

Denis CANTIN, “The post office in French Indochina from the late 19th century to 1954” (“La Poste en Indochine française de la fin du XIX^e siècle à 1954”), DEA in contemporary history directed Jean-Louis Mestre, Aix-Marseille, 1997, 142 p.

From 1860 to 1901 the Post and Telegraph service participated in France’s colonial conquest by implanting and developing its presence overseas. Indeed, it seems to have been one of the tools of conquest used by the French. It was of nearly vital support to the army and internal administration; its primary function was far from offering service to the local population. These observations prove themselves true in the case of the French colonization of Annam-Tonkin in Cambodia, especially in relation to France’s project of annexing southern China. But the expansion of the post and telegraph service throughout the Southeast Asian peninsula met with specific obstacles. This challenging environment was a place where staff was relatively isolated from its administration in metropolitan France. The European staff that emigrated from France found certain advantages (salary, social standing, career, fulfilling a fascination with Asia) than somewhat compensated for the difficult working conditions they found in Indochina.

At this point we can make two observations on the organization and operations of the P&T administration. First, the P&T is an autonomous administration that is governed by centrifugal forces. More precisely, its independence in relation to its sister administration in France – and its autonomy in relation to the residential colonial administration, could not help but sustain strong reactions. For this reason, pressure was exerted to divide this service into as many offices as there were countries. These projects failed, but it does seem that this was the reason why the northern office (Annam, Tonkin, and northern Laos) and the southern office were not united until 1901. Our second observation has to do with how the service was run: with the exception of the telegraph, the modes of transportation enlisted to carry the mail always came from organizations outside the P&T administration. This was the case for mail carried on foot by “coolie-tram,” a service begun in the 10th century that was considered either part of the army or the residential administration.

By the same token, transportation by river or sea, automobile or railroad was carried out under contract by private companies. All of the underwater cables connecting the peninsula with other areas belonged to England.

After 1901 there was a change in French colonial politics. The period of conquest and installation had ended. It was now a matter of transforming Indochina into a French colony that was prepared to receive investments from France and associate itself (albeit moderately) with the administration of their country. These two aspects of the new French foreign policy would transform P&T service in Indochina. In 1901 the administration was reorganized by a vast reform than continued for years later. The goal of this reform was to centralize the service into one single office that was directly controlled by the governor general as the engine of economic development. The new policy of centralization provoked reactions from several quarters, including those who preferred to accentuate administrative centralization even more. The service took on a



role that was more economic (development) than political (conquest); it was bound to comply with public wishes by setting up a rural mail service that enabled correspondence to reach the farthest and most isolated corners of Indochina. Public demand concerning financial matters led the P&T first of all to offer both French and international money order service, followed by regular checking and postal checking accounts. Modernizing the service also meant integrating new technologies such as airplanes and automobiles. The monitoring of personnel and staff incentives was also strengthened.

The general management of the P&T participated actively in the politics of association begun by governor Paul Beau and developed by his successors, notably Albert Sarraut. Its two major aspects were first of all, that the Indochinese administration had to be more independent from the French administration, and second, that indigenous personnel should be eligible for higher administrative positions. These circumstances initially manifested themselves in the independence from French staff sought by the local personnel that wanted to be comprised of only local recruits. A local administrative corps was formed when the quality and quantity of staff from France was diminished. Unfortunately this group was unable to replace the French group completely because of difficulties with hiring and educational background. As a result, there were two different statuses for European personnel within the P&T service; both were reformed after the First World War. The local P&T personnel structure was integrated with the local structures of other general governmental administrations in 1921.

As for the indigenous staff, the P&T administration should be proud of its active participation in the politics of staff integration. But the situation remained somewhat paradoxical. Although the P&T administration had many local staff members and gave them important responsibilities, it did not hide its mistrust of the indigenes. The obvious reason was that this staff had the advantage of offering employment at low cost to an administration that required a large staff. However, it gradually became necessary to offer this staff career opportunities that went beyond the level of work they were currently doing. A higher professional level was created in 1904 and expanded in 1912 and 1919. But the new status levels still kept indigenous employees of the postal administration at a lower level than the European staff.

