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*Part Three: Economic and Cultural Issues*

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# The Hải Phòng–Yunnan Railway: An Important Knot in French Indochina–Japanese Relations during the Second World War

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## Introduction

Tonkin (northern Vietnam) with lots of rivers that originate from the southwestern plateau of China and flow through its territory to the South China Sea, gave the French rulers both in Indochina and France the idea of building a key railway in parallel with the rivers, running from Yunnan down to Hải Phòng. Governor-General of Indochina Paul Doumer took the initiative to start the plan, in order to develop the territory widely known as “France’s balcony on the Pacific.” Thirty years after the day of inauguration (in 1910), the Hải Phòng–Yunnan Railway became a focal point in the negotiations between the French and Japanese. This paper analyzes the bilateral relationship between France and Japan concerning the Railway. This analysis contributes to our better understanding of the history of relationship between Indochina and Japan during the Second World War.

## 1. A Brief History of the Hải Phòng–Yunnan Railway

Prof. Paul Pelliot of The École Française d’Extrême-Orient (EFEO) once wrote, “Before the Tang dynasty, there was no historical account concerning the travel between Yunnan and Tonkin.” While travel between Guangzhou and Tonkin began during the Song dynasty through two main routes, one by land and another by sea, travel between Yunnan and Tonkin only began during the Yuan dynasty (the 13<sup>th</sup> century). At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Jean Dupuis was the first French trader who made a journey from Tonkin up to Yunnan along the Red River. Meanwhile, Chinese traders commonly used three inland routes to travel between Yunnan and Tonkin. These three routes ran alongside the banks of the Red River and its two tributaries, the Đà and the Lô. Whether one travelled by land or by sea, travel between the two localities was always very difficult and painstaking.

The idea of building a railway line connecting Yunnan and Tonkin was first raised by Marquis de Mores, a French political activist. In 1888, he wrote a report to the French military about his business trip to Indochina.<sup>1</sup> In 1895, a French Consul in Shanghai expressed a similar idea in his report. In 1897

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<sup>1</sup> For further reference, see Cam Anh Tuấn, “Chemin de fer Hải Phòng–Yunnan (1898–1945),” Ph.D. dissertation, Université d’Aix-Marseille, 2014.

Paul Doumer was appointed to be Governor-General of French Indochina. Using his influence, he convinced the French Parliament to pass a 200 million franc-loan for the construction of a railway in Indochina. The third article of the act permitted the Governor-General of Indochina to provide guarantee for the loan to the Lào Cai–Yunnan Railway Company (*Société Concessionnaire du Chemin de Fer de Laokay à Yunnansen*) for a period of 75 years, together with many other financial privileges.

The construction of the railway line was divided into two sections, which were implemented by different yet closely connected contractors. The section from Hải Phòng to Lào Cai (Laokay) was built by the colonial government, while the section in the Chinese territory, from Lào Cai to Yunnan, was built by the Construction Company. In Tonkin, the construction between Hải Phòng and Hanoi was finished in April 1903, followed by the construction from Hanoi to Việt Trì which was accomplished in November 1903. The most challenging part in the territory of Tonkin was from Việt Trì through Yên Bái to Lào Cai, the construction of which was finished on February 1, 1906, one year behind schedule.

As for the section from Lào Cai to Yunnan, although the route was determined and approved in late 1901 and the contractors were nominated in 1903, it was only open for public use on April 1, 1910. The total manpower mobilized for this section was 60,700, including 46,400 Chinese and 14,300 Vietnamese. 12,000 workers died in the construction process, 10,000 of whom died in Nậm Thi valley alone. Because of this terrible ‘record,’ many scholars have called this section the “railway of death,” commenting ironically that “one cross-tie cost one human life.”

After the entire railway line was completed and began commercial operation in 1910, Vietnam and Yunnan faced a number of challenges and turbulence, such as economic crises, domestic political troubles and regional conflicts, until the end of the Second World War. These ‘historical’ ups and downs, however, seemed to have little impact on the operation of the railway. Unlike the Trans-Indochina railway line with a total length of 2,524 kilometers administered by the Indochinese government, the Hải Phòng–Yunnan line, with a total length of 848 kilometers, never experienced financial deficit during the period between 1910 and 1945.

Responding to the request made by the Hải Phòng–Yunnan Railway Company to the Indochinese government concerning the maintenance costs, the Department of Dispute Management and Control Administration (*Service du Contentieux et du Contrôle Administratif*) made a report in September 1941 to the Governor-General, which affirmed that the company’s financial status was “comparatively prosperous” (*assez prospère*).<sup>2</sup> According to this report, the Company’s original capital had doubled by 1937 and tripled by 1940. The average amount of dividend payment also increased steadily. In 1932, the owner of one share worth 500 francs received a dividend of 40 francs (8 percent); in 1937 it doubled, and in 1940 it was 240 francs (48 percent).<sup>3</sup>

These figures show that the operation of the railway line was cost-effective. Without having to pay back the huge construction costs (almost 245,000,000 francs), the Hải Phòng–Yunnan Railway Com-

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<sup>2</sup> Archives Nationales d’Outre-Mer (ANOM) (Aix-en-Provence), Gouvernement Général d’Indochine (GGI), dossier 66019.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

pany could enjoy stable profits. On the other hand, the government of France and the colonial administration of Indochina, who had spent a huge budget for the construction of the railway, were not reimbursed. Even so, they often praised the railway as a symbol of France's high technology in engineering and transportation. Yet this railway also brought many troubles to the French in Indochina.

## **2. The Second World War and the Hải Phòng–Yunnan Railway in the Franco–Japanese Conflict**

During the first years of the Sino–Japanese War (beginning in 1931), there existed different opinions among the military leadership in Japan. The Imperial Navy wanted to expand the China conflict into a full-scale war to include Southeast Asia, but the Army leaders opposed this plan. In 1939, the global and regional situation changed, with the conclusion of the pact between Germany and the Soviet Union and Japan's defeat in the war in Manchuria with the Soviet Union. Thus, the plan of conquering the South instead of the North received unanimous approval by all groups of the Japanese military. The Japanese expanded the area under their occupation in China. However, Chiang Kai Shek's forces did not give up fighting against Japan. With the conquest of Guangzhou in 1938 and Nanning in 1939, the Japanese Army contained the Nationalist army in the inland region. As a consequence, the Yunnan–Hải Phòng railway became the most important route for the Chiang government to receive supplies from the outside world. Thus, this railway became a “hot” issue in the relations between Indochina, a colony of the defeated French, and Japan, the most ambitious and aggressive empire in Asia.

### **2.1 The Hải Phòng–Yunnan Railway in the French Plan against Japan**

During the early years of the Sino–Japanese War, the French rulers declared their neutrality in the conflict. To affirm this declaration, they prohibited the Vietnamese from crossing the Chinese border, particularly via the Hải Phòng–Yunnan Railway line. This policy of neutrality helped the French to tactfully settle their relations with both China and Japan. Regarding China, the French had the France–China Treaty which was signed in 1930. This treaty not only helped maintain the French privileges in mainland China including the Hải Phòng–Yunnan Railway, but also helped solve issues regarding Indochina, France's only colony in Asia that had a border with China, such as the tariff system and cross-border travel. Furthermore, once the Sino–Japanese War broke out, China had become the final defense line that would protect Indochina from a Japanese invasion.

In the meantime, Japan was a technically “friendly” country following since the conclusion of the 1907 treaty and even an ally during the First World War. However, there were two opposing opinions among the French leadership. One group argued that France could maintain the peaceful relationship between the two countries, and judged that a Japanese southward invasion would be impossible. Even after Japan launched the war in China, they believed that its invasion was only “a sudden power

demonstration.”<sup>4</sup> Another group, however, was always suspicious of Japan’s southward invasion and argued that France had to prepare necessary measures to protect Indochina.

At any rate, Indochina was in a vulnerable position. It was protected by a colonial army which was poorly equipped and trained. Furthermore, the colony could not expect assistance from the mother country, because France itself faced many difficulties in Europe. With the declaration of “neutrality,” the French wished to “win the heart of” Japan, which was “isolated” in the world after the German *rapprochement* with the Soviet Union and after the Anglo-American initiative of a trade embargo against Japan. If the French could win over the Japanese, they could save Indochina from aggression by a power which had already occupied the territory adjacent to their colony.

However, the wish to maintain goods relations with both China and Japan did not mean that the French wanted to act as a peace-maker between the two. Instead, the French strategy was that of “standing up in the mountain and watching two tigers fighting each other.” In other words, the French wished to use China to stop the advance of the Japanese army. In actuality, the French government’s official declaration to forbid the strategic transportation of armaments through the Hải Phòng–Yunnan Railway only existed on paper. In 1938, the French government rejected an official request from the Japanese to close off the border and to accept a Japanese monitoring mission to watch the border-crossing transactions. The Japanese judged that the supply route through the Hải Phòng–Yunnan Railway was far more important in terms of assistance to the Chinese resistance forces than the route through Burma.

The table below shows the revenues of the Hải Phòng–Yunnan Railway Company during the 1930s.<sup>5</sup> The revenue started increasing in 1937 and peaked in 1939.

Year	Revenue (fr)	Year	Revenue (fr)
1931	4 397000	1936	4 504127
1932	4 180000	1937	6 002954
1933	4 094000	1938	9 707848
1934	3 766255	1939	15 541 000
1935	3 945947		

Besides, the total volume of transport through this railway also increased substantially, from 6,000 tons per year on average during the first years of the 1930s to 18,000 tons in 1939. In the first quarter of fiscal 1940, despite serious damages by Japanese air bombardment, the company still generated high revenues (8,274,909 francs).<sup>6</sup> Thus, despite the official declaration of a border closure, the company witnessed a substantial increase in both revenue and volume of transport. This fact suggests that the French in Indochina covertly used the railway to support the Chinese forces in their anti-Japanese resistance. In practice, the French turned a blind eye to the transportation of armaments and supplies

<sup>4</sup> Jacques Binoche, «La politique extrême-orientale française et les relations franco-japonaises de 1919 à 1939», *Revue française d'histoire d'outre-mer*, 284-5 (1989): 263-75.

<sup>5</sup> Vietnam National Archives, Résidence Supérieure de Tonkin, dossiers 34037; 45086; 77503; 77560.

<sup>6</sup> See also Cam Anh Tuấn, “Chemin de fer.”

through the railway to support the Chinese Communist and Kuomintang forces. According to a French writer, “the best solution to protect Indochina would be to support the Republic of China using the Hải Phòng–Yunnan Railway line.”<sup>7</sup>

The railway became a key means whereby the French hoped to prevent a Japanese invasion of Indochina in particular and Southeast Asia in general. On the diplomatic front, the French officials at first firmly rejected Japan’s request to close the entire border with China and the railway connecting Hải Phòng port and Yunnan. However, the Japanese began periodic bombings against the railway in Chinese territory on December 30, 1939. Their airstrike killed 111 people, including five Frenchmen, on February 1, 1940. The Indochinese government, headed by Governor-General Catroux, gradually showed a more compromising attitude toward Japan: issuing bans on trans-border transportation of fuel (June 17, 1939) armaments (June 20, 1940), and finally all other goods (June 21, 1940). Faced with the greater threat, on July 7, 1940, Governor-General Catroux even ordered controls to be put in place at Lào Cai station as evidence that the Japanese request was receiving a serious response.

On July 20, 1940, the Vichy government appointed Admiral Decoux as the new Governor-General. Initially, he took a firm stance toward Japan. In a telegram to the French Ambassador in Tokyo, he wrote, “If we have to lose Indochina, it would be better to lose it by defending it than by betraying it.”<sup>8</sup> However, this reaction seemed to be too late as the Japanese had already entered Indochina on June 29, 1940.<sup>9</sup>

## 2.2 The Hải Phòng–Yunnan Railway in Japanese Ambitions

In 1939, the Japanese Army and Navy reached a consensus to shift their policy toward southward advancement. They regarded Indochina as the first target in the South, because of its proximity to China. According to Japanese archival documents, Japan had three goals: to use Tonkin in Indochina to quickly end the war with China, to exploit Indochina’s abundant resources to sustain a long war and to use its territory as a basis to invade all of Southeast Asia.<sup>10</sup> Many historians also point out another reason: Japan wanted to forestall a possible conflict with France, which had a lot of vested interests in China.<sup>11</sup> In actuality, the Japanese had already bombed the French concessions in Shanghai and Guangzhou, which had provided a shelter for many Chinese. The Japanese had also conquered many southern provinces of China and surrounding archipelagoes. The Hải Phòng–Yunnan Railway was the last important French foothold in China.

Tokyo did not really trust the French government’s claim that the border had been closed and transportation along the railway stopped. The Japanese called the supply line between Indochina and China the “French Indochina Route to support Chiang Kai Shek.” In 1938 and 1939, they repeatedly sent let-

<sup>7</sup> Philippe Grandjean, *L’Indochine face au Japon 1940–1945: Decoux-de Gaulle, un malentendu fatal* (Paris: L’Harmattan, 2004).

<sup>8</sup> ANOM, GGI, Cabinet Militaire (CM), dossier 812.

<sup>9</sup> Franck Michelin, «Décider et agir: L’intrusion japonaise en Indochine française (juin 1940)», *Vingtième siècle*, 83 (2004) : 79.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 79.

<sup>11</sup> See Binoche, “Politique extrême-orientale.”

ters to the French government in Indochina requesting that the French seriously implement what they had declared. They failed, however, to obtain satisfactory responses. As a consequence, they started strategic airstrikes against the Hải Phòng–Yunnan Railway. The heaviest attack was that of February 1, 1940, against the railway section at the 83 km point, where a train was heading toward Kunming. A total of 111 were killed, including five Frenchmen, 24 Vietnamese, and 82 Chinese, and 140 others were wounded.

The airstrikes on the railway, mostly against the sections in the Chinese territory, helped Japan to achieve several goals. First, by the air attacks against the strategic points along the railway, Japan could test the attitude of the Allied countries, especially the US, which had already started economic embargo against Japan. In actuality, the US and Britain did not substantially extend a helping hand to the French in Indochina. Their “indifference” convinced the Japanese to go ahead their southward advancement.

Second, the railway attack was an occasion for the Japanese Air Force to demonstrate its power. Yamamoto Isoroku, one of the founders of the Imperial Air Force, once wrote about its inferiority to the Allied air forces.<sup>12</sup> The Navy shared this view. Within this context, the Hải Phòng–Yunnan Railway provided “a training ground” to convince the Japanese Navy. This “rehearsal” would contribute to the Japanese victories in Pearl Harbor and in naval battles against the British fleet.

Third and not less importantly, the attack on the railway line helped Japan to put pressure on the French in Indochina. Finally, the French accepted the Japanese demand to halt the operation of the railway within Chinese territory, and to allow Japanese troops to be stationed in Indochina. Thus, the Japanese obtained rights to use Hải Phòng port, three military airports and the two railway lines between Hải Phòng–Lào Cai and Hải Phòng–Lạng Sơn. While the Japanese bombings seriously damaged the Chinese sections of the railways, the Japanese ground forces utilized the Vietnamese section for the transportation of troops and armaments to the border.

Between September 30, 1940 and December 13, 1941, the Japanese army ordered the Yunnan Railway Company to supply 6359 cars in total, including both passenger and freight cars. The exact number of troops and volume of armaments transported are not available, but judging from the average transport capacity of each car as regulated by the Railway Company, we can estimate as below.<sup>13</sup> In sum, during this period, the Yunnan Railway Company transported over 40,000 Japanese troops and 77,000 tons of freight.

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<sup>12</sup> Michelin, «Décider et agir», p. 81.

<sup>13</sup> ANOM, GGI, CM, dossier 426.

Type of car	Number requested	Transport capacity	Estimate
ABC	131	30 persons	3930 persons
D	730	50 persons	36500 persons
G	2527	10 tons or 6 horses	25270 tons
GG	1139	20 tons or 9 horses	22780 tons
H	499	10 tons	4990 tons
HH	658	20 tons	13160 tons
M	211	10 tons or one car	2110 tons
MM	464	20 tons or two cars	9280 tons
Total	6359		40430 persons and 77590 tons

Thus, the Japanese air attack on the Hải Phòng–Yunnan Railway helped to implement their plan of southward advance and fighting with the Allied forces. Later, on March 9, 1945, the Japanese made a surprise attack against the French in Indochina, and completed their conquest of Indochina. In the meantime, as retaliation for Japan's conquest of Indochina and Pearl Harbor, the Allied forces launched a total of 46 airstrikes on the Hải Phòng–Lào Cai Railway from May 12<sup>th</sup> 1942 to December 27, 1943, killing 25 persons, wounding 75 and causing serious damages.<sup>14</sup>

### Conclusion

The Second World War (1939–1945) transformed the world in general and Indochina in particular. Being a crucial part of the Indochinese Union, Vietnam became a battlefield in the conflict between Japan and France and its allies. The fate of the Hải Phòng–Yunnan Railway was not exception. As with all railways in wartime, the Hải Phòng–Yunnan Railway attractively presented the strategic calculations of the French and the Japanese. It also witnessed the strategic impasse and the poor defense ability of the French, giving a signal of their decline in Indochina together with Japan's success in implementing its ambitions. The Japan–France conflict gave an opportunity for the Vietnamese patriots to open up a new page in the nation's history of fighting for independence. In this paper, we have not discussed the history of the railway during the time of revolution and independence. That topic will be left for future research.

<sup>14</sup> See Cam Anh Tuấn, "Chemin de fer."