Mekong River. Even though the Kingdom of Siam was not colonised by any countries, the effects of the Franco-Siamese treaties transformed the original attributes of the area and its people, changing it from a single Siamese culture to one of greater diversity, which can be perceived from urban development, architectural style and religion. Old and the new elements combine in the city in a unique way that reflects the city's past and its present. The transformation has had various effects on the development of the city. The physical elements have



transformed; some disappeared, some remain, some have change in the architectural style. It is clear that the Franco-Siamese treaties affected to Ubon in both tangible and intangible ways.

The urban morphology changed and expanded after the Franco-Siamese treaties. The current physical development of the city remains affected by the urban and infrastructure elements which were built during the colonial time, so the new growth has had to take place outside. Consequently, the city is not as dense as the centers of other big provinces (Ubon is among the top five largest provinces of Thailand; even after Yasothon and Amnat Charoen had been separated from Ubon as provinces in their own rights.) These tangible components became the city's attribute and significance as a part of the identity of the city.

In addition, the ethnic groups and religious continue to be as diverse as the time the treaties took the action in Ubon city. The ethnic groups express their culture and traditional practice in their neighbourhood which can perceive in the way of life and traditional events. Some cultural practices have become well-known and important economic driver for the city. Ubon's people are blended together into a unique and beautiful tapestry. These intangible components became the city's character.

Thus, this article has shown significant points of development and change in the Ubon urban landscape which resulted from the Franco-Siamese treaties. Though some elements took hold in the city later than others, they have all contributed to the Ubon urban attributes that exist today as a process of urban transformation. This study highlights the other aspect of Ubon city's heritage on the Historic Urban Landscape approach by reconsidering all urban elements as holistic. Hence, the strategy for conservation and development of the city should consider these components as a part of Ubon history. If people concentrate only the one facet of change of the city, they run the risk of ignoring the other elements, which help describe the city's identity, history, architecture, society, economy and more.

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