The Role of seaports in the Tonkin coastal region for mineral trading in the colonial period (1884-1945)

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Abstract: *To facilitate an ambitious resource exploitation in Indochina, the French colonial government invested in an advanced transportation system including seaports in the Gulf of Tonkin. Coal mines in coastal areas such as Hon Gai, Cam Pha became vibrant industrial and commercial centers. Therefore, such seaports as Hai Phong, Hon Gai, Cam Pha or Port-Wallut were built close at hand in the Eastern coal basin of Quang Yen province (now Quang Yen district, Quang Ninh province). The mineral trading in Tonkin undoubtedly benefited from this important coastal trading system. With these advantages, the Tonkin coastal region has become an important trading gateway, transhipment and transportation hub for mineral exports in the Far East. This article highlights the advantages and importance of the seaports in the Tonkin for mineral trading in the colonial period (1884-1945).*

Keywords: Seaports, Colony, Mineral Trade, Tonkin Coast, Indochina, Vietnam

1. Introduction

The Northeastern Coast was historically an important part of Dai Viet, serving as a connection point between the North of Vietnam and the South of China. The richness and diversity of natural conditions made it an important residential area as well for the survival and development of its inhabitant communities. The Northeastern Coast, through centuries of political upheaval, remained one of the epicenters of important economic activities and played an essential role in the regional trade. Van Don and Pho Hien were once vibrant trading centers not only of Dai Viet but also of the entire region[2]. The development

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[2] Since the 17th century, the development of foreign trade in Dai Viet as well as the search for new markets by Western traders had promoted trading activities in Tonkin, including the exchange of

of Dai Viet's foreign trade economy was always associated with the prosperity of these trade centers.

The Tonkin coastal area in the late 19th and early 20th centuries was particularly important not only because it covered the Cua Cam-Red River-Yunnan trade route but also played as a trade gateway for goods from seaports on Ha Long bay (Baie d'Halong) or the Gulf of Tonkin (Golfe du Tonkin). During the colonial period, the Tonkin coast and Indochina were considered the hubs of resource extraction and important military outposts of France in the Far East (Nguyen Manh Dung and Tran Xuan Thanh, 2023: 72-73).

However, the French at that time also realized that the biggest challenge to the colonial exploitation was the ruggedness of the terrain and the harshness of natural conditions in Tonkin, where more than three-quarters of the area were rough mountains. The state of infrastructure, especially the backward transportation system in Tonkin was the most significant obstacle. Meanwhile, apart from the Quang Yen coal basin near the Gulf of Tonkin, many mineral mines with large reserves were located in the upstream areas. According to earlier surveys, the coal arcs in Quang Yen stretched about 200 km from Dong Trieu to Tien Yen, extending to the eastern tip of Ke Bao island (Jules Silvestre, 2020: 281-282). Many coal seams were found deep underground or close to the sides of cliffs. Those difficulties drove the colonial government's immediate modernization of the infrastructure and transportation systems, including seaports in the Tonkin coast.

2. Demand for infrastructure and seaport systems in the Tonkin coast

The French colonialists soon realized the existence of coal mines in Quang Yen when they came to Tonkin in the early 1870s. French naval officers were highly interested in the Quang Yen coal mines for a stable and long-term fuel source for the French warships operating in the waters of the Western Pacific region. They also expected abundant coal reserves in Tonkin would partly fill the shortage in Metropolitan France.

Records by Edmond Fuchs and Édouard Saladin (1882: 271) indicated that the French navy's demand for coal amounted to hundreds of thousands of tons per year. Coal was imported from England, France, Australia, and Japan through four major Asian ports of Singapore, Shanghai, Hong Kong, and Saigon. Although the coal mined in France increased by 60% in the 1873-1895 period, imported coal still accounted for 30% of the domestic demand (Lamb, 1977: 255-257). Therefore, Tonkin's abundant coal reserves would ease he domestic demand both in France and of the French expeditionary forces in the Far East.

Indochina, unlike the French settler colonies in North Africa, Tunisia, or Morocco, was an extractive colony with long-term French policies for extraction of resources. Jean-

silver for silk by the East India companies in the Far East. Eastern merchants, from China, Japan, Siam, and Western merchants through the East India companies, such as the Dutch East India Company (VOC), the English East India company (EIC), the French East India company (CIO), founded their commercial establishments and conducted trade in Tonkin. During this period, Domea acted as a major border port of the Tonkinese trade system to receive and transport goods from Western merchant ships, including weapons, copper and silver coins, which were then transferred to Pho Hien and Thang Long in exchange for Tonkinese silk, ceramics, and forestry resources.

Marrie de Lanessan[1], the first Governor-General to Indochina for three years, was the one to completed the pacification of Tonkin. He was also the person who directed and attended the inauguration ceremony of one of the first coal mining wells in Indochina on Ke Bao Island in Tonkin Gulf. Nevertheless, Paul Doumer[2] and then Albert Sarraut[3] as his successors were the initiators of ambitious projects for the long-term exploitation in Indochina. Both of them advocated the establishment of a colonial economic institution aided by a modern infrastructure system including railways, roads, waterways, and seaports. This system later greatly contributed to a comprehensive extraction and a better integration of Indochinese mineral industry into the regional trade. Ports on the Tonkinese coast became increasingly important not only for receiving, transshipping, and exporting minerals but as the trade gateways of Tonkin to Upper Laos and Yunnan as well.

Paul Doumer, during his five-year term, had "transformed a groping colonial regime into an administration of systematic operation" (Chesnaux, 1955: 151). Doumer began a special program to "make the best out of Indochina to benefit France", including "building things necessary for the extraction in Indochina such as railways, roads, riverways, and ports" (Cited from: Ta Thi Thuy, 2017a: 26). To secure financial resources for the project, Doumer unified the financial system by creating a common budget for all five colonies. The budget revenues derived from various taxes shouldered by indigenous people, a policy once recounted as "the rubber back of the Annamese people, on which the colonial government freely exercise its elastic tax rates" (James, 1898: 11). Doumer believed that the monopoly policies on opium, salt, and alcohol helped improve significantly the Indochinese Federation's budget (Doumer, 2016: 512-514; See also: Failler, 2000; Dumarest, 2020; Sasges, 2022). Viewing transportation infrastructure as the key to promoting commercial growth, mining development, and plantation (Murray, 1980: 315-374) motivated him to act quickly.

Priorities set in the Bill of Colonial Extraction presented by former Governer-General Albert Sarraut to the French National Assembly on April 12, 1921 included not only tropical produce but also underground natural resources, or fuel reserves, that were vital to the economic recovery of France after the World War I. Sarraut emphasized that the program targeted the key areas of material and food production, large-scale granaries and farming areas, vast forests, and large mines for the benefits of Metropolitan France. France could make use of the fatty resources of raw materials, grains, cotton, cattle, forests, metals, here and there (Cited from: Ta Thi Thuy, 2017b: 114-115).

Sarraut determined to build a railway system to connect production areas and seaports, to develop port infrastructure for heavy vessels, and to increase the extraction capacity for both ground and underground resources in a systematic

[1] Jean-Marrie de Lanessan (1843-1919), Governor-General of Indochina from June 1891-December 1894.

[2] Joseph Athanase Paul Doumer (1857-1932), Governor-General of Indochina from February 1891-October 1894.

[3] Albert Pierre Sarraut (1872-1962), Governor-General of Indochina from November 1911-January 1914 and from January 1917-December 1919.

manner (Sarraut, 1923: 343). His plan required the development of a synchronous transportation system with a particular urgency for the Tonkinese seaports.

The colonial government had indeed executed swiftly the plans proposed by Doumer and Sarraut in the first decades of the 20th century. The seaports built during this period were particularly effectual for the colonial economy and its mineral trade.

3. The role of seaports in promoting mineral trade in Tonkin

By the end of the 19th century, Tonkin and Halong Bay became geostrategic areas to the French colonial policy.

The seven-focus program proposed by Doumer in 1897 prioritized the pacification and border security in Tonkin in parallel with the establishment of naval bases and strong naval vessels. This was to ensure Indochinese defense and increase France's influence and interests in the Far East and Indochina's neighboring countries (Ta Thi Thuy, 2017a: 27). Therefore, in addition to railways, roads, and waterways, the French also built several estuary ports (in Hai Phong) and seaports (in Hon Gai, Cam Pha, Port-Wallut).

Furthermore, a storm warning and coastal lighting system was also established to ensure safety for shipping. They built lighthouses with luminous ranges of 20-30 nautical miles on Hon Dau and Norways islands with lighthouses of fixed light colors of white, red, or blue in the surroundings as the navigation beacons for ships to enter estuaries and ports (Pouyanne, 1994: 10-104).

Hai Phong Port, built after the French seized Tonkin, was located 25 kilometers from the sea, stretching on the southern bank of Cua Cam river. It was primarily a supply base for the French expeditionary army and then became the second largest port in Indochina (after Saigon port) serving key imports and exports between Tonkin and Yunnan. Until the late 19th century, sandbars built up at the mouth of Cua Cam river caused difficulty for ships entering the port. The French administration considered the construction of a new port in Ha Long bay but abandoned the plan due to high estimated costs. They therefore continued investment in Hai Phong Port[1].

The Ports of Hon Gai and Cam Pha both were built by a French coal mining enterprise in Tonkin. In 1924, the total tonnage of shipping through the ports were 940,830 with a cargo volume of 900,000 tons, of which coal amounted to 874,079 tons. Due to the increasing volume of coal export, the company built a new port on the coast of Cam Pha, next to an active coal mine. While Hon Gai Port could only receive 6,000-ton vessels, Cam Pha Port could accommodate vessels of ten-meter draft. This company also invested in a wharf, mechanic workshops, and a railway connecting the wharf and the mines in Cam Pha. The whole operations were run by electricity generated from a newly built 4,000kW power plant. The 30-meter long and nine-meter deep stone paved wharf allowed two cargo ships of 10,000 tons to dock at the same time. The annual volume of coal export through Cam Pha Port was

[1] In 1921, Haiphong Chamber of Commerce, who managed Haiphong port, borrowed three million francs in bond to extend the wharfs for better access to warehouses. The volume of goods transported through Haiphong port increased constantly, from 407,000 tons in 1916 to 1,173,090 tons in 1924 while the number of port calls also rose from 700 to 1,046 from 1914 to 1922 (Pouyanne, 1994: 110-113).

haft million tons (Pouyanne, 1994: 118-119). There were wharves and cranes at both Hon Gai and Cam Pha Ports to assist coal loading and unloading, with a capacity of up to 500 tons per hour (Miller, 1946: 268-279).

Wallut Port was also an important secondary transportation hub on the Gulf of Tonkin. Claude Bourrin, a French clerk working in Indochina in the late 19th century, noted the ambition of the French administration to build a regional port city on the Gulf of Tonkin. According to Bourrin's account, in 1893, "Governor-General De Lanessan arrived at Wallut cove on the Saigon-labelled ship that anchored in La Source bay, where the largest vessels, or a fleet of vessels, or even eight-meter draft ships could easily pass through despite tide rises or falls" (Bourrin, 2011: 303-304). The Governor-General came here to receive the decision by the Ke Bao Administration Council to name the first coal mine in the Far East after him. The desire of De Lanessan and other French officials was to soon develop Ke Bao into a "competitive and the best equipped and richest coal mining hub in Asia" (Bourrin, 2011: 301-302) and "apart from Hon Gai, Wallut Port would be launched and grow, and our young Tonkinese country would look forward to the birth of another industrial city" (Bourrin, 2011: 304-305). Portal's ambition, which was to dethrone Hai Phong and replace Hong Kong with the imminent Wallut port city (Bourrin, 2011: 307), did not come true. Wallut Port was then only a subordinate transportation hub on the Gulf of Tonkin after the ports of Hon Gai and Cam Pha.

It took the French many years to establish and expand industrial infrastructure systems before starting on extraction and doing business. The French Company of Tokin Coal Mining (Société française des Charbonnages du Tonkin - SFCT)[1] was then the owner of the largest mining area (21,832 ha) in the eastern Quang Yen coal basin, stretching from northeastern Mong Duong to Cam Pha, Ha Tu, Ha Lam, Hong Gai to Courbert Port and Nagotna mine to southwest (Cited from: Cao Van Bien, 1995: 50). This area held the largest coal reserves and was advantageous for extraction and transportation of coal from mines to gathering points in Hon Gai and Cam Pha. Therefore, SFCT invested in a large-scale and synchronous infrastructure system to better serve the coal mining operation.

The system in Hon Gai consisted of a coal briquette[2] factory that was served by waterway and railway businesses; nine 30-ton per day coke kilns located; a chain of forging, assembly, framing, heat treating, and foundry workshops which was able to produce two-ton weighed cast iron pieces; a 8,000kW power plant (alternator powered by six Babcock and Wilcox boilers of 3,000 rpm); a thousand-bed hospital and two clinics in Hon Gai, at Cam Pha port and at Cam Pha mine, respectively. There was also a mobile medical station at each extraction

[1] The French Coal Mining Company (SFCT) was founded in 1888 and headquartered at 64 Chaussée-d'Antin Street, District 9, Paris. Its capital investment grew from 4,000,000 francs, or eight thousand shares at the time of establishment, to 6,000,000 francs or 12 thousand shares in 1896, and to 38,400,000 francs in 1928. The company owned many important coal mines, such as Hon Gai (including Ha Lam, Ha Tu, Cam Pha, Mong Duong, and some small mining areas along the coast of Cua Luc bay (port Courbet), Ke Bao, and Mao Khe (Cao Van Bien, 1995: 50 - 51).

[2] A coal briquette contained 75% Hon Gai coal, 20% fatty coal, and 5% coal.

site. When a pandemic occurred, a 280-bed quarantine camp was set up in Hon Gai where a French-Vietnamese school and a vocational school were also located. Schools for Vietnamese children were built in Ha Tu and at Cam Pha port and Cam Pha mine (Cited from: Do Hoang Anh, 2021).

SFCT managed coal loading and unloading at the ports of Hon Gai and Cam Pha. There were a 75-meter long cement wharf perpendicular to land through a 25-meter long pier, two seven-ton steam cranes, an 80-meter long keel, and two seven-ton electric cranes. Hon Gai Port could receive six-ton vessels while Cam Pha Port could accommodate concurrently two 8000-ton or 10,000-ton vessels. SFCT also operated a steam-locomotive railway system for coal transport. There was a ten-kilometer railway line from Ha Tu to Hon Gai coal screening area and an additional three-kilometer branch line toward Nagotna coal mine. Cam Pha and Mong Duong mines were connected to Cam Pha Port through 16 kilometers of a one-meter gauge railway, for which they used an electric tractor of 750 horsepower. Another company undertook sea transportation of coal (Cited from: Do Hoang Anh, 2021).

It could be noted that SFCT was not only a regionally leading coal producer but a typical capitalist conglomerate of large-scale and synchronous investments (large-scale factories, mining areas, logistic systems). It was one among the twelve largest coal businesses in France and of the entire French colonies. The modernization of infrastructure, and seaports in Tonkin, had promoted mineral trade in Indochina. Tonkinese coal for many years was Indochina's main export, second only to Cochinchinese rice (Aumiphin, 1994: 153). Coal was mostly exported to Japan, China, and France through the Tonkinese seaports. The largest contributor to the regional mineral trade was coal in Indochina. It was a coincidence that the two largest coal miners and exporters in Indochina were also owners of modern infrastructure systems and seaports in on the Gulf of Tonkin. The advantages for gathering, loading, and transporting coal had facilitated Indochina's rapid increase in coal export, from 200,000 tons in 1900 to 2.5 million tons in 1939 (miller, 1946: 278). Indochina at the time was always among the three largest coal exporters in the Far East and one of the ten largest coal exporters in the world (Miller, 1946: 278).

In brief, large investments in infrastructure and seaports in Tonkin, the Indochinese mining industry had experienced major changes, gradually integrating into the regional and the world mineral markets.

4. Conclusion

The French built a modern infrastructure system and seaports in the Gulf of Tonkin to realize their ambitious colonial extraction program in Indochina. The system had contributed to transforming the coal mines in Tonkin, such as Hon Gai, Cam Pha, or Ke Bao, into important industrial and commercial centers. In particular, the newly established sector of seaport services and logistics helped promote the mineral business and significant changes of the Indochina's colonial industry.

The development of the Tonkin coast, as the economic and political center and the military outpost of France in Indochina, had influenced foreig n trade, including mineral trade, in the colonial period. In addition to traditional farm produce and handicrafts, mining products like coal, zinc, tin, and

so forth became important exports and contributed to Vietnam's steady integration into regional and global trade in the first decades of the 20th century ❑

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