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**論說**

## **Archival Documents About the France-Indochina-Japan Relationship during World War II (The Case of the Haiphong-Yunnan Railway)**

CAM ANH TUẤN

The failure of the French bourgeoisie's efforts to penetrate the Chinese market at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century coupled with the fall of Napoleon III forced the French to review their position in the Far East and find a way to realize their Chinese dream. Tonkin, which is located in northern Vietnam, boasts plentiful rivers whose sources lie on China's southwest plateau. Tonkin's rivers flow through Chinese territory to the South China Sea, and this geographical factor played a part in the conceptualization of French Indochina, specifically the French Empire's desire to link Haiphong, Vietnam to Yunnan, China via railway. This ambitious initiative was undertaken by Paul Doumer who promoted the project as a means of developing the economy of France's overseas territories or the so-called "balcony on the Pacific." The railway was opened to the public in 1910.

Thirty years after the railway's inauguration day, during the World War II era, the Haiphong-Yunnan railway in particular, and Indochina in general, combined to unintentionally become one of the objective causes as well as an historical object of disagreement between Paris and Tokyo, both of whom were plagued by suspicions at the time. The railway played an intermediary role in the complex relationship that existed between the two most powerful influences in Indochina, and their treatment of the railway reflected, in part,

their diplomatic policies.

## **1. An overview of the historical context of the Haiphong-Yunnan railway**

Considered an El Dorado of the world, China, as a great Eastern power, has, since Marco Polo, always attracted great fascination from the countries of the West.

In Westerners' eyes, China was the land of "the myth of inexhaustible wealth."

Nevertheless, China did not become the target of Western and Japanese colonial expansion policy until the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. There are two main reasons for this late reaction. The first is China's policy. For a long time, the Chinese court has persisted with a closed-door policy that bars Western traders and missionaries from setting up operations in China. For traders, this policy made it too difficult to trade with what "is a world in itself, which can be sufficient without resorting to products from abroad."<sup>1)</sup> Chinese doors were also closed to missionaries, who could have expressed similar sentiments as traders given that China possesses a very rich and varied civilization as well as a Confucianism-dominated society. It took 5 centuries for these groups to set foot in China after first contact was established by Marco Polo in the 13<sup>th</sup> century; however, in 1776, the first consulate was opened in Canton. The second reason for delayed entry into China cited "difficulties of establishment in . . . [a] country too vast and too distant, [and] little appreciated by . . . diplomats at first."<sup>2)</sup> In spite of these barriers, the Chinese dream still existed in the minds of all those who "engage[d] in the colonial adventure to evangelize, conquer, trade and prospect."<sup>3)</sup> Given its wealth, China was an attractive but not easily attainable goal.

Having implemented various strategies to realize their Chinese dreams, the French finally managed to stand out from the other Western powers by finding their own, very competitive route to the Far East: going through Tonkin in order to access south China and reach the prized region of Yunnan.

The construction and operation of the Haiphong-Yunnan railway line took place as part of the French conquest of Vietnam, which began on September 1<sup>st</sup>, 1858 with an attack on the port of Tourane (Đà Nẵng) (a city at the center of Vietnam) and concluded in 1945 after the Japanese coup and Vietnamese independence. In 1898, after France solidly established itself throughout the whole of Indochina, Paul Doumer took office as the Indochinese governor general and immediately launched an ambitious plan to build an Indochinese railway network. Among the eight railways that were submitted to the High Council of Indochina, the line connecting Tonkin to Yunnan (Hải Phòng-Lào Cai-Yunnan) was selected as first priority. Its construction spanned 1898 to 1910. In 1945, as a result of the Japanese coup and Vietnamese independence, France lost all its ownership rights to the railroad.

The railway played an important role in France's strategy regarding Indochina and China. Not only did it mark France's presence in southern China, it also served as "a guarantee of security for the French colony"<sup>4)</sup> in Indochina. During World War II, Chinese nationalist troops in west China depended on the railway for supplies in their fight against the Japanese. As a result, the railway line became an important link in the context of French-Indochina-Japanese relations during World War II. However, Chinese nationalist troops were forced to dismantle a portion of the railway as part of their efforts to prevent Japan from invading Yunnan.

The beginning of the Sino-Japanese War was marked by the battle of Marco Polo Bridge on July 7<sup>th</sup>, 1937. From a political and diplomatic point of view,

the French government observed that “The state of war between China and Japan had never [been] officially declared,”<sup>5)</sup> so France declared itself neutral in the conflict by limiting the transit of war material despite strong reproaches from both the Japanese and the Chinese. Until 1939, the Japanese Imperial Army occupied much of China’s territory, and Chinese ports were completely blockaded. Under these circumstances, the Haiphong-Yunnan railway became the only railway line connecting China to the outside world. In order to meet the demand the Chinese government placed on it, the railway’s transport capacity was increased from 6,000 to 18,000 tons at the beginning of 1939. This record increase in tonnage explains the railway’s 1939 operating revenue.

On the eve of the Sino-Japanese conflict, Chinese nationalists had to return to southern China. In November 1939, the Japanese army invaded Kuang-Si province and the Indochinese border zone, thus virtually asphyxiating Chinese nationalist troops. As a result, the Haiphong-Yunnan railway became a major military objective for the Japanese. In the eyes of French general staff, “The best way to preserve Indochina was using the Yunnan railway to supply the nationalist Chinese who could ‘fix’ the bulk of the Japanese forces.”<sup>6)</sup> The different policies on this course of action led to a very tense diplomatic situation between the French and the Japanese.

## **2. Discerning French Indochina’s attitude through archival documents**

In June 1940, France fell to the Germans. The Japanese army immediately seized the opportunity to intensify “*progressivement son influence*”<sup>7)</sup>, and on June 18<sup>th</sup>, 1940, Tokyo sent an ultimatum to the French in Indochina, calling for the closure of the Haiphong-Yunnan railway and the Sino-Tonkin border. Faced with an increase in pressure from Tokyo as well as Japanese bombings

starting at the end of 1939, Indochina general Gaullist Catroux, citing “a simple army of law and order,”<sup>8)</sup> as protection, was obliged to give way, banning the transport of gasoline, armaments, and eventually all goods on June 17<sup>th</sup>, 20<sup>th</sup>, and 21<sup>st</sup>, 1940, respectively. In addition, in order to effect the definitive closure of traffic between Tonkin and Yunnan, and “calm the claims of Tokyo,”<sup>9)</sup> General Catroux deposited a rail at the Lao Kay border station on July 7<sup>th</sup>, 1940. However, it seems that his gesture “only manage[d] to push back the crisis.”<sup>10)</sup>

On July 20<sup>th</sup>, 1940, the Vichy regime replaced the governor general of Indochina with Admiral Découx who adopted “a firmer attitude than his predecessor against Japan.”<sup>11)</sup> Preserved in Aix-en province, France, the archival dossiers of the *Cabinet militaire* collection contain original and confidential *télégrammes d'État*, such as correspondence between Admiral Découx and French ambassadors in Washington and Tokyo. These documents reveal, as follows, Découx's firm attitude towards some key issues:<sup>12)</sup>

- He persisted in thinking that “The agreement of landing of [*sic*] these troops would destroy the only chance we have left to save [the] colony” and insisted that “If we [the French government] must run the risk of losing Indochina, it is better to lose it by defending it than by betraying it.” Unlike Catroux, whose solution was to engage “in a process of irreversible abandonment, alienating Chungking,”<sup>13)</sup> the solution that Découx chose aimed to fall under the terms of the ultimatum issued by Tokyo on June 18<sup>th</sup>, 1940.

- He demanded that the French government dispatch apparatus, crews, automatic weapons, and ammunition to Indochina through Russia and China as soon as possible.

- He emphasized the seriousness of the Vietnamese and Chinese reactions to the presence of Japanese troops in Indochina.

While Découx was attempting to placate Tokyo, Arsene Henry, the French

ambassador to Tokyo, asserted that Japan intended to respect France's rights and interests in the Far East, particularly with regard to the integrity of Indochina and France's sovereign right over all parts of the Indochinese Union. On August 30<sup>th</sup>, 1940, after an August 2<sup>nd</sup> meeting in the same year between Henry and the new Japanese foreign minister, Yosuke Matsuoka, an agreement was finally signed whereby "France now authorizes [the] Japanese army to disembark at Haiphong, and use three Indochinese airfields,"<sup>14)</sup> as well as the two railroads from Haiphong to Lao Kay and from Haiphong to Lang Son to attack the Chinese resistance.

### **3. Evidence of Japanese political pressure in archival documents**

Given that it was supposed that France provided aid to the government of Chiang Kai Shek in the form of supplies of weapons and other products during the period spanning December 30<sup>th</sup>, 1939 to May 1943, the Japanese army decided to execute military operations and a bombing campaign on the Chinese section of the Yunnan railway. The railway suffered about twenty Japanese air strikes, which resulted in 143 casualties; 181 wounded; the destruction of many stations, tracks, bridges, cars, and wagons; damaged buildings and staff quarters; and cut telegraph and telephone wires. There was also a series of bombings on the 83-km bridge while a train was going towards Yunnan on February 1<sup>st</sup>, 1940. According to the Japanese government, this attack was of "absolute strategic necessity."<sup>15)</sup> It caused serious damage not only to the railway company but also to civilians. There were 111 casualties, including five French, 24 Vietnamese, and 82 Chinese. In addition, 120 were wounded, and the tunnel upstream of the bridge was obstructed.

The Tonkinese section of the railway once again became a key subject of

Franco-Japanese interviews. On the side of the Japanese, the Vichy regime's provocative choice (of which we spoke in Section 2) caused the great dissatisfaction of the Japanese government, resulting in unanimity among Japanese generals concerning the attack on Indochina. The Japanese suspected that a secret pact existed between Indochina and Chungking. They believed that Chiang Kai Shek's troops would join French troops in the event of a Japanese attack on Indochina. Given these suspicions, Japan's attitude towards Indochina depended on the result of talks concerning the following issues:<sup>16)</sup>

- (a) the granting of a naval air base at Haiphong
- (b) the use of the Yunnan railway
- (c) authorization for passage and stay at certain points for Japanese troops and equipment
- (d) the existence of the Chungking-Indochina pact

If the Japanese proposals were rejected, the attack on Indochina would be immediately ordered under the pretext of the Indochina-Chungking pact since Chiang Kai Shek's military allies would obviously be considered enemies of Japan.

With regard to the Haiphong-Lao Kay railway line, the Japanese army asked the railway company for a total of 6,359 railcars to transport their troops and war materials for the period September 30<sup>th</sup>, 1940 to December 13<sup>th</sup>, 1941. Based on the capacity of the railway cars and wagons at that time, the railway would have theoretically transported more than about 40,000 soldiers and 77,500 tons of war material from Haiphong port to Hanoi, Phu Tho, and/or Lao Kay, and vice versa. The most requested routes were Haiphong to Hanoi and vice versa, and Haiphong to Gia Lam and vice versa. Hanoi station was a

stopover for Japanese troops going south of Tonkin while Gia Lam station was a stopover for northern destinations.

In conclusion, archival documents about the history of the Haiphong-Yunnan railway not only contain materials that facilitate general study on the subject, they are also an research essential source for the economic, diplomatic, and social history of the Yunnan railroad. Furthermore, these archival documents clearly reflect the relationship between French Indochina and Japan, especially from 1939 to 1945.

## Notes

- 1) WEBER, Jacques. *Un siècle de présence française un Chine (1843-1943)*. Centre de recherches sur l'histoire du monde atlantique – Université de Nantes. Nantes : Presses académiques de l'Ouest/ Ouest Éditions. 1997, p. 9.
- 2) TIXIER, Nicole. *La Chine dans la stratégie impériale: Le rôle du Quai d'Orsay et de ses agents* – un article dans *L'esprit économique impérial (1830-1970) – Groupes de pression & réseaux du patronat colonial en France & dans l'empire*. dirigé par BONIN Hubert, HODEIR Catherine, KLEIN Jean – François, Paris : SFHOM. 2008, p. 65.
- 3) *Ibid*, p. 79.
- 4) TIXIER, Nicole. *Ibid*, p. 79.
- 5) TANAKA, Takashi. “Les relations Franco-Japonaises de 1931 à 1941”. *Revue des Guèrres mondiales et conflits contemporains*. Numéro 178. Avril 1995. p. 99.
- 6) GRANDJEAN, Philippe. *L'Indochine face au Japon 1940-1945* :



*Decoux- de Gaulle, un malentendu fatal*. Paris : L'Harmattan. 2004, p. 12.

- 7) TANAKA, Takashi. *Ibid.* p. 99.
- 8) GRANDJEAN, Philippe. *Ibid.* p. 09.
- 9) MERCIER, Fabienne. “1940-1944: quelle politique chinoise pour l’Etat français”. *Revue des Guerres mondiales et conflits contemporains*. Numéro 172. Octobre 1993. p. 127.
- 10) *Ibid.*
- 11) TANAKA, Takashi. *Ibid.* p. 99.
- 12) ANOM, Fonds GGI. Cabinet militaire. Dossier 812. Commission Japonaise en Indochine – Août 1940. Le télégramme du GGI à l’Ambassade de France à Tokyo en date du 30 Août 1940.
- 13) MERCIER, Fabienne. *Ibid.* p. 127.
- 14) TANAKA, Takashi. *Ibid.* p. 100.
- 15) ANOM. Fonds GGI. Série cabinet militaire. Dossier 817. A la conférence de presse du 28/3/1940, le porte-parole du Ministre Japonais des Affaires étrangères a dit que le bombardement du chemin de fer du Yunnan continuerait, parce que cela était une *nécessité stratégique absolue*.
- 16) ANOM, Fonds GGI. Cabinet militaire. Dossier 812. Commission Japonaise en Indochine – août 1940. Le Japon et la France d’Extrême-Orient.