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THE BURMA-CHINA RAILWAY: A CASE STUDY OF THE COMMERCIAL AND THE OFFICIAL MENTALITY IN NINETEENTH CENTURY EMPIRE BUILDING

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The subject of this paper is a communications project that never had any real prospect of success, a commercial dream that never came true, a railway that was never built. Why then should I presume that this rather minor episode in British imperial history may be of some interest to other than the Southeast Asian specialist? Perhaps the later importance of the famous Burma Road might arouse a flicker of curiosity about earlier attempts to link inland China with the Indian Ocean. And admittedly it was this aspect which first drew my attention to these abortive nineteenth century trade route plans. A better justification for this paper, however, may be found in what it reveals of the respective attitudes of commerce and government towards such improbable projects for commercial expansion. It will show the enthusiasm with which responsible commercial bodies championed the most visionary schemes as long as they were carried out at government expense; the indifference or even hostility with which official circles, especially the Indian government, reacted to them; and finally how, by the very end of the nineteenth century, Imperial rivalries partially modified government policy just before the entire idea of a commercial shortcut to Western China finally dropped into oblivion.

The origins of this idea can be comprehended from a glance at a large scale map of Asia. Direct overland communications from the head of the Bay of Bengal would shorten the distance to interior China by over 3,000 miles. Coupled with the perennial lure of the China market to nineteenth century Englishmen, this basic geographical fact elicited a wide variety of schemes and proposals to effect such a shortcut. Indeed there is some evidence that as early as the seventeenth century the East India Company had learned of the ancient caravan trade between Burma and the Yunnan plateau and had some efforts to utilize it for direct trade with China.¹ However, uncertain relations with the Burmese court plus Dutch and French rivalry long kept trade with Burma too unstable to pursue the idea any further and it was only after the First Anglo Burmese War, 1824-1826, that the Company was in a position to explore these possibilities. In the years after the war Company emissaries to the Burmese court at Ava learned more

¹ D. G. E. Hall, *Early English Intercourse with Burma*, London, 1928, pp. 120-121.

of the annual caravan trade with China.² The main items in this traditional trade were Chinese silk, tea and metals — the latter providing the basis for exaggerated reports of Yunnan's mineral resources — in return for Burmese raw cotton, precious stones and, most intriguing for British commercial interests, a few English woolen piece goods. Several attempts were made to explore existing and potential trade routes, one in 1836 actually reaching the Chinese frontier town of Ssumao.³ Yet despite the enthusiastic reports of some of its officers in the field, the Indian government, preoccupied with continued political difficulties with the Burmese court, showed no great haste to push plans for overland trade with China. It was not until ten years after the Second Anglo-Burmese War of 1852 that a commercial treaty was concluded opening Burma to more unrestricted trade and providing for through trade with China.⁴

It was at this juncture that the question of overland access to China was taken out of the obscurity of the Indian Government files and placed before the commercial public and government in England. Behind this, of course, was the continuous growth of British export industries, especially textiles, and their search for expanding markets. The particular cause, however, lay in one man — a retired Indian Army Officer, Captain Richard Sprye. Sprye first approached the Foreign Office in 1858 with his scheme for a trade route, possibly later a railway, running up the Salween Valley and to China via the Shan State of Kianghung, thus avoiding the formidable eastern spurs of the Himalayas and the awesome gorges of the upper Salween and the Mekong.⁵ The cautious, level headed gentlemen of the Foreign Office treated Sprye with the aloof courtesy usually reserved for bothersome visionaries and, of course, ignored his plea that opening up the Southwestern frontier of China be included in the negotiations at Peking.

But when he turned his attention to the organized commercial opinion of Great Britain the response was altogether different. On July 12, 1860 the Manchester Chamber of Commerce became the first commercial body to petition the Foreign Office in favor of government sponsorship of Sprye's projected trade route. This was quickly followed by similar communications from other leading Chambers of Commerce. The earliest came from the textile districts of Lancashire and West

² Visiting Ava in 1827, the new Civil Commissioner in British Burma, John Crawford, estimated the annual value at between £400,000 and £700,000, consisting mainly of Chinese silk, tea and metals in return for Burmese raw cotton and precious stones. John Crawford, *Journal of an Embassy to the Court of Ava*, London, 1829, p. 193.

³ Great Britain, House of Commons, *Sessional Papers*, 1868-1869, (hereafter referred to as *S.P.*) "Papers relating to the Route of Captain W. C. McLeod...", vol. 46, pp. 617-765.

⁴ *S.P.*, 1864, "Burma Commercial Treaty of 1862..." vol. 42, p. 390.

⁵ Sprye's original letters to the Foreign Office appear in a long pamphlet of his, *The British and China Railway*, London, 1858.

Yorkshire — Liverpool, Huddersfield, Bradford, Halifax and Leeds — but the spokesmen for the textile interests were soon joined by such other important Chambers as those of Glasgow, Bristol, and Gloucester.⁶

The pattern of support established at the very beginning of commercial agitation on behalf of the Sprye route held true throughout the long controversy over direct land access to Western China. The textile districts were the most frequent and most insistent memorialists with various other commercial organizations which possessed some particular interest in trade with China lending considerable support from time to time. This, of course, was perfectly consistent with the general character of British interest in the opening of the allegedly fabulous China market. Evidently Sprye's proposals were opportunely timed to take advantage of that interest. By the early eighteen-sixties it was becoming apparent that the opening of the treaty ports on the coast had not caused the tremendous expansion of the China trade which commercial optimism had fondly predicted. Rather than admit that their estimates of China's commercial potential had been grossly exaggerated, it was easier for many to assume that the wealth and markets were still there but lay inland where the coastal ports could not tap them. Hence, the continuous struggle to remove any remaining barriers to commercial penetration from the coast. And, hence the keen interest in proposals to drive a commercial way through Burma to Western China. The *Times* summed up this common belief very nicely: "... in confining our trade to the southern and eastern seaboard of China, we are but scratching the rind of that mighty realm. The best Chinese products, and the best customers for our goods, all lie inland toward the West."⁷ In such beliefs, even though they were almost entirely fallacious, lay much of the basis for the uncritical acclamation with which such schemes as Sprye's were received by supposedly sober minded business men.

But this highly vocal support did not extend to taking any financial risks. Uniformly the Chambers' petitions requested government initiative, not only in removing political difficulties, but also in bearing the expenses of railway surveys and construction. This was another permanent feature of this agitation. At home *laissez-faire* may have been the accepted theory of economic policy, but in Asia it was the government's duty to guarantee politically and economically the successful extension of British Commerce. Only during the years of most intensive Imperial rivalries in Eastern Asia did the government come partly to share this view. But during the height of Manchester liberalism important commercial interests, those of Manchester itself in the forefront, vigorously urged this role on a reluctant government.

⁶ These may be found in *S.P.*, 1864, vol. 63, pp. 393-415 and *S.P.*, 1867-68, vol. 51, pp. 687-744.

⁷ *The Times*, London, October 6, 1860.

The Foreign Office objected that any attempts to open overland communications would be vigorously resisted by the Chinese government, especially since much of Yunnan was currently in the hands of local Moslem rebels. Moreover, no adequate protection could be given to British traders at places so inaccessible to gunboat diplomacy. Redress for unfortunate incidents, not unlikely in provinces where Europeans were still unknown, could thus "... only be obtained by applying pressure at places more accessible, and so placing in jeopardy the more important interests of British trade on the seaboard of China."⁸ The Indian government was even more adamantly opposed to such schemes, partly because the expenses were to be charged to Indian revenues, and partly because of the complications they felt certain would ensue in relations with Burma and Siam. Thus Calcutta rejected all suggestions of even a preliminary survey.⁹

But though the Viceroy and Council in India might ignore the wishes of Lancashire this was not quite so easy for elected politicians in London. In 1866 Lord Cranborne (afterwards the Marquis of Salisbury) became Secretary of State for India and, in response to further petitions from commercial bodies, ordered the Indian Government to undertake the necessary railway surveys. A direct order could not be defied and after futile objections the surveys were begun only to be speedily abandoned as soon as Cranborne left the India Office.¹⁰ Despite outraged cries from Sprye's supporters in England nothing more was done to explore his project. In London, Cranborne's successors — Sir Stafford Northcote and the Duke of Argyll, expressed sympathy with the commercial bodies' wishes but refused to overrule the Indian Government's opposition.¹¹

Yet Calcutta too was susceptible to the general optimistic spirit of commercial expansionism as brought to bear in combined pressure from its subordinates in British Burma and its superiors in London. Therefore in 1868 and again in 1875 it sanctioned exploratory expeditions to Yunnan, both times with serious misgivings and directing both of them towards the more traditional Irrawaddy — Bhamo route which presumably would not involve expensive railway plans. The Sladen expedition of 1868 successfully contacted the Yunnan Moslems at Tengyuch and brought back vastly exaggerated reports of the potential commerce.¹² The opening of steamer service on the Upper Irrawaddy did not, however, substantiate this optimism.

⁸ *S.P.*, 1864, vol. 63, p. 400.

⁹ *S.P.*, 1867-68, vol. 51, pp. 761-766.

¹⁰ *S.P.*, 1867-68, vol. 51, p. 733.

¹¹ *S.P.*, 1876, vol. 56, pp. 665-667.

¹² *S.P.*, 1871, "Report by Major Sladen on the Bhamo Route", vol. 51, pp. 433-596, and Alexander Bowers, *Bhamo Expedition: A Report on the Practicability of Re-Opening the Trade Route Between Burma and Western China*, Rangoon, 1869.

The second expedition, spurred on by the end of the civil war in Yunnan and rumours of French interest in the province, ended in the political incident which both Calcutta and Whitehall had feared. The party's Chinese interpreter, Augustus Margary, was murdered just inside of the Chinese frontier and the expedition driven back into Burma. British prestige was now affected and in the Chefoo Convention settling this incident very favorable terms were secured for opening overland trade.¹³ The government, however, had no intention of implementing these terms. In the first place, the incident had confirmed previous fears about troublesome and expensive incidents in the wild and barbarous country through which overland trade must pass. More fundamentally, on the spot investigation parties brought back the first accurate reports of the actual economic condition of backward, wartorn Yunnan and the geographic barriers to trade with it.¹⁴ The Bhamo route was discredited for anything more than the necessarily limited caravan trade and the whole idea of an overland route to China was set back for several years.¹⁵

But more realistic knowledge did not simply explode the myth and let the idea of a Burma-China railway die a natural death. Instead the keener search for new markets and more intense imperial rivalries of the late nineteenth century, revived it in more grandiose forms. The most popular of these was the "Burma-Siam-China Railway" conceived of and publicized by one Archibald R. Colquhoun, sometime Indian civil servant, newspaper correspondent, explorer, author, and publicist extraordinary.¹⁶ Colquhoun along with his partner, Holt S. Hallett, performed the most remarkable feat of all trade route agitators, actually getting the commercial bodies to put up £5,000 of their own money to finance exploratory surveys.¹⁷ These surveys completed, the two men returned to England in 1885 where their indefatigable speech making and voluminous writings created a greater general awareness of the

¹³ Text in William F. Mayers, *Treaties between the Empire of China and Foreign Powers*, 5th ed., Shanghai, 1906, pp. 44-48.

¹⁴ *S.P.* 1877, "Report by Mr. Davenport on the trading capabilities of the Country transversed by the Yunnan Mission", vol. 84, pp. 205-241, and *S.P.*, 1878, "Report by Mr. Baber on the Route between Tali-fu and Momein", vol. 75, pp. 713-756.

¹⁵ For the effect this episode had on opinion in England see *The Economist*, October 16, 1875, p. 1221.

¹⁶ Some idea of Colquhoun's energy and versatility may be gained from a list of his published books. *Across Chryse*, 1883, 2 vols; *Burma and the Burmans*, 1884; *Among the Shans*, 1885; *Report on The Railway Connexion of Burmah and China*, 1885; *The Key to the Pacific*; *The Nicaragua Canal*, 1895; *Overland to China*, 1900; *China in Transformation*, 1900; *Russia Against India*, 1900; and *The Whirlpool of Europe*, 1914.

¹⁷ A popular account of these explorations is given in Hallett's book, *A Thousand Miles on an Elephant*, London, 1890.

trans-Burma trade question than Sprye had ever been able to arouse.¹⁸ Once again the commercial bodies flooded Whitehall with their petitions and once again requests for government political and financial sponsorship were politely, but firmly, refused.

Intermittent agitation for the Burma-Siam-China railway continued well into the nineties but gradually the intensity declined as it became apparent to all but its most zealous supporters that the government simply would not buy the project. Moreover, further first-hand reports of conditions in Yunnan made it difficult to sustain earlier dreams of its fabled wealth,¹⁹ and new projects to open the Upper Yangtze and Szechwan to steamers competed for attention. Yet, paradoxically, as commercial interest in the Burma-China Railway began to wane, official interest began to rise. The motive here, however, lay more in the sharper imperial rivalries in Asia, especially France's activities in Indo-China, than in any more receptive attitude to domestic pressure groups. With the French openly proclaiming their new province of Tonkin as the gateway to the markets of Southwestern China and planning a government built railway to tap these, there was more incentive to join in a race for markets which honest appraisal would have shown to be of rather limited potential.²⁰ But the apparently imminent dismemberment of the Chinese Empire after its defeat in the Sino-Japanese War put purely commercial considerations into the background. Britain and France, in the Salisbury-Courcell Agreement of 1896, agreed to share equally all commercial concessions in South-West China, but this was not entirely effective. Thus, in the 1894 Anglo-Chinese Border Convention provisions were included for consular residence and tariff advantages.²¹ In the 1897 revision these were extended to cover more frontier towns.

Far more significant, however, was the actual commencement of a government railway towards the Chinese frontiers. In 1889 the Indian government had begun preliminary surveys for a branch line from the Rangoon-Mandalay trunk to the hill station of Lashio and ultimately to the Kunlong Ferry on the Salween. Nothing was done on this rather

¹⁸ A few of the numerous newspaper and periodical articles on the subject in the mid-eighties may be found in: *Manchester Guardian*, December 13, 1882 and April 22, 1885; *Glasgow Herald*, May 16, 1883; *The Times*, March 11, 1885; *Quarterly Review*, vol. 156 (1883), pp. 492-530; and *Blackwood's*, vol. 139 (March, 1886), pp. 279-291.

¹⁹ Alexander Hosie, *Three Years in Western China*, London, 1890. S.P., 1888, "Report by Mr. F.S.A. Bourne of a Journey in Southwestern China," vol. 98, pp. 121-240.

²⁰ The influence of French rivalry on British policy is studied in detail by Warren B. Walsh, *European Rivalries in Southwestern China, 1885-1894*, Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation, Harvard, 1935. Leighton LaFuze, *Great Britain, France, and the Siam Question: 1885-1904*, Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation, University of Illinois, 1935 is also useful.

²¹ S.P., 1894, vol. 96, pp. 89-99 and S.P., 1898, vol. 105, pp. 129-138.

expensive line until in 1895 orders came from the home government to commence construction immediately. After the French appropriated funds for their Hanoi-Kunming line, plans were made to extend the Burmese railway past Kunlong into China. These plans took the form of a private railway company with strong government backing. In 1898 the Yunnan Company was formed and, with the assistance of Indian Army engineers, undertook extensive surveys for a rail line from Kunlong through to the Upper Yangtze.²²

Strangely enough the commercial bodies in Great Britain continued to express a preference for Colquhoun and Hallett's scheme right up until the Yunnan Company actually began survey work in China.²³ Then the prospect of a great through line to the Yangtze swung them over to the officially approved project. However, the long history of Burma-China railway plans was approaching its demise, not its culmination. Under pressure of extraordinary political circumstances the government was considering such a railway but even then, as Salisbury made clear to a delegation from the Association Chambers of Commerce, it had not committed itself to financing such an undertaking.²⁴ When these extraordinary circumstances disappeared, when the breakup of China failed to materialize, Whitehall quietly forgot about such ambitious schemes. The Indian Government had never favoured them. The commercial interests at home had finally tired of them. Survey work, suspended by the Boxer outbreak, was not resumed. In the succeeding decade a few proposals were made for expanding local trade through Bhamo but with the World War even these were forgotten.²⁵ After that fratricidal conflict the great age of European commercial and imperial expansion had somehow passed. Even local trade over the northern Burmese border dwindled; great railway projects were something of a now distant past.

In retrospect, official coolness to these obviously impractical schemes is more easily understood than commercial enthusiasm for them. They were all extremely costly, of uncertain commercial returns, likely to involve political complications and above all, were to be carried out entirely at government expense. These reasons in themselves are sufficient to account for a persistent opposition, stronger in direct proportion to removal from domestic political pressure. The strength of this opposition in the Indian Government, Foreign Office, and in the

²² The best account of these surveys is by the chief engineer, Major H. R. Davies, *Yunnan, the Link between India and the Yangtze*, Cambridge, 1909.

¹³ Some examples of this continued support may be found in Associated Chambers of Commerce, *Annual Reports*, 1897, pp. 117-119 and 1898, pp. 42-45. Also Hansard, 4th series, vol. 47, March 9, 1897, pp. 295-296.

²⁴ Associated Chambers of Commerce, *Annual Reports*, 1899, pp. 7-8 and 1900, p. 7.

²⁵ There is a last forlorn echo of these plans in the *Manchester Guardian*, December 18, 1913.

India Office might also be explained in terms of the social origins of the career officials staffing those branches of government. By the mid-nineteenth century competitive entrance into the Indian Civil Service was mainly won by those members of landed or professional backgrounds. The Foreign Office and India Office tended to be preserves of the aristocracy. At the very highest level the Viceroys and Secretaries of State for India were almost exclusively from the large landed aristocracy. In sum, by birth, training, and position they were not likely to favor government involvement in risky and expensive projects which business interests espoused but would not financially support.

The persistent enthusiasm of a large segment of organized commercial opinion seems more remarkable. These were not a few ambitious opportunists, a handful of aggressive overseas traders, a lobby of Old China Hands. A partial list of commercial organizations petitioning on behalf of one or more of the railway schemes would include the Associated Chambers of Commerce, the China Association, and the Chambers of Manchester, Liverpool, London, Glasgow, Bristol, Birmingham, Huddersfield, Halifax and Leeds. They were all willing to be carried away with the vision of unlocking the vast markets of inland China, but not to the point of assuming financial risks themselves. Even in the eighteen-sixties, well before serious commercial or imperial rivalries in Asia, commercial interests clamored for aggressive government action, and financial support, in securing new markets. For almost forty years, throughout the heyday of the Manchester School and Little Englandism and into the new era of imperial expansion, this was the consistent burden of the Chambers' demands. That they were generally refused (except for the temporary aberration between 1895 and 1900) is revealing of government-business relations. That they were made, with such fervor and persistence, is revealing of the content of supposedly anti-imperialist, *laissez-faire* commercial opinion with regard to overseas commercial expansion.