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Subversive Technology: Chinese Bandits, Telegraphs, and the Plot to Overthrow the Qing Empire from French Tonkin, 1891-1924

Despite attempts to establish a colonial government over all areas of the former northern part of the autonomous State of Dai Nam (Tonkin, Bac Ky, Bac Bo), French rule in northern Vietnam often depended on the cooperation of local power-brokers. In some cases, these people had formerly and violently opposed French rule. Many military officials and civilian administrators within French Tonkin believed that giving leaders of bandit gangs a stake in the French colonial state would ensure the smooth establishment of French rule. By employing them, the French government could secure the loyalty of bandit gangs, groups that often proved difficult to eradicate. These surrendered bandits, or “soumissionnaires,” proved at times more troublesome once they had submitted to French authority than they were as independent operators.

This is the story of one such soumissionnaire, Luong Tam Ky. Originally from southern Guangdong Province in China, Luong Tam Ky first came to northern Dai Nam in the 1860s as a member of the Yellow Flag bandit army. Eventually, he led a small group of followers to Dinh Hoa district, Thai Nguyen Province. There, he demanded payments from the local population and established a largely independent area of rule. When the French failed to defeat him militarily in the 1890s, Luong Tam Ky was offered generous terms for cooperation with the French, which he readily accepted.

Luong Tam Ky became an important advisor to the French government in Thai Nguyen, and consequently maintained his position of authority in Dinh Hoa. In 1907, the Resident of Hai Ninh accused Luong Tam Ky of sending coded telegraphs to operatives within Tonkin and in China in an effort to foment an anti-Qing uprising in his home area of southern Guangdong. The telegraph, once lauded by no less than Paul Doumer as an instrument to unite the governments and citizens of China and Indochina, had possibly become a weapon in the hands of a dedicated anti-Qing activist.

My paper will discuss Luong Tam Ky and his alleged plot to overthrow the government of China from his position of power within French Tonkin. What do Luong Tam Ky's activities from deep within (and making use of) the capillaries of state power mean for our ideas of the French colonial state? How did Luong Tam Ky use technologies of power (and of telegraphics) to his own ends? I will also discuss some notable aspects of Luong Tam Ky's “rule” in Dinh Hoa, as well as his place as a colonial anti-hero within the historical narrative of Vietnamese nationalism.

My proposed paper relates to the wider themes and ideas of the “Beyond

Teleologies” conference as it focuses on a lesser-known, colonial era anti-hero. Also, my paper will highlight the fragmentary structure of French colonial rule, especially in contested areas such as Thai Nguyen. By connecting the telegraph with a subversive act neither nationalist nor anti-colonial in character, I will demonstrate that the features (gadgets) of the French colonial effort in Tonkin did not merely contain dialectical, colony-to-nationalism possibilities. The subversive use of colonial era devices could also serve the goals of individuals whose power became amplified through their enrollment in the colonial enterprise. The case of Luong Tam Ky demonstrates that not all rebellion must be heroic, nor even anti-colonial.