

The Yunnan–Burma railway, 1860s–1940s: Imagining, planning and rejecting a railway that was never built

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In the late nineteenth century, British commercial interests in Asia and back home visualised a railway connecting British Burma with inland China, which they saw as a vast unexplored market. British engineers and adventurers were then employed by the commercial bodies to investigate the economy and geography of Yunnan and Upper Burma for the project. The railway was eventually rejected by the British as being unviable and unprofitable. The colonial knowledge created by these missions (in the form of travelogues, survey reports, interviews and studies) was later interpreted by Chinese nationalists as evidence of Britain's ambitions to colonise southwest China in 1905 (the Russo-Japanese War) and 1927 (the Northern Expedition) when the Chinese nation was in deep crisis. But the outbreak of the Second Sino-Japanese War led the Chinese Nationalist government to reconsider the Yunnan–Burma railway as necessary infrastructure for obtaining foreign supplies to save the nation. The colonial knowledge produced by British explorers and merchants earlier was reinterpreted by the Nationalists to try to persuade the British authorities to construct the Burma section of the railway. By tracing the history of this failed project, this article argues that nationalist understandings of colonial infrastructure were far from fixed and consistent. It recounts the circulation of colonial knowledge on the Yunnan–Burma railway from the late nineteenth to the early twentieth century, showing how different nationalist agents in Asia interpreted and reinterpreted colonial infrastructure at various critical periods.

In recent years, an increasing number of scholars have reexamined the nature of colonialism in modern Asia. Instead of considering colonialism as an exclusively top-down systematic establishing of economic, political, and cultural dominance over the colonised, scholars now tend to highlight the complexity of relations between colonisers and colonised.¹ Following this scholarship, this study argues that the British

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1 Frederick Cooper, *Colonialism in question: Theory, knowledge, history* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005); Ann Laura Stoler, *Along the archival grain: Epistemic anxieties and colonial common sense* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009); Robert Bickers, *Britain in China: Community, culture and colonialism 1900–1949* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999);

planning of the Yunnan–Burma railway in the late nineteenth century was not really a colonial project initiated by the British authorities in London. Instead, the project was primarily advocated and promoted by British commercial bodies and private entrepreneurs, influenced by Western adventurers and missionaries' vivid depictions and imaginings of Upper Burma and southwest China in the nineteenth century. By the end of the nineteenth century, British commercial interest groups had even funded adventurers, engineers, and surveyors to conduct comprehensive surveys of the area, resulting in a wealth of first-hand knowledge.² Disagreements over the costs and prospects of the Yunnan–Burma railway between the British authorities and interest groups, however, led to the aborting of one of the most ambitious colonial infrastructural projects in Southeast Asia. British colonialism, in this instance, cannot be perceived as a monolithic, coherent and well-designed system, but as one composed of conflicting elements, practices and appeals, subject to the varied conditions in different regions over time.

Ironically, in their anticolonial struggles, nationalists across Asia tended to accept and perpetuate the stereotyped perception of homogenised colonialism. In most nationalist narratives in India, Thailand, and Indochina, Westerners, whether they were colonial officials, merchants, missionaries, homemakers, or scientists, were all under the direction of their governments back in the metropolises and shared identical goals of exploiting local resources and oppressing the indigenous people. It was much easier and more convenient for nationalists to mobilise their followers to rise against colonial regimes tagged as uniformly cruel and discriminatory, and to ignore the remarkable differences within the Western groups.³ Thus, most anti-colonial nationalist movements in Asia tended to construct the Western colonisers as a common enemy. This image was then oversimplified, homogenised, and demonised in order to better serve nationalist mobilisation. Such perceptions of homogenised top-down colonialism were embraced by the Chinese and Burmese nationalists alike. This study asserts that both Chinese and Burmese nationalists used anti-colonial rhetoric over the proposed construction of the Yunnan–Burma railway to mobilise their supporters. The Chinese nationalists kept reminding the Chinese that the Yunnan–Burma railway was the first step of Britain's grand policy to colonise southwest China. The Burmese nationalists saw the project as a symbol of how the British were exploiting Burmese resources to advance their colonial ambitions.

The Chinese attitude toward the Yunnan–Burma railway was turned upside down, however, after the outbreak of the Second Sino-Japanese War. After losing control of almost all of its coastal ports to the Imperial Japanese forces, the Chinese

Robert Bickers, 'Shanghaianders: The formation and identity of the British settler community in Shanghai 1843–1937', *Past & Present* 159, 1 (1998): 161–211; Robert Bickers, *Empire made me: An Englishman adrift in Shanghai* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004).

2 British businessmen had been highly influential in the expansion of the empire since the 18th century. See Jessica Hanser, 'From cross-cultural credit to colonial debt: British expansion in Madras and Canton, 1750–1800', *American Historical Review* 1, 1 (2019): 87–107.

3 Shahid Amin, *Event, metaphor, memory: Chauri Chaura 1922–1992* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995); Sumit Sarkar, *Beyond nationalist frames: Postmodernism, fundamentalism, history* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002); Penny Edwards, *Cambodge: The cultivation of a nation* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2007); Shane Strate, *The lost territories: Thailand's history of national humiliation* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2015).

Nationalist government persuaded the British authorities to help them build the Yunnan–Burma railway. Nonetheless, the long-held assumption in China that the Yunnan–Burma railway was an initiative strongly supported by British authorities undermined the Nationalist government's efforts, as neither the governments of Burma nor of the United Kingdom were interested in investing in this project. Burmese nationalists' strong opposition to the railway project further surprised the Chinese government and weakened their position.

Through unpacking the entangled interests and considerations behind the Yunnan–Burma railway proposal, this article sheds light on the complicated relations between colonial infrastructure, colonialism, and nationalism in modern Asia. There is a body of scholarship on the Yunnan–Haiphong railway, which the French colonial authorities built to connect Vietnam with Yunnan in the early twentieth century. Scholars have explored how the French colonial authorities in Indochina associated the construction of the Yunnan–Haiphong railway with geopolitics and economic expectations.⁴ Some studies have also tried to examine how the railway construction and maintenance in Vietnam and Yunnan facilitated the formation of a common identity amongst the Vietnamese and Chinese railroad workers.⁵ Nonetheless, few studies have attempted to investigate how the interplay of colonialism and nationalism shaped the fate of the Yunnan–Burma railway, which has been frequently compared to the Yunnan–Haiphong railway.

Studies of colonial infrastructure have often highlighted the bilateral relations between the colonisers and the colonised. In such studies, infrastructure was often related to the colonisers' political and economic agendas. At the same time, the colonised were described as either victims or opponents. This article, however, challenges that binary dichotomy and examines various actors and their complicated relations in the story of the Yunnan–Burma railway. The actors' conflicted appeals and interests reveal multiple symbolic and material functions of an infrastructural project that sometimes had diametrically opposite political and ideological agendas. Based on this argument, this article contributes three points to the current scholarship on the Yunnan–Burma railway. Firstly, it points out that the idea of building a railway to connect Burma with Yunnan originated with British colonial adventurers and investors. This idea, however, had long been ignored by the British colonial authorities. Secondly, this article uncovers the changing attitudes of the Chinese nationalists toward the Yunnan–Burma railway in the first half of the twentieth century. It finds that although the Chinese nationalists tended to depict the Yunnan–Burma railway as a colonial conspiracy during national crises in the 1900s and 1920s, they began to promote the railway project during the Second Sino-Japanese War. Last but not least, this article also tries to uncover the voices of Burmese nationalists who saw the Yunnan–Burma railway as the main obstacle to independence.

4 Jean-Francois Rousseau, 'An imperial railway failure: The Indochina–Yunnan Railway, 1898–1941', *Journal of Transport History* 35, 1 (2014): 1–17. Rousseau argues that the Yunnan–Haiphong railway never became profitable for the French.

5 David Wilson Del Testa, 'Paint the trains red: Labor, nationalism, and the railroads in the French colonial Indochina, 1898–1945' (PhD diss., University of California, Davis, 2001); Selda Altan Öztürk, 'Labor and the politics of life along the Yunnan–Indochina Railway, 1898–1911' (PhD diss., New York University, 2017).

British commercial bodies

In 1962, Ralph Croizier published an article entitled ‘Antecedents of the Burma Road: British plans for a Burma–China railway in the nineteenth century’.⁶ Croizier systematically explores how government–business relations within the British Empire and imperial rivalries in Southeast Asia influenced British plans for the Yunnan–Burma railway in the nineteenth century. He demonstrates that British adventurers and investors had proposed at least three plans to build a railway to connect Burma with Yunnan.

The first plan was raised by Richard Sprye in the 1860s. Sprye had been a military officer in the British East India Company and served in the first Anglo–Burmese War in the 1820s. While in Burma, Sprye found that although the harsh geography of the Eastern Himalayas in this country posed significant challenges to railway construction, the relatively easy topography of southeastern Burma made a railway line from the Salween Valley northward up to China via the Shan States possible.⁷

In 1858, Sprye formally forwarded his proposal of building a railway between Burma and Yunnan to the British government. In addition, he highlighted that such a railway line would expand British commercial interests into southwestern China and check other imperial powers, such as the French, the Americans, and the Russians, which had also been focusing on this region at the time.⁸ Nonetheless, this proposal was regarded by the British Foreign Office as an empty fantasy of Sprye’s.⁹

Sprye later turned to business communities in Britain for support. He talked to leading businesspeople, gave public speeches, and wrote newspaper articles and published pamphlets to promote his ideas on the Yunnan–Burma railway.¹⁰ His efforts were rewarded as commentators and opinion leaders began to discuss the proposal openly. A comment to the editor of *The Times* expressed appreciation of Sprye’s decade-long devotion of time and money to surveying a viable railway route between Burma and Yunnan. The writer went on to say that Sprye’s preliminary work and first-hand reports from Burma opened the eyes of British manufacturers, merchants, and shipowners as to how a railway connecting Burma and Yunnan could generate enormous wealth. The commentary suggested that the British government fund this project because it had mercantile importance and would significantly strengthen Britain’s military and political position in the region.¹¹

Inspired by the media coverage, chambers of commerce across Britain began to forward petitions to request the government to take action to open up trade routes between Burma and Yunnan. Croizier discloses that the business communities in textile manufacturing cities, such as Liverpool, Huddersfield, Bradford, Halifax, and Leeds, were among the first that asked the Foreign Office, the India Office, and the

6 Ralph Croizier, ‘Antecedents of the Burma Road: British plans for a Burma–China railway in the nineteenth century’, *Journal of Southeast Asian History* 3, 2 (1962): 1–18.

7 Richard Sprye, *The British and China railway* (London: n.p., 1858), pp. 1–13.

8 *Ibid.*, p. 23.

9 ‘India and China’, *The Times*, 17 Aug. 1863.

10 ‘Money-market & City intelligence’, *The Times*, 2 May 1866.

11 ‘To the Editor of The Times’, *The Times*, 12 Oct. 1860.

Board of Trade to consider Sprye's proposal.¹² Later on, textile interest groups within significant chambers of commerce in Glasgow, Bristol, and Gloucester successfully persuaded their organisations to pressure the government on the Yunnan–Burma railway issue.¹³

In response to these appeals, the Foreign Office explained that a railway project that penetrated inland China would alienate the Chinese government, which had just conceded considerable areas to the British following the Second Opium War.¹⁴ The British Government of India also regarded Sprye's proposal as impractical. On the one hand, the proposed railway needed to cross the territories of the kingdom of Burma into the Shan States, which the British had no control over; on the other hand, the Government of India was still facing severe financial problems since the Indian Rebellion of 1857 and, therefore, had neither intention nor resources to cover the expenditure of an uncertain railway venture.¹⁵

The second plan of the Yunnan–Burma railway was proposed by Archibald Colquhoun, a civil servant in British Burma. Colquhoun was sent by the Government of India to Siam and the Shan States in 1879 and conceived of a railway line that could link Lower Burma, Siam, the Shan States, and Yunnan. In 1881, Colquhoun attempted to explore this route by himself, but he failed to examine the section in Burma. When he returned to Britain in 1882, Colquhoun began to publicise his Yunnan–Burma railway idea. In his talk with the chambers of commerce of Glasgow, London, Liverpool, Manchester and Edinburgh, Colquhoun stressed that the Yunnan–Burma railway would open undeveloped markets in the Shan States, Siam, and southwest China. In the Shan States alone, Colquhoun estimated that the British mercantile community could export up to £5 million of commodities a year.¹⁶ Colquhoun's speeches, interviews, and letters regarding the railway proposal drew the public's attention across the country, stirring up excited debates in commercial circles in Britain.¹⁷ Worrying that the Americans and the French would soon get the upper hand over the British in the region, many British businesspeople supported Colquhoun's idea. Consequently, a sum of £5,000 was raised by Colquhoun to explore his proposed line further.¹⁸

Although Colquhoun went back to Asia with the funds he had raised, he spent most of his time reporting on the Sino-French War. Instead, Holt Hallett, a civil engineer with experience in Burma, worked for Colquhoun to conduct the survey work in Siam and the Shan States.¹⁹ In their report of the survey, Colquhoun stated that 'the mines (in Yunnan), properly developed, and with better means of communication, might be made very profitable'.²⁰ In addition to the economic benefits of the

12 Croizier, 'Antecedents of the Burma Road', p. 4.

13 Sessional Papers, 19th century, Great Britain, Parliament, House of Commons (henceforth SP), 1864, vol. 63 (Shannon: Irish University Press), pp. 393–415; SP, 1867–68, vol. 51, pp. 687–744.

14 SP, 1864, vol. 63, p. 400.

15 SP, 1867–68, vol. 51, p. 764.

16 'Tuesday Morning, January 9', *Glasgow Herald*, 9 Jan. 1883.

17 'The Colquhoun Exploration Scheme', *Edinburgh News*, 15 Jan. 1883; 'Explorations in Western Asia', *Portsmouth Evening News*, 10 Jan. 1883; 'The London Gazette', *Morning Post*, 10 Jan. 1883.

18 Crozier, 'Antecedents of the Burma Road', p. 9.

19 See Holt Hallett, *A thousand miles on an elephant in the Shan States* (London: Kessinger, 1889).

20 Archibald Colquhoun, *Overland to China* (New York: Harper & Bros, 1900), p. 382.

Yunnan–Burma railway, Colquhoun further highlighted the geopolitical importance of such a railway. In a memorandum to the British government, Colquhoun noted that

if British influence is to be asserted in the Yangtze region, the connection of the Upper Yangtze by rail with Burma must be undertaken and carried through without delay. Furthermore, the assertion of British influence in the Upper Yangtze is a vital necessity for the preservation of India. To allow Russian influence to grow up in the Upper Yangtze would add another and infinitely more serious frontier question and endanger the stability of the Indian Empire.²¹

Colquhoun admitted that the railway would not prove commercially remunerative in the short term and, hence, suggested, ‘the line can only be carried through either as a government undertaking or under government guarantee’.²²

When Colquhoun and Hallett’s survey report reached Britain in 1885, British merchants were much inspired. The chambers of commerce of Manchester, London, Glasgow, Liverpool, Leeds, and Bristol also mobilised their influence to petition the British government to sponsor Colquhoun’s plan.²³ Much of Burma was by then under British rule through the Government of India. Unwilling to fund the project, the British government in London asked India to respond to the public appeal. The British Indian authorities also found Colquhoun’s proposal to be too expensive and unsustainable. On the one hand, building a railway through mountainous terrain in Burma, Siam and Yunnan would require a colossal investment of funds and resources; on the other hand, the Indian authorities argued that there were, ‘no products in Yunnan which can be utilized in exchange for goods of British manufacture to a sufficient extent to make the railway in question remunerative’.²⁴ Therefore, the Government of India insisted that it employ its limited resources to develop the internal railways in Burma.²⁵ The proposal for a Yunnan–Burma railway was turned down again.

Although not successful in pressing the authorities to build the railway, British capitalists and the public opinion they mobilised played a significant role in the decision-making behind the British annexation of Upper Burma in 1885.²⁶ Since then, there had been a surge of interest in Britain about Burma as interest groups saw the colony as having an untouched wealth of resources awaiting development and exploitation. An extensive network of railways was constructed in Burma under the pressure of these groups in the last decade of the nineteenth century.²⁷ In the 1890s, a railway line from Mandalay to Lashio was proposed to consolidate its control over the Shan States and develop the economy of Upper Burma.²⁸

21 Ibid., p. 415.

22 Ibid., p. 414.

23 ‘Eastern exploration’, *Edinburgh Evening News*, 8 Jan. 1885; ‘The annexation of Burma’, *Dundee Courier*, 5 Jan. 1886; ‘Railway construction in China’, *Daily Gazette for Middlesbrough*, 6 Jan. 1886.

24 Colquhoun, *Overland to China*, p. 414.

25 Crozier, ‘Antecedents of the Burma Road’, p. 11.

26 Anthony Webster, ‘Business and empire: A reassessment of the British conquest of Burma in 1885’, *Historical Journal* 4 (2000): 1003–25.

27 David Baillargeon, ‘“On the road to Mandalay”: The development of railways in British Burma, 1870–1900’, *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 43, 4 (2020): 654–78.

28 Crozier, ‘Antecedents of the Burma Road’, p. 13.

By the turn of the twentieth century, a third plan for the Yunnan–Burma railway was put forward. In 1898, the French government decided to fund the building of the Kunming–Haiphong railway, which would make France a dominant power in the region.²⁹ For fear of losing southwest China to the French, the British authorities seriously considered a railway link extending into Yunnan from Lashio. With the support of the British government at home and the Government of India, British capitalists established the Yunnan Company in 1898 to send expeditionary teams into Yunnan to survey the route for a railway line.³⁰ After a two-year survey in Yunnan and the Shan States, H.R. Davies, one of the leading figures in the Yunnan Company expedition, reported that there would be several engineering challenges to the Yunnan–Burma railway owing to the mountainous terrain.

Additionally, the cost of such a project would be very high, and the prospect of short-term profits was dim. Nevertheless, the Yunnan–Burma railway could give the British access to the Upper Yangtze, from where steamships could take commodities all the way down to Shanghai. As Davies describes it was, ‘only through Yunnan that India can be linked to the Yangtze and Eastern China’.³¹ Given that such a project was too large for any private commercial bodies, Davies proposed that it was handled by either the British government or the Government of India.³²

However, Davies’ proposal, too, failed to interest the Government of India. Facing difficulties in making existing railways in India and Burma profitable, the Indian authorities had privatised most of their railways since the 1880s.³³ Allowing the Government of India to cover the costs of building a railway with no prospects of profit in the near future was unacceptable in the eyes of those in power in India, even if the project had long-term geopolitical significance. While visiting Burma in 1901, Lord Curzon, the Governor-General of India, formally called off the Yunnan–Burma railway survey work, calling the whole plan a fit of ‘midsummer madness’.³⁴ Although the British government back home supported the Yunnan Company’s expeditions and surveys, it did not intend to pay the bill for construction of the railway either. Accordingly, the Yunnan–Burma railway proposal was shelved indefinitely.

Given that the Indian government had rejected Davies’ proposal, British interest groups realised that the authorities would not be interested no matter how they promoted the Yunnan–Burma railway. Furthermore, the relevant knowledge produced by Western explorers, adventurers, missionaries, and colonial officials regarding the topography and geology of Upper Burma and Yunnan in the nineteenth century had also reached the British public and disillusioned them of the extravagant riches of a Yunnan–Burma trade.³⁵ For these reasons, the craze for a railway connecting

29 Rousseau, ‘An imperial railway failure’, p. 5.

30 Major Davies, Thomas Holdich, Fred Garey, Logan Jack, John Halliday and C.H.D. Ryder, ‘Exploration in western China: Discussion’, *Geographical Journal* 21, 2 (1903): 120–26.

31 H.R. Davies, *Yun-nan: The link between India and the Yangtze* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1909), p. 7.

32 *Ibid.*, p. 7.

33 Baillargeon, ‘On the road to Mandalay’.

34 Earl of Ronaldshay, *The life of Lord Curzon: Being the authorized biography of George Nathaniel Marquess Curzon of Kedleston* (London: Kessinger, 1928), p. 202.

35 Crozier, ‘Antecedents of the Burma Road’, pp. 15–16.

Burma with Yunnan in Britain had receded by the turn of the century. British commercial bodies no longer appealed to the government regarding opening up Yunnan–Burma trade by the early twentieth century.

Imagining the Yunnan–Burma railway

Knowledge about Yunnan produced by Westerners drew the attention of Chinese intellectuals, however. In 1909, H.R. Davies had published a book, *Yun-nan: The Link between India and the Yangtze*, detailing his travels in Yunnan in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. While Davies' journeys in Yunnan were primarily aimed at surveying potential railway routes, he was also interested in the region's cultural and racial diversity. His attempts to classify and taxonomise the ethnic groups in the region were presented in the appendix of *Yun-nan* and had attracted the attention of Chinese ethnologists who were themselves interested in southwest China's populations in the 1930s. After reading Davies' *Yun-nan*, Chinese scholars including Ling Chunsheng, Ding Wenjiang, and Ma Changshou were impressed by Davies' classification model, finding it a modern and scientific way to categorise ethnic groups. Thomas Mullaney shows how Western concepts and taxonomy reached China in the late nineteenth century via Davies, who used modern linguistic and ethnological knowledge in his study of Yunnan and its peoples, and how this knowledge was later adopted by Chinese scholars and policymakers alike in the twentieth century, influencing contemporary ethnic policies in China.³⁶ Nonetheless, few scholars have specifically investigated the knowledge about the Yunnan–Burma railway produced by Davies and other Western explorers by the turn of century and how this set of knowledge shaped Chinese nationalists' perceptions of colonialism.

As early as the 1860s and 1870s, Western diplomats and merchants had begun to persuade the Qing government to consider railway construction in the country. They argued that railways had proved a highly successful tool for economic development in the West. Railways in China would greatly facilitate domestic transport and trade and, therefore, raise government revenues due to the boosted commerce. Taking the mining industry as an example, they argued that the price of Chinese coal was much higher than it was in the industrialised West owing to the high cost of transportation within China, which was then primarily powered by men and animals. With the help of railways, instead, transportation costs would be much lower, and much more coal could be exported.

Consequently, the Chinese government would obtain a tremendous rise in tax income, and the Chinese people would be enriched.³⁷ Advocates further employed the case of railway construction in India to strengthen their argument. They contended that the railway system built by the British in India connected remote regions in the country and facilitated the circulation of commodities.³⁸ Furthermore, the railway could quickly deliver foodstuffs to places ravaged by famine and thus save lives.³⁹

36 Thomas Mullaney, *Coming to terms with the nation: Ethnic classification in modern China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011).

37 Joseph Edkins, 'Tieluyouyishuo' [The benefits of railways], *Zhongxijianwen* 10 (1873): 31–7.

38 'Dayingyikai yindulunchetielu' [The British are considering building railways in India], *Jiaohuixinbao*, 7 Sept. 1872.

39 'Hanhuangyinyou tieluyunliang jiuhojimin' [Starving people being saved by foodstuffs transported via railways], *Wanguogongbao*, 24 Apr. 1875.

However, the Qing government not only expressed no interest in railways but also indicated its deep concerns over the intentions of the Western countries concerning the construction of railways in China. In an 1865 memorandum of the Zongli Yamen (the Qing foreign affairs department), Chinese officials stated that they rejected the justifications for building railways to facilitate transportation. They further thought that such a justification was an evident Western conspiracy against Chinese sovereignty.⁴⁰ One year later, a Chinese official further elaborated, 'Westerners would use the railway to connect their country with inland China. Then, Westerners would migrate to China freely, and Western troops could be deployed to China freely. If that happens, even the most loyal patriots could no longer save China.'⁴¹ Others agreed that facilitating China's transportation via railways was merely an excuse for Westerners, whose real intention was to collect crucial information and intelligence for their future intervention in Chinese domestic affairs and to facilitate Western missionary work.⁴² Chinese officials also worried that rural Chinese would be angered by the sudden appearance of railways, regarded by most villagers as evil. If conflicts between ordinary Chinese and Westerners over the construction of railways erupted, Western governments would have excuses to make more trouble.⁴³ Overall, the records show that the Qing government was deeply concerned about foreign-built railways in its territories and tended to relate it to Western expansionism and intervention since the beginning of its contact with this technology.

In addition to worrying about railways inside China, the Qing government focused on Western proposals to build railways in neighbouring countries, and in Russian Siberia in particular. An article in *Wanguogongbao* in 1874 mentions that the Russian authorities planned to survey a railway route connecting Moscow to Manchuria via Siberia. In so doing, Chinese commodities, such as tea, could be transported to Russia more quickly and at lower prices than the current sea routes.⁴⁴ Some Chinese intellectuals likened Russia's plans to the Prussian war plan against the French. During the Franco-Prussian War in 1870, the Prussian army employed its railway system to transport its troops and defeat the French. Chinese commentators reminded their readers that if Russia completed its Siberian rail network, it could acquire economic benefits during peacetime and quickly deploy its military forces to the Chinese border during wartime.⁴⁵ In 1880, the news of a possible Russian railway project in the Khanate of Kokand (within the territories of Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Kazakhstan) was reported in China. Since Kokand shared a border with Xinjiang, which was troubled by riots and unrest in the late nineteenth century, Chinese commentators had argued that the Russian railway project was a well-designed plan that aimed to annex Xinjiang.⁴⁶

40 Qingdaiwaijiaodanganhuibian [Collections of Diplomatic Archives of the Qing Dynasty, hereafter Qing Diplomatic Archives], *Choubanyiwushimo*, vol. 31, 1865 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2008).

41 Qing Diplomatic Archives, *Choubanyiwushimo*, vol. 45, 1866 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2008).

42 Qing Diplomatic Archives, *Choubanyiwushimo*, vol. 54, 1867 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2008).

43 Qing Diplomatic Archives, *Choubanyiwushimo*, vol. 56, 1867 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2008).

44 'Daeguoshi: Nizaotieludaodizhongyuan' [Russian affairs: Planning to build railways to China], *Wanguogongbao*, 28 Nov. 1874.

45 'Lunerenzhuanyitielu zhongguobukebubei' [The Russians are focusing on railway construction and the Chinese have to respond with preparation], *Wanguogongbao*, 8 Feb. 1879.

46 'Lunerenzengjiantieluzhihuohan' [The Russians plan to build railways to the Khanate of Kokand], *Wanguogongbao*, 24 Jan. 1880.

The Qing government was well informed of the Russian railway projects. While travelling in Russia in 1891, the envoy of the Qing court Xu Jingcheng reported that the construction of the Russian Siberian railways would soon extend to Vladivostok.⁴⁷ Government leaders such as Zhang Zhidong and Prince Gong repeatedly highlighted the potential threat of the Russian Siberian railway. Additionally, they warned that the completion of the Siberian railway would allow the Russians to dominate trade in northeast Asia. Cheap Russian commodities would flow into the China market and leave few business opportunities for the local Chinese. The Russian authorities would then send its law enforcement units to Manchuria to justify protecting Russian interests. With the inflow of Russian migrants, capital, security forces, and commodities, Manchuria would soon fall into the hands of the Russians.⁴⁸ Prince Gong stressed that the Qing government needed to build its own railway network in Manchuria in advance to address this crisis.⁴⁹

In fact, since the 1890s, the Qing government had approved railway construction in the country.⁵⁰ One of the principal reasons behind this compromise was Chinese concern over Russia's railway construction in Siberia and the possible Russian infiltration and intervention in Manchuria via these railways.⁵¹ Consequently, one of the first railways constructed by the Qing government was in Manchuria (the Guandong railway).

Similarly, the Qing government was also worried about its border with Burma. The Western staff of the Chinese Imperial Maritime Customs systematically produced visual and archival knowledge of a region that had drawn the interest of foreign powers and concerned the Qing court at the turn of the twentieth century.⁵² In contrast to their attitude toward the Russian Siberian railway, however, few Chinese paid attention to the proposal of building a railway to connect Burma with Yunnan as put forward by British commercial communities in the late nineteenth century. Ironically, while the British government formally cancelled the survey of the Yunnan–Burma railway and the interest groups ceased to promote the project in the early twentieth century, rumours of a possible British annexation of Yunnan through the construction of the proposed railway repeatedly came up in Chinese language newspapers, periodicals and books, and gave rise to intense debate among Chinese nationalists.

In the first decade of the twentieth century, Chinese intellectuals began to suffer increasingly from colonial anxieties. The Russo-Japanese War had a twofold effect on

47 Wang Yanwei and Wang Liang, eds, *Qingjiwaijiaoshiliaozhiguangxuchao*, vol. 84, 1891 (Beijing: Shumuwenxian chubanshe, 1987).

48 Wang Yanwei and Wang Liang, eds, *Qingjiwaijiaoshiliaozhiguangxuchao*, vol. 117, 1895 (Beijing: Shumuwenxian chubanshe, 1987); Wang Yanwei and Wang Liang, eds, *Qingjiwaijiaoshiliaozhiguangxuchao*, vol. 118, 1895 (Beijing: Shumuwenxian chubanshe, 1987).

49 Wang and Wang, *Qingjiwaijiaoshiliaozhiguangxuchao*, vol. 118, 1895.

50 The Qing government formally approved the construction of railway in China in May 1889; see Fu Rucheng, ed., *Zhongguojindaitielushiziliao (1863–1911)* [Materials on the history of modern Chinese railways, 1863–1911] (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1963), p. 171.

51 Yang Yonggang, *Zhongguojindaitielushi* [A history of modern Chinese railways] (Shanghai: Shanghaishudianchubanshe, 1997), p. 25.

52 Emma Reisz, 'Projecting the road: Topological photography on the Yunnan–Burma frontier', *Chinese Historical Review* 25, 2 (2018): 143–62.

the ever-growing tide of Chinese nationalism. On the one hand, the defeat of the Russians at the hands of an Asian country greatly encouraged the Chinese nationalists. They were convinced that China too could develop into a modern and powerful nation if proper and determined reforms were introduced. On the other hand, as Japan had overtaken Russia as the dominant power in Manchuria and invested in almost all the aspects of the economic, cultural, and political life of the region under cover of the Mantetsu (the South Manchuria Railway Company), the fear of imminent subjugation of the Chinese nation had spread among the nationalists. The Kunming–Haiphong railway (completed in 1910) by French Indochina further deepened their anxieties: China was now facing the fate of being divided and colonised from all directions.⁵³

In 1905, a Chinese student in Japan named Liu Fu wrote a book to briefly introduce China's railways. He highlighted that the British were planning to construct a railway to connect Burma with Yunnan. The railway would have two routes in Yunnan, Tengyue and Shunning. Both routes would eventually reach Kunming, the capital of Yunnan. Liu Fu argued that this railway clearly showed British imperial ambitions and would pose a significant danger to China.⁵⁴ Chinese newspapers also rushed to report the news. In 1908, *Shenbao* reported that British officials planned to build a railway from Bhamo in Burma to Dali in Yunnan.⁵⁵ Two years later, *Shenbao* further reported that the British had developed a more detailed plan for the Yunnan–Burma railway. They would build the Bhamo–Tengyue section first and then connect Tengyue with Dali later.⁵⁶

This news spread widely in China, evoking intense criticism from Chinese nationalists. An open letter by Chinese migrants in Japan to the people of Yunnan in 1906, states that the Kunming–Haiphong railway had already endangered Yunnan. The letter argued that if the British decided to build the Yunnan–Burma railway, Yunnan could hardly escape the fate of being divided by the two colonial powers. As the Qing government had already signed the deal with the French and the Kunming–Haiphong railway was under construction, very little could be done to stop that project. Instead, the open letter asked all Yunnanese to stand up against any Yunnan–Burma railway proposal, which had not been built.⁵⁷ One year later, a group of Yunnan students studying in Japan wrote an open letter to ask the Qing government to reject any agreement regarding the Yunnan–Burma railway. Otherwise,

53 Rana Mitter identifies the May Fourth movement in 1919 as the defining moment of modern Chinese nationalism. See Rana Mitter, *A bitter revolution: China's struggle with the modern world* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005). The case of the Yunnan–Burma railway, however, shows that nationalism among the Chinese socioeconomic elites had already gained momentum by the early 1900s. See also Robert Bickers, *Out of China: How the Chinese ended the era of Western domination* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017).

54 Liu Fu, *Zhongguotieluyaojian* [A brief index to the Chinese railways] (Tokyo: Zhongguoshulin, 1905), p. 37.

55 'Yingrenyizhudianmiantielu' [The British were considering building the Yunnan–Burma railway], *Shenbao*, 16 Feb. 1908.

56 'Wenyngrenyubandianmianlu' [Learning that the British were planning to build the Yunnan–Burma railway], *Shenbao*, 2 May 1910.

57 'Liudongquantiguorenshang quandianshenshiyandianmiantieluqi' [A note on the Yunnan–Burma railway forwarded by all Chinese citizens in Japan to all Yunnanese], *Yunnan* 2 (1906): 131–3.

they claimed, ‘Yunnan would become another Manchuria’.⁵⁸ Yunnan businesspeople in Sichuan province also expressed their concerns about the Yunnan–Burma railway to the government. They too warned that British expansion into Yunnan would be unstoppable if the government approved the railway. Yunnan would become another Burma (a British colony), Korea, Taiwan or Manchuria. Furthermore, with Yunnan as its base, the British would soon expand into Tibet and Sichuan.⁵⁹

Nevertheless, as demonstrated here, there is no evidence from the British side indicating that the British government and commercial communities had any plans to pursue the Yunnan–Burma railway project in the early twentieth century. The reports on this project and the responses and reactions in Chinese language publications thus reveal how anxious Chinese nationalists imagined and exaggerated or invented the news of the Yunnan–Burma railway’s construction at a time when the Chinese nation was in deep crisis.

In the 1920s, Chinese nationalism rose again as the Guomindang (the Nationalist Party) launched the Northern Expedition to unify China. The Guomindang attributed the national humiliations of China to warlords and imperialists and vowed to drive them all out of China. The ensuing conflicts between British soldiers and Chinese workers in Hankou and Jiujiang in 1927 deepened anti-British sentiments. Accordingly, discussions about the Yunnan–Burma railway reappeared in the Chinese media. In 1927, an article elaborated how the British had tried to build the Yunnan–Burma railway at the cost of Chinese sovereignty from the late nineteenth century onward and reminded the Guomindang government that the British were still interested in the railway project through which they would control Yunnan.⁶⁰ Other Chinese commentators asserted that the British had long held the ambition of connecting India with the Yangtze River. In so doing, the British could bypass Singapore and Hong Kong and transport Indian commodities into China at a much lower cost and in a much shorter time. Hence, China and India would be integrated into a single market under British rule. The key to this project, they argued, was the Yunnan–Burma railway. As the British were planning to build this railway, the Chinese would soon lose control of their nation.⁶¹

Overall, unhappy with what had occurred in Manchuria and the building of the Kunming–Haiphong railway, Chinese nationalists saw the proposed Yunnan–Burma railway as a symbol and last stand of their fight for national salvation. It did not matter whether the British were going to actually build the railway. By inventing and spreading the news of a British conspiracy to make inroads into China, the nationalists expressed their deep concern over the fate of their nation and strengthened their own political appeal.

58 ‘Liuxuesheng dianzuxiliangfudianchengdu’ [Students studying abroad telegraphed to boycott the appointment of Xiliang], *Shenbao*, 9 May 1907.

59 ‘Lvshuyunnantongxiangquantidaibiao weipianmajiewuchengchuanduwen’ [Appeal to the Governor of Sichuan with regard to the boundary issues of Pianma by representatives of the Yunnan businessmen in Sichuan], *Shenbao*, 19 Aug. 1911.

60 ‘Dianmiantieluzhijiaoshe’ [Negotiations with regard to the Yunnan–Burma railway], *Jiaotongyanjiuhuibao* 2 (1927): 39–46.

61 ‘Dianmianbianwuyuxinandaju’ [The boundary issues in Yunnan and Burma and the political situation in southwest China], *Jianguoyuekan (Shanghai)* 1 (1929): 53–9.

The Chinese nationalists' periodic voicing of concerns over the Yunnan–Burma railway echoed the Guomindang's anti-colonial and anti-imperialist rhetoric. Brian Tsui observes that the Guomindang had launched a conservative revolution that aimed to achieve its nation-building and modernisation projects via resorting to the global radical right-wing ideologies of the 1930s. In competing with the Chinese communists for legitimacy, the Guomindang also tagged itself as a revolutionary party which would lead China in the fight against foreign imperialism and colonialism.⁶² Yet the Guomindang was to have a complete change of heart over the long-dismissed Yunnan–Burma railway after Japan invaded China.

Wartime planning

In 1937, war between China and Japan broke out. Within one year, almost all the coastal areas and port cities in China were occupied by Japanese troops. The Chinese Nationalist government, which had retreated to inland China since late 1937, had to rely on overland routes for foreign supplies. The Soviet Union transported commodities from Central Asia to northwest China via Xinjiang. The Chinese also imported supplies from the Yunnan–Burma Road and the Kunming–Haiphong railway.

Nevertheless, the logistical capacities of these routes were far from sufficient to meet the demands of China's war effort. The route connecting Soviet Central Asia with northwest China was almost 3,000 km long. The distances, poor road conditions, and the lack of trucks thwarted this route's capacity. Meanwhile, supplies shipped from overseas were unloaded at Rangoon and transported by railway up to Lashio before they were brought into China through the Yunnan–Burma Road connecting Kunming with Lashio in the Shan States via Baoshan and Wanding. However, the road passed through jungles, and was unable to handle heavy freight. The Kunming–Haiphong railway faced a similar problem of capacity. In 1939, more than 130,000 tons of cargo owned by the Chinese government awaited rail transport in the port of Haiphong. In addition, more than 150,000 tons of cargo ordered by the Chinese from the Americans were being delivered to Haiphong. But the Kunming–Haiphong railway's capacity was merely 300 tons a day—it would take years for the Chinese to receive their cargo.⁶³

Desperately trying to explore alternative routes and means to expand its supply lines, the Chinese Nationalist government decided to build the Yunnan–Burma railway in 1938. After a brief survey, Chinese engineers worked out a proposal to connect Kunming with Lashio through the railway. The whole project was divided into two sections within the Chinese territories. The eastern section was approximately 500 km long and started from Kunming to Jilong. In addition, the construction materials for the eastern section could be transported via the Kunming–Haiphong railway. The western section was nearly 300 km long and started from Jilong to the border with Burma along the Nanding River. In the meantime, the British Burmese government was to construct a railway line from Lashio to Kunlong and the Nanding River to connect with the Chinese western section. From Lashio, the Yunnan–Burma

62 Brian Tsui, *China's conservative revolution: The quest for a new order, 1927–1949* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

63 Academia Historica (AH), Taipei, 020-011110-0022, Waijiaobu, Dianmianyunshu-Tielu 2, 19 May 1939.

railway could merge with the Burma railway network and, therefore, facilitate transportation between the port of Rangoon and Kunming.⁶⁴

In the eyes of the Chinese Nationalist government, the success of the Yunnan–Burma railway depended on whether the Burmese government would build the Lashio–Kunlong section. The materials for the building of the western section between Jilong and the Nanding River had to be imported from overseas via the port of Rangoon. The Lashio–Kunlong section had to be built first. The heaviest components and machinery, such as rails and locomotives, could be taken into China via the existing railways.⁶⁵

In 1938, the Chinese government formally asked the Burmese government to construct the Lashio–Kunlong section. Given that this section was comparatively short (roughly 160 km), the Chinese government had been optimistic that the British would support this project.⁶⁶ However, the British authorities showed no interest in the Yunnan–Burma railway. In response to the request of the Chinese, the British Embassy in China highlighted that the region between Kunlong and the Nanding River had not been demarcated and that the British authorities were unable to build anything in the region before the boundaries between the two countries were fixed. Furthermore, the British also highlighted that the economic prospects of the Yunnan–Burma railway were not attractive enough for them to invest in this project.⁶⁷

The Chinese Foreign Ministry attributed the negative attitude of the British authorities to their ambitions on the boundary issues.⁶⁸ One Chinese official affirmed in a memorandum that the Governor of Burma Sir Archibald Cochrane had been in the position for more than three years. One of his greatest ambitions as a governor was to settle the boundary issues with China. If the Chinese government could compromise on the boundary issues, the Burmese governor would probably approve the railway project.⁶⁹ Meanwhile, the Second World War broke out in Europe in September 1939 and by the summer of 1940, the Germans had defeated the French, Britain's ally. After September 1940, the French colonies in Indochina were controlled by the Japanese, who cut off the Kunming–Haiphong railway, hence the construction of the Yunnan–Burma railway became even more vital for the Chinese. Guomindang leader Chiang Kai-shek instructed the Chinese authorities to allow the British to construct the Lashio–Kunlong section on the southern bank of the Nanding River, an implication of territorial compromise.⁷⁰

The British Burmese government, however, was still hesitant to support this project. In the early twentieth century, all railways in Burma were owned and operated by the Burmese government. Facing fierce competition from road and river transport,

64 AH, 020-011110-0022, Waijiaobu, Dianmianyunshu-Tielu 2, 14 July 1938.

65 AH, 020-011110-0022, Waijiaobu, Dianmianyunshu-Tielu 2, 2 July 1938.

66 AH, 020-011110-0022, Waijiaobu, Dianmianyunshu-Tielu 2, 6 July 1938.

67 AH, 020-011110-0022, Waijiaobu, Dianmianyunshu-Tielu 2, 22 May 1938.

68 AH, 020-011110-0022, Waijiaobu, Dianmianyunshu-Tielu 1, 17 Apr. 1940.

69 AH, 020-011110-0021, Waijiaobu, Dianmianyunshu-Tielu 1, 26 Apr. 1940.

70 Before 1940, the land between Kunlong and the southern bank of the Nanding River was undemarcated. The Chinese compromise of allowing the British to build railways from Kunlong to the Nanding River indicated that the Chinese Nationalist government would give the land to Burma. See AH, 020-011110-0021, Waijiaobu, Dianmianyunshu-Tielu 1, 4 May 1940.

the Burma Railways had been losing money since the 1920s. After the partition of Burma and India in 1937, the Burma Railways even became the country's most significant source of debt. The Burmese government asked the Chinese government to provide persuasive information concerning the economic potential of the railway.⁷¹

Although the Chinese began to survey the natural resources of Yunnan before the war, few systematic studies had been done due to the lack of funding and expertise. Consequently, the Nationalist government found it difficult to give the British a suitable response. At this critical moment, officials in the Chinese Ministry of Communication suggested that Davies' book *Yun-nan* might be helpful. As described, the book was well known in China, especially among Chinese scholars who used it as a classic text on ethnic minorities in Yunnan.⁷² In their negotiations with the Burmese government, Chinese officials regarded Davies' material on Yunnan's landscape, peoples and products as a source of first-hand and persuasive information.

Within less than one month, a memorandum of the economic prospects of the Yunnan–Burma railway was drafted by the Chinese Ministry of Communication and forwarded to the Burmese government. The memorandum's argument was primarily built on material in Davies' book with additional information added by A.O. Whitehouse, a royal engineer who had followed Davies' route in Yunnan and approved his survey in 1939. The memorandum highlighted that the coal deposits near Kunming were abundant and of high quality. Since Burma imported most of its coal from India, the coal freight rate in Upper Burma had been extremely high. The Yunnan–Burma railway could bring coal from Yunnan to Upper Burma much quicker and at lower prices. Developing coal mines in Yunnan would further stimulate the exploitation of other mineral resources, such as iron, copper, zinc, silver, and gold. The rich deposits of these minerals and the cheap freight prices facilitated by the Yunnan–Burma railway would significantly advance Burma's economic development.

Further, the Chinese government followed Davies' suggestion of building a railway line between Sichuan and Yunnan (the Suifu–Kunming railway). Once the Yunnan–Burma railway was joined to the Suifu–Kunming railway, the British could easily tap the Upper Yangtze market. Commodities in inland China could move to Europe more cheaply by rail and steamer via Rangoon than by the all-water route via Shanghai. Last but not least, the Yunnan–Burma railway would help to develop Yunnan, where an increasing population required more agricultural products. In particular, Burma could export rice to Yunnan through the railway for a significant profit.⁷³

While the British authorities evaluated the Chinese proposal for constructing the Yunnan–Burma railway, the news also reached Burmese politicians and intellectuals and caused heated debates. Most Burmese strongly opposed the construction of the railway with two justifications. First, Burma was a neighbour to India and China, the two most populous nations globally. When Burma was administered as a province of British India, tens of thousands of Indians had migrated to Burma. Indian landlords were perceived to have seized Burmese lands, Indian workers to have taken

71 AH, 020-011110-0021, Waijiaobu, Dianmianyunshu-Tielu 1, 6 June 1940.

72 Mullaney, *Coming to terms with the nation*.

73 Foreign Office Records, The National Archives, London (FO), 271/27610, Burma–Yunnan Railway (Folder 1), from Chinese Embassy, London to R.A. Butler, Foreign Office, 12 Feb. 1941.

Burmese jobs, and Indian moneylenders to have exploited ordinary Burmese people. There were far fewer Chinese migrants in Burma due to the mountains and jungles separating Burma and Yunnan.

If the Yunnan–Burma railway was built, the Burmese feared that numerous Chinese would flock to Burma and make the livelihoods of ordinary Burmese more difficult. Second, the Burmese nationalist movement had burgeoned since the 1930s as dozens of the Burmese nationalists were elected into the Legislative Council and Parliament of the country. Most Burmese assumed that their country would soon obtain independence from the British. The Yunnan–Burma railway construction implied that the British would develop huge investments alongside the railway line. Hence, the nationalists feared that the railway would propel the British to maintain their colonial rule, instead of giving the Burmese their independence, to ensure the enormous investment in the railway was paid off and brought profits.⁷⁴

Tim Harper and Christopher A. Bayly find that although there existed factions amongst the Burmese nationalists on the eve of the Pacific War, they shared a pro-Japanese attitude and thought they could use a possible Japanese invasion scenario to bolster their positions and to push the British to make compromises. At the same time, the British authorities were well aware that they were unprepared to defend Burma against the Japanese forces.⁷⁵ As the Japanese tried to use all opportunities to incite anti-British sentiments among the Burmese,⁷⁶ British concern over the Yunnan–Burma railway grew because the Burmese were historically suspicious of the Chinese.

In January 1941, the British authorities asked the Burmese government to send a mission to Chongqing, the wartime capital of the Nationalist government, for a discussion about the Yunnan–Burma railway.⁷⁷ To explain the Mission's true purpose to Sir Archibald Cochrane, the Foreign Office revealed that the Burmese government could make good use of China's reliance on Burmese transport lines to gain some significant concessions on boundary issues. It further indicated that the Mission should dissuade the Chinese government from constructing the Yunnan–Burma railway and recommend road transportation instead.⁷⁸

On 15 January 1941, the Burma Mission that was composed of T.H. Craw (Counsellor to the Governor of Burma), U Ba Than (Minister of Commerce and Industry), D.B. Petch (Commercial Secretary), and J.F.H. Nicholson (Chief Public Works Officer, Federated Shan States) visited Chongqing to meet their Chinese counterparts.⁷⁹ During the talk, the Mission told the Chinese officials that the construction of the Burma portion of the Yunnan–Burma railway was beyond the capacity of Burma. Instead, they suggested that the Chinese should focus on developing their

74 'Extension of railway line to China border', *Rangoon Gazette*, 4 Apr. 1941.

75 Christopher Bayly and Tim Harper, *Forgotten armies: Britain's Asian empire and the war with Japan* (New York: Penguin, 2005), pp. 152–205.

76 AH, 020-011110-0022, Waijiaobu, Dianmianyunshu-Tielu 2, 7 June 1939.

77 FO, 271/27610, Burma–Yunnan Railway (Folder 1), from the Governor of Burma to the Under Secretary of State, Foreign Office, 4 Jan. 1941.

78 FO, 271/27610, Burma–Yunnan Railway (Folder 1), from Secretary of State to Governor of Burma, 8 Jan. 1941.

79 For the list of the Mission, see FO, 271/27610, Burma–Yunnan Railway (Folder 1), from Secretary of State to Governor of Burma, 29 Dec. 1940.

road transportation system.⁸⁰ In a telegraph sent from the Chinese Foreign Ministry to the Chinese Embassy in Britain immediately after the meeting with the Burma Mission, the Chinese officials admitted that they had failed to convince the Burmese government and that the Yunnan–Burma railway may have to be cancelled.⁸¹

Conclusion

While the Burma Mission was still in Chongqing in early 1941, the chief economic adviser of the British government, Frederick Leith-Ross, wrote a letter to the Foreign Office, in which he stressed that the symbolic significance of the construction of the Yunnan–Burma railway was much more essential than its economic significance. He explained that the Chinese resistance served as a crucial deterrent to the southward expansion of the Japanese. Because the morale of the Chinese had been on the verge of collapse due to repeated defeats, British support for the Yunnan–Burma railway would greatly strengthen Chinese resolve even if the project's commercial prospects were dim.⁸² Trying to trap the Japanese troops in China and save its Asian colonies, the British authorities accepted Leith-Ross' suggestions and decided to fund the Yunnan–Burma railway project directly from London.⁸³

On 17 February 1941, the British Embassy in China informed Chiang Kai-shek that the British government agreed to build the Burma section of the Yunnan–Burma railway out of its sympathy toward the Chinese.⁸⁴ However, the railway construction was fraught with chaos and disruptions as a result of miscommunications between the British and the Chinese, a shortage of materials during the war, and opposition from the Burmese. Most of the Burma sections had not been built when the Pacific War broke out in December 1941.⁸⁵ As the Japanese invaded Burma and defeated the Allies in early 1942, the unfinished Yunnan–Burma railway project was closed down.

When the Allies reconquered Burma in 1945, the Chinese asked whether the British would like to resume the construction of the Yunnan–Burma railway.⁸⁶ The British authorities maintained that the commercial prospects of such a project were too dim to be resumed. Furthermore, following the devastation of the Second World War and postwar reconstruction needs, neither the Burmese nor the British governments had adequate funds to construct the railway.⁸⁷ The Chinese Nationalist government did not argue any more as it was preparing for civil war against the Communists. Thus, the century-long plan for the Yunnan–Burma railway

80 FO, 271/27610, Burma–Yunnan Railway (Folder 1), from Governor of Burma to S. of S. for Burma, 20 Jan. 1941.

81 AH, 020-011110-0021, Waijiaobu, Dianmianyunshu-Tielu 1, 24 Jan. 1941.

82 FO, 271/27610, Burma–Yunnan Railway (Folder 1), from Sir F. Leith-Ross to Mr Butler, 16 Jan. 1941.

83 A budget of £250 million was proposed by Leith-Ross and accepted by the British government; see FO, 271/27610, Burma–Yunnan Railway (Folder 1), from Burma Office to Butler, 13 Feb. 1941.

84 AH, 020-011110-0021, Waijiaobu, Dianmianyunshu-Tielu 1, 11 Mar. 1941.

85 FO, 371/31631, Burma–Yunnan Railway 1942, from War Office to Mr Sterndale Bennett, 7 Jan. 1942.

86 FO, 371/46261, Burma–Yunnan Railway 1945, from Chungking dispatch, 6 Feb. 1945.

87 FO, 371/46261, Burma–Yunnan Railway 1945, from the Under Secretary of State, Foreign Office to Burma Office, 21 July 1945.

ended until the twenty-first century when the Chinese government, under Communist rule since 1949, launched its Belt-and-Road Initiative.

Overall, this article elucidates how the knowledge of colonial infrastructure produced by Western adventurers and investors in the late nineteenth century had long been ignored by the colonial authorities. It also tells how Asian nationalists (re)imagined a colonial infrastructural project and used their imaginations to serve their respective political agendas, at different times.