

ON THE BORDERS OF TONKIN BY DR P. NEIS.

(Sur Les Frontières du Tonkin 1885-1887)

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Chapter 1

Departure from Hanoi in gunboat. -Landing at Chu

In the month of April, 1885, to execute the article 3 of the Treaty of Tien-Tsin signed on 9 June, France and China appointed a commission of delimitation of the borders of Tonkin. This article of the Treaty was conceived in these terms "within a period of six months from the signing of this Treaty, the Commissioners appointed by the high contracting parties will go on-site to recognize the border between China and Tonkin; they arise, everywhere where need be, the border posts intended to make apparent the demarcation line; in the event that they could not reach agreement on the location of these border posts or corrections of detail that related to the present-day border of Tonkin, in the common interest of the two countries, they would refer to their respective Governments. "To accomplish this mission, the French government sent, representatives of three ministries. These were: the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Mr. Bourcier Saint-Chaffray, the Consul general, Chairman of the French delegation, Mr. Scherzer, consul to Canton, and Dr. Neis, doctor of the Navy, Explorer in Indochina, members, Mr. Pallu de la Barrière, Member Assistant; for the Ministry of war, Lieutenant-Colonel Tisseyre, and for the Department of the Navy, Captain Bouinai. A clerk of Chancery of Port Said, Mr. Delenda, was Deputy to the president as Secretary. We will see later that during these two years of travel, although sudden changes commission staff; say immediately that, upon his arrival in Indochina M. Pallu de la Barrière left the commission and did not participate in any role of its work. Mr. Scherzer and Mr. Tisseyre were previously in the Far East, the other members journeyed together from Marseilles on 20 September and arrived on 11 November in Hanoi, where they were very graciously received by general de Courcy and his staff. Colonel Tisseyre was in Hanoi, and M. Scherzer has arrived there a few days later, the commission, in full, had just to get to the border. The Chinese commissioners warned that they were waiting in Long-Chéou, a Chinese city situated on the confines of Kouang-Si, not far from Lang-son, the arrival in this city of the French delegation to get started and join us at the border. Unfortunately, Lang - Son, has been evacuated by our troops since the retreat of colonel Herbinger, had not yet been reoccupied. The intention of general de Courcy was to completely pacify the Delta and neglect, at least for the moment, the borders and even all high Tonkin. In the administration as in the army, this viewpoint seemed wrong to almost everyone who knew Tonkin: the pacification of the Delta seemed impossible if it is abandoned to the irregular bandits the largest part of the country that we knew, included in the North, on the side of Lang-Son and Caobang, the rich and fertile land; Then, if you considered Tonkin as a pathway for our trade in China; we had to ensure the roads leading there. Finally we owed the Chinese commission; who had sent a commission of delimitation on our borders, the

implementation of article of the Treaty of Tien-tsin. Despite all these reasons, it was not without difficulty that Mr. Saint-Chaffray managed to overcome the hesitations to select the general in chief, and it was only after five weeks of waiting in Hanoi that the French delegation was able to get back on the road to join the Chinese delegation. To reach Lang - son, where we had to put us easily in communication with our Chinese colleagues stationed at Long-Chéou, general Warnet, Chief of staff, chooses the route taken in February by general Négrier. We had to find escort column that would lead us, under the command of the Chief of battalion Servièrè, and supplies and the coolies at Chu, on the Lochnam, organized by the staff, (native porters) necessary for this column.

On 10 December in the morning, we embarked finally on both the Moulin and the Jacquin, the gunboats that must lead us to Lam, the port of Chu. Many friends came to say goodbye to us; they did not know if our small column will be able to arrive safely at the border, but we have good confidence and we are happy to get out of the forced inaction when we were in Hanoi. In Hanoi, the Commission has been joined by two topographers, Messrs lieutenant Vernet and Bohin. It is accompanied by interpreters; letters, domestic; the little Tonkinese, clever, vigorous and a-bit-difficult-to- feed ponies; three hundred coolies, who will be responsible for personal supplies of the commission, are distributed in four junks loaded rice and adjacent to each of the sides of the two gunboats. These small gunboats travel little after sunset because of the sandbanks that clutter all rivers of Tonkin, but mostly because the Commander, found himself the only officer of the operation, is always responsible and that it would be impossible to continue a day and night without rest, a painful service. We moved to camp on the bridge [the two gunboats, thus heavily loaded; in the evening we established camp beds near each other.] The large white nets, which defend us very imperfectly – from the cloud of mosquitoes covering the Red River, give to the bridge of the gunboats the view of a dormitory. The next day we arrived at Hai Duong, and on the 12th, after having passed the position of the Seven Pagoda and the Song Thuong, we engaged in the Loch-nam, a charming small river with forested banks, often filled and dotted with picturesque rocks which make it perilous navigation. A few days earlier, the gunboat Henry-Riviere screwed on one of these rocks, and we see it stranded on a sandbank where it will await a flood of the River to be floated. The current is quick, and the junks loaded with rice that we tow are threatened every moment of sink to bottom, despite the very moderate pace at which we walk; a light breeze from complicating the situation, the junk, exposed to the wind, fills half and sinks before we could tow it to the shore; the coolies saved themselves fairly easily, and the loss of rice is not our major importance. We stop in the afternoon to the position of Lam, where must end our navigation. This post and that of Chu, which is distant 7 km, were very affected by cholera during the last campaign; there are still a few cases, and the soldiers and coolies crowded mass that we take with us may cause an upsurge of the epidemic; therefore, we decide to pass as quickly as possible in these plague-stricken places.

End of Chapter 1