The construction of the Yunnan railway: as seen by a French engineer (1904-1907)

Vatthana Pholsena

THIS ARTICLE HAS ITS ORIGINS in a collection of photographs and letters donated to the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies in Singapore by Elisabeth Locard; they had once belonged to her great-great uncle, Albert Marie, a French engineer who was sent to work on the Yunnan railway in Yunnan Province, China, between 1904 and 1907. In total, the collection includes 138 photos and 159 letters that Marie produced during his three-year assignment in south-western China.

Albert Marie was born on 25 August 1875 in Viviers in south-eastern France. After obtaining his degree in engineering, he soon accepted a job offer from the Compagnie des chemins de fer de l'Indochine et du Yunnan, which had been recently founded in 1901. He subsequently left for south-western China in June 1904.

Marie’s photos and letters from during that time constitute the raw material for this overview, which focuses on a few themes, including the daily lives of the railway company’s employees, work on the construction sites, and local inhabitants. It aims to provide a snapshot of a French colonial agent’s life in early twentieth century China.

The journey from Marseille to Yiliang

The Sino-French agreement, signed on 12 June 1897, secured France’s access to and exploitation of natural resources in the three southern Chinese provinces of Guangdong, Guangxi, and Yunnan, as well as opened up prospects for future projects to improve or build transport infrastructure in the region. Such projects were facilitated the following year by another Sino-French accord (dated 10 April 1898), which effectively bestowed on the French government the right to construct a railway from the borders of Tonkin (today’s northern region of Vietnam) to the capital of Yunnan, then called Yunnan-Sen (now Kunming). The construction work began in 1900. Ten years later the line was completed; it covered a total distance of 465 km, stretching from Haiphong (a port city located on the lower Red River on the eastern coasts of Tonkin) to Yunnan. The brand new train station of the provincial capital, then called Yunnan-Fou, was officially inaugurated in 1910.

Albert Marie departed from Marseille on a liner, probably in early May 1904. He arrived in Saigon about a month later, and was instantly overwhelmed by the beauty of the place that materialized before his eyes in the form and structure of French-style urban architecture and planning. He wrote:

—I am still under the charm of everything I have seen thus far. Saigon surpasses all the cities we stopped by, and she truly deserves her name of Pearl of the Orient. Wide and straight roads, with seamless lush vegetation; superb constructions, comfortable hotels, where, for example, everything is rather expensive. […] one enjoys again European life here, and the only thing, except for nature, which would make one believe that one is no longer in France is the population that is almost entirely Chinese (…). This country is a dream country. Never would I have thought to see such a treatment, in Indochina, or at least what I know of today. Cochinchina, is a marvelous country. Everything will be done when railroads crisscross it in every direction. And the so much disparaged French administration has achieved wonders here. Official buildings, the post-office, the city hall, are absolute jewels. Purification appears complete as well as wonderful. The city is now growing in every direction and the city where 20,000 Chinese people live. Hope as I do. 1 Saigon, Continental Hotel, 23 June 1904

Life around the Dian-Viet Railway: boundaries and interstices

Marie was based in Yiliang for slightly over a year. His integration into the European community of the small town happened smoothly and quite naturally as the group was composed exclusively of the Indochina-Yunnan railway company’s employees, technical staff, and management cadres, from France, Italy and Germany. He rapidly settled into a comfortable and mildly bourgeois, routine.

Poor maritime connectivity in the Straits of Malacca

Nathalie Fau

CONNECTIVITY HAS BEEN A KEY CONCEPT debated by the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN), particularly since the adoption of the Master Plan on ASEAN Connectivity (MPAC) in October 2010. One of the MPAC objectives is to enhance regional connectivity by promoting sub-regional initiatives, which usually focus on less developed areas of the ASEAN region with less developed infrastructures.

The north-south configuration of the Straits of Malacca and Singapore has led to a geographical organization comprising two sub-regional initiatives, known as the generic term ‘growth triangle’: the Indonesia-Malaysia-Singapore Growth Triangle (IMST-GT) and the Indonesia-Malaysia-Thailand Growth Triangle (IMT-GT). This approach was later enhanced by the introduction of the concept ‘growth corridors’, a new development tool funded by the World Bank and introduced in Asia, Latin America and South Africa.

One of the aims of the development of cross-border maritime corridors is to help twin or sister ports to cooperate, in the same way as twin cities on opposite sides of a land border do. In order to encourage links between these major ports, priority has been given to the improvement of their infrastructures, such as bridges and facilities to handle fast ferries and roll-on/off (RO-RO) ships. However, maritime links do not seem to be as efficient as land corridors. This was shown by several studies, including those done by Asian Development Bank (ADB) and by Banca Monte dei Paschi di Siena. These studies concluded that the volume of intra-IMT-GT maritime trade was quite small. They also revealed that the weakest points in the economic corridors of IMT-GT were transversal maritime corridors linking the two sides of the Straits of Malacca and the poor logistics integration of Sumatra compared to the linkage between Thailand and Malaysia.

Impediments to development of maritime connectivity

As the Straits is seen as an international transport route rather than an internal sea, this presents several interesting and challenging dynamics. On one hand, the international community pays close attention to navigation safety, environmental protection and security in the Straits, and contributes to the upkeep of the sea lane. This is helpful to the littoral states that do not have the financial and technical means to maintain the Straits by themselves. On the other hand, the international attention presents a serious handicap to the economic opportunities presented by the international shipping traffic through the Straits, rather than by regional cross-Straits traffic. Indonesia and Malaysia are especially afraid of being prevented from exercising their national sovereignty over the Straits, in the wake of the criticisms they received from the international users of the Straits over their capacity to fight piracy or eradicate terrorism in the region.

For many years the international navigation in the Straits benefited mainly Singapore. However, during the past decade, Malaysian and Indonesian ports have successfully diverted some of the business their way. The states’ rivalry
Our life in Yלהg [Yllang] is rather enjoyable. Here is what my days consist of: I get up at 7 o'clock. Everything is at the foot of my bed - shoes, trousers, tie, shirt, socks, everything's in order. The sink is full, the glass of water, and the toothbrush with the paste on it. We only have my cigarettes case and my toothbrush. If Breuergelmuh takes it nobody would protest. She's fifteen years old and cost 60 piastres (about 150 Francs). This is not expensive.8

The railway is celebrated for its heroic technical feats (the most famous of which is arguably the “truss bridge” [pont ar abattants] overhanging a 100-meter-deep gorge), but these were accomplished by means of extraordinary human efforts and at the cost of thousands of lives. Of the 60,000 coolies (from Tonkin and China) who worked on the construction of the railway, 12,000 perished on the building sites (mainly from accidents, illness, and malnutrition), out of which a horrifying 10,000 died in the Nam Ti Valley8 in 1898-99: arms smuggling, bandits murdering Chinese couriers (who also died from drowning in the river), and sanitation.9

The Malacca Straits, whose regional integration is historically seen as an epilogue of the region’s political stability and, as such, commercial and economic prospects. In all, the 463 km-long railway line has 342 bridges, viaducts, and aqueducts, as well as 155 tunnels, amounting to a total distance of 18 km of such structures. By October 1905, Marie was already working on some of these structures, including a tunnel at km 376. On 6 December 1905, he informed his parents that he supervised “1000 coolies a day, 90 bricklayers and 180 stone cutters”. Just 4 months later, the tunnel was completed; it had as many as 1800 coolies and 23 European engineers under his direction, and found himself enjoying the leadership role.10

Epilogue

Albert Marie was soon rewarded for his accomplishments and was promoted to deputy chief of a new section in October 1906. By 2011 he had already informed his parents of his next prospective assignment abroad in Turkey, to work on the construction of the daunting Constantiople-Baghdad railway line connecting the Ottoman Empire to Mesopotamia, a region that, like the Chinese empire, was the focus of intense imperial rivalry among Western powers (i.e., France, Germany, Great-Britain, and Russia). After leaving Yeuillez and Indochina in May 1907, Marie did indeed depart for Constantinople, where he met his future wife and continued his successful trajectory as a travelling engineer in a colonial world.11

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Notes

1 This is a much-shrinkerised version of a paper I contributed to a project entitled “Views from the Dian-Viet Railway: Transborder Landscapes”, coordinated by Stan-B H Tan and partly funded by the National University of Singapore.

2 I would like to warmly thank Elisabeth Locard and Oshi Bernard, who are both descendants of Albert Marie, for providing these biographical details and for their generous assistance in this project. I would also like to thank V. H. Yang for his invaluable help in sorting out the photographs, and to the IDEAS library for granting me permission to reproduce some of the photographs from this chapter.

3 All the translations are ours, unless otherwise stated.


5 In quotes taken from Albert Marie’s letters, his transcription of place names is used, in each case followed in brackets by the more commonly used transcriptions. 1  This is a much-shortened version of a paper I contributed to a project entitled “Views from the Dian-Viet Railway: Transborder Landscapes”, coordinated by Stan-B H Tan and partly funded by the National University of Singapore.


7 Marie is using ‘gentlemanly’ in an ironic fashion here.


10 Charles Fournier et al. 1999. Le contact colonial franco-

11 This study is a component of the TRANSFER research program (Transnational Dynamics and Territorial Reorganisation), a comparative approach of Central-European and South-East Asia, funded by the French National Research Agency. A part of this study will be published by INSEA in 2013 under the title Transnational Dynamics in Southeast Asia: the Greater Mekong Subregion and Malacca Straits Economic Corridors, edited by Nathalie Fau, Sivaranh Khonthaphane and Christian Tuffin.


