

News from Asia *continued*

## 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.<sup>2</sup> After obtaining his degree in engineering, he soon accepted a job offer from the *Compagnie du chemin 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 (in particular, mineral) 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 late 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 duly deserves her name of Pearl of the Orient. Wide and straight roads, with seamless luscious greenery, 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 this and my opinion is this: 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. Pacification appears complete as four of us wandered alone through the city where 20,000 Chinese people live. Hope as I do.<sup>3</sup> Saigon, Continental Hotel, 23 June 1904*

The young man's enthusiasm related to a shared sentiment among his fellow countrymen at that time: faith in colonialism, then synonymous with "progress and bravura".<sup>4</sup> The sentiment was a new one, as the armed struggle between Vietnamese resistance and the French army had ended only a few years earlier (in 1895), after four decades of almost continuous fighting. Military operations on the Sino-Vietnamese border had finally succeeded in suppressing Chinese banditry, pacifying the area by 1897. Violent protests would soon break out once again (in 1908), but back in 1904, Albert Marie's optimism continued to thrive as he reached Yiliang (an important base of the Yunnan-Indochina Railway Company situated about 60 km from Kunming/Yunnan-sen) on 6 August 1904, after over a month of travelling through Vietnam and across Yunnan Province.

**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 pleasurable, even bourgeois, routine:

## Poor maritime connectivity in the Straits of Malacca<sup>1</sup>

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.<sup>2</sup>

The north-south configuration of the Straits of Malacca and Singapore has led to a geographical organization comprising of two sub-regional initiatives, known as the generic term 'growth triangle': the Indonesia-Malaysia-Singapore Growth Triangle (IMS-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,<sup>3</sup> 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 roll-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 Banomyong.<sup>4</sup> 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 construction of a transnational space within the area. Due to this fact, the littoral states are more concerned about harnessing 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





4.

à Singapour (cours au charbon)

Our life in Yléang [Yiliang]<sup>5</sup> 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, my cigarettes case is filled up - and all these clean, thanks to my boy who's truly wonderful. On the table a tomato and cucumber salad, or something like that, and a cup of coffee. (...) at 7.30 I go to the office until 12.30 when my boy comes to tell me that there is "something to eat". Between 1.30 and 2 pm, I go back to work until 5.30. Then, a tennis game with everyone (...). Yléang [Yiliang], 15 August 1904

Marie's gregarious and affable character made him a popular member of the railway company's community. The French man regularly shared with his European fellows a meal - in effect a ritualized event - which played an essential role in nurturing a sense of 'home' for this 'exiled' community. Marie confided to his parents in March 1905 "how important this gathering [was] for all of [them] in regard to [their] morale."

Marie and his companions constructed, to borrow Ann Stoler's expression, "[a] space of the intimate" (from food one eats to the language one speaks at home)<sup>6</sup> in this remote area of Yunnan province, organized around easily recognizable tenets of nineteenth century European bourgeois domesticity: routine, order, and cleanliness. Consequently, the contrast with the local inhabitants as portrayed by the Frenchman, in letters such as this one, was all the greater:

Yesterday evening, we crossed the Nam Ti (a tributary of the Red River) to go to Song-phong or Ho-Keou [Hekou], the closest Chinese town from here [Lao Cai]. To describe it to you would be too long. We strolled for two hours in small streets of two meters' width, dirty and hilly, swarmed with children, pigs, chicken, dogs. The Chinese wander around in front

has negatively impacted the development of cross-straits connectivity and port complementarities. Furthermore, the lack of attention paid by the Indonesian government to the development of the Sumatran side of the Straits of Malacca has also not helped to strengthen cross-straits connectivity. For example, in 2010, the Indonesian government launched the 2011-2025 Master Plan for the Acceleration and Expansion of Indonesian Economic Development (MP3EI),<sup>5</sup> whose main strategy focuses on developing national economic corridors with clearly identified economic specializations. Although the definition of the proposed corridors is fairly similar to that set out by ADB, their limits, on the contrary, are very different. In the Indonesian planning, there is no mention of the transversal routes proposed by the ADB to link the two sides of the Straits. In Sumatra, the strategy aims primarily at national integration. The flagship project will in fact entail building a bridge linking Java to Sumatra, across the Sunda Strait.

A comparative assessment of ADB's involvement in the Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS) and the Straits of Malacca region highlights the fact that whereas the bank plays a central role in GMS, its involvement in the Straits is just marginal. ADB has actively promoted the development of GMS in order to favour increased commercial exchanges in the Mekong sub-region,

of pagodas or shops where elderly grandfathers and grandmothers spend their day. Many beggars stretch out their hands. Some pathetic soldiers, a mixed bag of the nastiest pirates, sleep under the sun in rags that are their uniforms. A few shops are somewhat clean. The shopkeepers, rich and respected, are fat chaps, puffy with fat and pride, with a magnificent pigtail, braided with exquisite care, which sometimes trails on the ground. All look at us with complete indifference. Only a few, coolies of the line, gave us the military salute. More sociable were the children who came around to grab away our sticks or to look at us like intrigued animals. Lao Cai, 5 July 1904

Yet, in the interstices between these private and public spaces, one senses some grey areas developing that Marie evoked in passing: a colleague who was sent away because "apparently he behaved in a too gentlemanly" fashion with the Kou-Mang [sic] (Chinese women) in the village"; or the European man whose wife was Chinese ('Mrs. Farahili', see fig. 1), and upon whom, a bemused

Marie explained, "... the Chinese law bestows to her husband (!) the right of life and death if she steals or betrays him. (...) If Breuregehem kills her nobody would protest. She's fifteen years old and cost 60 piastres (about 150 francs)... This is not expensive."

#### Work on the Yunnan railway line: building a legacy

The young man was ambitious, self-assured, and hardworking, as well as appreciated by his supervisors. He did not need to wait very long for advancement; after slightly more than a year, on 23 September 1905, he was officially promoted to chief of the 24th lot, corresponding to a section of track that stretched from km 376 to km 390 on the line. This lot was part of the stretch of line situated in the valley of Tatchenho (in the basin of Pataho), which covered a distance of approximately 130 km (i.e., between km 300 and km 430) and peaked at an impressive height of 2026 meters on the final stretch.<sup>8</sup>

The railway is celebrated for its heroic technical feats (the most famous of which is arguably the 'truss bridge' (*pont sur arbalétriers*) overhanging a 100 meter-deep gorge), but these were accomplished by means of extraordinary human efforts and at the cost of thousands of lives. Out 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 valley.<sup>9</sup> Marie was lucky to have survived his time working there. Though themes of violence and death on work sites do not feature prominently in the engineer's letters, they do surface intermittently in his accounts: arms smuggling; bandits murdering Chinese couriers (who also died from drowning in the Nam Ti river or falling into the ravines) and a French colleague while traversing the Nam Ti valley; the murder of a Chinese labourer by a European security guard (who was merely fined and transferred to another building site); and the killing of two Chinese soldiers by two railway company heads of sections

(Marie did not tell what punishment, if any, the latter received). Such events somehow reflect the level of deceptiveness pertaining to 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.<sup>10</sup> By October 1905, Marie was already working on some of these structures, including a tunnel at km 379. On 6 December 1905, he informed his parents that he supervised "1000 coolies a day, 90 bricklayers and 100 stone-cutters". Just 4 months later, the young engineer had as many as 1800 coolies and 23 European employees under his direction, and found himself enjoying the leadership role.

#### Epilogue

Albert Marie was soon rewarded for his accomplishments and was promoted to deputy chief of a new section in October 1906. But earlier in the year he had already informed his parents of his next prospective assignment abroad in Turkey, to work on the construction of the daunting Constantinople-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 Yunnan 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.

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#### Notes

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- 2 I would like to warmly thank Elisabeth Locard and Odile Bernard, who are both descendants of Albert Marie, for providing these biographical details and for their generous assistance in this project. I wish to extend my thanks to Russell H.K. Heng for his invaluable help in sorting out the photographs, and to the ISEAS library for granting me permission to reproduce some of the photographs from this collection.
- 3 All the translations are ours, unless otherwise stated.
- 4 David W. Del Testa. 2001 (unpublished thesis). *Paint the Trains Red: Labour, Nationalism and the Railroads in French Colonial Indochina, 1898-1945*. Davis: University of California, p.120.
- 5 In quotes taken from Albert Marie's letters, his transliteration of place names is used, in each case followed in brackets by the more common contemporary transliteration.
- 6 Ann L. Stoler. 2002. *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power. Race and the Intimate in Colonial Rule*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, p.6.
- 7 Marie is using 'gentlemanly' in an ironic fashion here.
- 8 Alexandre Vèrignon. 1946. "Le chemin de fer du Yunnan", *Notes documentaires et études*, N. 316, 31 May 1946, p.8.
- 9 François Hulot. 1990. *Les chemins de fer de la France d'outre-mer. 1. L'Indochine, le Yunnan*. Saint-Laurent-du-Var: La Régordane, p.37.
- 10 Charles Fourniau et al. 1999. *Le contact colonial franco-vietnamien. Le premier siècle (1858-1911)*. Aix-en-Provence: Publications de l'université de Provence, p.198.

#### Notes

- 1 This study is a component of the TRANSITER research program (*Transnational Dynamics and Territorial Reorganisation, a comparative approach: Central America and South East Asia*), funded by the French National Research Agency. A part of this study will be published by ISEAS in 2013 under the title *Transnational Dynamics in Southeast Asia: the Greater Mekong Subregion and Malacca Straits Economic Corridors*, edited by Nathalie Fau, Sirivanh Khonthapane and Christian Taillard.
- 2 ASEAN. 2011. *Master Plan on ASEAN Connectivity*, Jakarta, ASEAN Secretariat, p.29.
- 3 Asian Development Bank. 2007. *Indonesia-Malaysia-Thailand Growth Triangle, Building a dynamic Future, A Road Map for development 2007-2011*.
- 4 Banomyong, R. 2006. *Logistics development study of the Indonesia-Malaysia-Thailand Growth Triangle (IMT-GT)*. Bangkok: Thammasat University.
- 5 Republic of Indonesia, Coordinating Ministry for Economic Affairs. 2011. *Master Plan for Acceleration and Expansion of Indonesia Economic Development 2011-2025*.

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