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Another "Mediterranean" in Southeast Asia [1]

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Translation by Nola Cooke

Abstract: Southeast Asia, long known as an intermediate zone between the ancient civilisations of China and India, is also an area that scholars have long portrayed as historically subject to influences coming from its west, beginning with Indianisation, then islamisation and finally westernisation. However, this article argues that it would be far more insightful, and historically more accurate for the last several centuries at least, to treat Southeast Asia and southern China as part of one region, in the same way that Fernand Braudel approached the history of the Mediterranean.

In contemporary thinking about Indonesia, once we shift our perspective from the level of a national space, like for instance that occupied by the Indonesian archipelago, to a broader regional perspective, two scenarios immediately come to mind: the first is "Southeast Asia", the second "ASEAN". Both scenarios are in fact variants of the same approach and, speaking chronologically, quite *recent* (dating respectively from 1945 and 1967), with the second merely the political (and semi-futurological) formulation of the first. Without dwelling too much on the difficulties ASEAN confronted in the late 1990s, [2] we can continue to predict a good future for Southeast Asia. Happily situated between the age-old giants of India and China, it continues to take off, despite the occasional bumps and already forms a sort of privileged buffer zone between the two Asian giants, a centre about the same size as Europe and a worthy pairing with it…

But this sense of Southeast Asian "centring" is not all that new. If the names in current use are quite recent, it was still a very long time ago that the West first identified the totality of the "East Indies"—that space which the Chinese for their part had designated for long centuries as the *Nanyang*, or "South Seas"—as a sort of "party-wall" that both connects and separates the two giants, a zone where Chinese and Indian influences had historically met (from whence the fruitful concept of "Indochina") and as a region of lesser political density, where structures were less rigid and where they could hope to find an advantageous zone of influence.

Map of the "East Indies," circa 1662

This perception is reflected more or less clearly in all the successive histories of Southeast Asia. Initially written from a colonial perspective, and later from a nationalist one, in either case they were marked by a strong desire to stress that the greatest influences came from the West: first of all "Indianisation", then "Islamisation" (conceived essentially as coming from Islamised India, or from the Middle East), and finally, of course, "Westernisation", after the early sixteenth-century arrival of the Portuguese. Written originally by Europeans, and aiming above all to teach readers to look to Europe (and later the US), these histories minimised the rhythms coming from the North to very little indeed, except for the Japanese commotion of 1942 which, even so, was rightly related as a totally unforeseen and even aberrant cataclysm.

In this sort of perspective, the Southeast Asian space naturally remains open to the Indian world, beyond the Gulf of Bengal (which we know had been an area of exchange between Sri Lanka and Burma, as well as between Bengal and Arakan), as well as towards the Melanesian world (which we know begins in Indonesian itself, in Maluku, Irian and Timor). Yet, by contrast, it excludes all relations with the Chinese world. No thought is given here to trying to rethink over the centuries [in the *longue durée*] the possible contacts between south China and Southeast Asia; at best, historical consideration was confined to the recently formed *Chinatowns*, which in turn were deliberately seen as settlements of "foreigners", and thus as an epiphyte…[3]

Ethnic Chinese offer prayers at a temple in Kuala Lumpur, February 2007

It is worth noting that such a spatial, and above all mental, "uncoupling" of Southeast Asia from southern China serves the interests of a lot of people. First of all, it allows Western Southeast Asianists to exhibit, unblushing, a fine ignorance of China (no small advantage, when we consider the difficulties we know await the apprentice Sinologist…). It is also reassuring: by clearly isolating fields, it justifies ignorance in the name of a supposedly indissoluble and airtight compart-mentalisation. The thing is also probably done to please many people from the countries involved, Indonesians, Malaysians, or even Vietnamese, who rarely like to think of their large neighbour, or to measure themselves against it, and would all prefer to create a collective dead-end in its respect (despite the dangers this might represent for their own futures). Let us add, too, that it is by no means certain that this approach would not also appeal to many responsible Chinese of the continent who, still concerned about the approach of "southern miasmas", prefer to remain within the shelter of their borders in order to better imagine "the State". … Today only Japanese and Taiwanese businessmen have a clear awareness of the intellectual heresy that this fictive "wall" represents: Japanese and Taiwanese businessmen, and Chinese businessmen from the continent as well, who, thanks to their geographic position, have been breaking

down "the wall" for many years, and whose culture enables them to feel something that could be rather better understood as the effects of a continuum.

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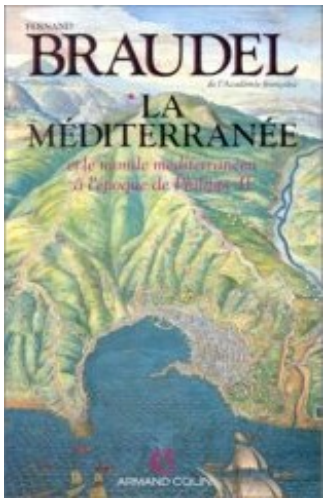

Cover of a recent edition of Fernand Braudel's *La Méditerranée et le monde méditerranéen à l'époque de Philippe II*

We are going to try here to sketch precisely, although in a few lines, all the possible advantages of enlarging "the region" to include the provinces of southern China, and of imagining that in Southeast Asia we find another "Mediterranean"; not from a foolish desire for imitation but because this Braudelian approach [4] has the great merit of proposing a *global vision* that obliges our thinking to take account of the two shores at the same time. Let us recall that the essential aspect of Braudel's method consisted in requiring the reader to "rethink" the two halves of a geographical ensemble, each at the same time, something well attested for the Roman era (*mare nostrum*) [5] but which the advent of Islam had supposedly destroyed. Going beyond the crusades, Napoleon's expedition to Egypt, and the colonial North African wars, Braudel's book allows us to rediscover—and not without some amazement—the unity of a coherent geographical space. By so doing, problems change their appearance: it is no longer a question of analysing the opposition of two irreconcilable "blocs" ("Christianity" and "Islam"), but of understanding the reasons for two parallel evolutions which, far from occurring separately, influenced one another on a very considerable number of occasions.

At this point, we can affirm that wanting to understand Southeast Asia without integrating a good deal of southern China into our thinking is like wanting to give an account of the Mediterranean world after removing Turkey, the Levant, Palestine, and Egypt. By this new "centring"—or rather, by restoring the centring—geography can and should help us to go beyond the received ideas that a certain style of history wants to us preserve, by insisting on staying too close to the facts (or to certain facts).

Map of administrative divisions in China

But first we have to explain what we mean here by South China. It seems to us that we obviously need to take account of Guangdong (with Guangxi) and Fujian, and the two big islands that respectively go with one (Hainan) and the other (Taiwan). But it is equally appropriate to take account of Yunnan, a region of high passes and caravans, without which we would but poorly understand the evolution of upper Burma and of Tonkin, and the dynamic of all the Thai peoples who, from the thirteenth century, would deeply influence the whole of the Indochinese peninsula. Yunnan was a regional impulsive force from the Bronze Age (because its chalky karstic soils contained abundant mines of tin). Further, far from being at the ends of the earth, as Europeans might have liked to imagine it in the nineteenth century, Yunnan has almost always been a place of journey crossings and exchanges. Mahayana Buddhism flourished there during the Nanzhao kingdom (which once extended as far as Hanoi) and, when the province was finally and irrevocably attached to the Chinese empire (under the Yuan, in the thirteenth century), Islam appeared there with the caravan traders, at the same moment that it set foot on Sumatra. At Chieng Mai, in our own times, we can still meet some of those Chinese Muslim families who, among other commercial ventures, are trading jade with Yunnan.

As for the two large islands of Hainan and Taiwan, which are like anchors cast out to sea from the Chinese continent, it is quite fascinating to compare their evolution. Both were initially occupied by non-Chinese populations, in the first case by Thais especially and by Austronesians in the second, so we could say that, from a certain perspective, they were both at base "Southeast Asian". But if Hainan was Sinicised quite early and has never ceased to form part of the continental system, Taiwan was not really occupied before the seventeenth century, above all by farmers from Fujian; and we know what its recent evolution has been.

Postcard image of Taiwan

Right from the start of our analysis, we must insist on the idea of continuity which ties these regions, today officially "Chinese", to the rest of Southeast Asia. It is easy to show that the karstic and tin bearing areas of Yunnan (and of Guizhou-Guangxi) exist with great consistency from the north to the south of the Indochinese and Malay Peninsulas, appearing even as far away as the shores of Sumatra. Furthermore, tin mines can be found similarly along the whole length, at Phuket (now in Thailand) just as at Perak, on the outskirts of Kuala Lumpur just as at Bangka and Belitung (Billiton). We find volcanic activity in certain parts of Taiwan and Hainan, and earthquakes might damage Fujian or Hong Kong just as easily as the Philippines or Burma. It is also a commonplace that this whole region falls under the monsoon cycle and experiences typhoons, while botanists and zoologists, in parallel with each other, stress the fact that the flora and fauna of southern China bears great analogies to the light forests of Indochina, and that in earlier times elephants were common in the North and the South. Just as in Hainan, the coastal regions of southern China were also covered by tropical forests, the point being that forest felling began here much earlier than further South. Just as with Europe's Mediterranean, then, the opportunity exists here for historians to study the differential retreat of the forests, occurring much earlier in the most economically developed countries: in the Muslim world retreating to the west, in China to the south.

Elephant in southern Yunnan

That said, however, it is obvious that we are not going to find in this Southeast Asian "Mediterranean", thus defined, all the elements of the original. For example, we only need to glance at the map to understand that it is very much more open to the two great oceans that adjoin it, the Indian and the Pacific, and in contrast that it is very much more empty, with no island here playing the role of "staging post", as Cyprus, Crete, Malta or even Sicily did in times past. The obvious candidate is the Paracels, but they were located within a dangerous zone that early navigators preferred to skirt around rather than go through directly; and the astonishing international game that now breaks out from time to time over these miniscule islets, which are the Xisha (Paracels) or the Nansha (Spratleys), can only be explained by the oil reserves discovered there, quite recently on the temporal scale we are using here.

We could go on listing differences "word for word"; but the most basic one is probably less a matter of physical structures than of history, the fact that in this other Mediterranean we do not find a similarly powerful common denominator like the Roman Empire provided for several centuries. No truly unified political system; no generally widespread language like Latin; no unifying religion like Christianity at its inception. We could certainly object that the so-called "period of Indianisation" had likewise seen the establishment of certain common cultural elements in Java, Bali, Cambodia, Champa, and even in China itself, by the intermediary of Buddhism, and that Sanskrit could have functioned at certain times as a sort of *koineï€*. [6] Even so, it never really happened on the same scale.

This objection notwithstanding, it does not mean there cannot be found in Southeast Asia elements of an ancient common cultural foundation, beginning with an ancestral cult, linked to that of the buffalo, which can be detected from the south of China to as far away as Indochina, the Philippines, and Indonesia. During the prehistoric epoch (that is, a period broadly corresponding with the Roman era in the West and the Han in China), the discovery of an impressive number of bronze drums provides us with the outline of what is called Dongson culture, reaching west from the bronze rich southwest of China to the borders of Iran, and to the south passing through Vietnam, Malaysia, Sumatra, Java, Bali, Sumbawa, etc. That other technical information, like the use of braced ridge tiles, [7] could also have spread along with bronze working cannot be doubted. Some pre-historians are currently researching the presence of boat-coffins, found equally in Wuyishan, one of the highest places in northern Fujian, in the Niah cave (northern Borneo), and in several places in the Philippines.[8] Generations of students of mythology have also studied the similarities found among the various folklores of river-valley dwellers.

Dongson drum probably made in Vietnam circa 200 A.D.

Finally, it is appropriate to note the work at present being carried out with great enthusiasm by many anthropologists, Chinese as well as western, on the Hakkas. We know that these "guests" (that is the sense of their name in Chinese: *hakka* or *keija* in mandarin) were formerly always considered as a more or less Han people, come from the North largely in the Sung period, who had settled in southern regions. Their "difference" from other such groups, it used to be said, was in their wonderful ability to preserve their original traditions (and dialect). But today the tendency is to view them as "aborigines", as people of the South, who had been progressively but incompletely acculturated by Han civilisation. [9] And it is very true that certain of their customs (for example, double funerals) are better explained by the existence of an "old Southeast Asian stock" than by any import from the North. [10]

Hakka dwelling in southern Fujian

It goes without saying that this demonstration is hardly insignificant here. To a certain extent, it aims at questioning the official monolithic view of Chinese culture, and there are good reasons for believing that the anthropologists are not entirely incorrect…

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It is true that, historically, the early Southeast Asian "Mediterranean", like the original, was for a long time "divided up" (to borrow the fine title of Jean Guilaine's book about the origins of "our" Mediterranean [11]). There is every reason to think that it stayed that way even longer, and that coastal navigation routes, extending from port to port and finally ending up by linking all shores together, took a little longer to establish there. We can put together a rough chronology of the establishment of these trade routes, by analysing certain texts, initially mainly Arabic and Chinese ones, but also in particular by using the data of Chinese ceramic exports, which can be found on all the shores and which have been well studied in recent decades.

Early Ming plate found on shipwreck near Ternate, Moluccas, eastern Indonesia

From this it seems most likely that the oldest route was the Western one, linking a number of often-rival trading areas near the Straits of Malacca to the great port of Canton. After leaving from some port of Sriwijaya (Shilifoshi in Chinese texts)—a generic term broadly designating the Malay Peninsula and southeast Sumatra whose trading centres included Palembang, Jambi, Bangka, Kalah, Ligor—the route passed by the Tioman Island (mentioned as early as the ninth century in an Arab text) before reaching the present coast of central Vietnam, controlled at that time by a series of small and competing Cham principalities that increasingly had to struggle against Vietnamese southern expansion. Further north, the route might go up to Tonkin, or modern northern Vietnam, where in the town of Luy-lau (where Buddhist pilgrims from China met others from India and Central Asia) the existence of a very cosmopolitan society from the third century is well attested. But the route might equally turn to the northeast, to Canton, perhaps touching on the southwest point of Hainan Island, where vestiges of a small Islamised Cham community still persist today. Thus the later "historical" rivalry between the future Vietnam and Guangdong-Guangxi region of south China might possibly be explained by the economic rivalry that grew up between the ports of Tonkin and those of South China in the more distant past.

It is by this Western route that Islam reached China, not very long after the death of its founder; Canton contains the tomb of one of the Prophet's close relations, Abu Wakkas, as well as an ancient mosque whose minaret, which was also used as a lighthouse,

dated from the ninth century. From this era, a good two centuries before it reached Java (whose oldest inscription only dates from the eleventh century) Islam was set to become the main ideological propensity of the seagoing merchants who circulated along the coasts of China. When a revolt broke out in 879 CE, the foreign community of Canton, mainly comprising Muslims but also containing Christians, Jews, and Zoroastrians, [12] was attacked and Mas'udi records 200,000 were killed.

There is every reason to suppose, although this time the facts are much less well documented, that another route joined Sriwijaya to the east of modern Indonesia, by a series of intermediary stops to the *passisir* ports of the northern Java coast. This old route (which may perhaps have only been an extension of that used by the bronze drums) allowed the westward transport of cloves—gathered mainly in the Maluku region but known in Mediterranean markets from the Roman period—along with various other products of the greater East, like parrots that were unknown in Java but well represented on the bas-relief carvings at Borobudur (ninth century).

Borobudur / Detail of frieze depicting parrots

From the tenth and eleventh centuries, we can make out certain changes. In China, the period known as the Five Dynasties (907-960 CE) was characterised by a great level of autonomy in the southern regions, which took advantage of the temporary imperial crisis. Fujian, known for some decades as the kingdom of Min, [13] took off economically, little by little preparing itself to become one of the early economic motors of Southeast Asia; while under the Southern Han (Nan Han) the Guangdong region experienced enormous development, notably in regard to metallurgical production. In the archipelago that later became the Philippines, we see the emergence of the gold-rich site of Butuan (on the north coast of Mindanao), which starts to exchange Chinese ceramics for its gold. On Java, the centre of gravity moves from the middle to the east; and in the area of modern northern Vietnam, finally freed from Chinese control, war begins with the Chams to the south. This conflict would end with the Cham withdrawal, thus causing the western trade route, which had made possible the first contacts with India, with maritime Buddhism, and with Islam, to become unproductive for a long time.

However, the great turning point for Southeast Asia, as in fact for all of Eurasia, occurred in the thirteenth century, with the "Mongol moment" in world history, [14] and then in the fourteenth century when, almost immediately after, unrest in the Turkish principalities of Central Asia closed the continental trade route that Marco Polo and Rubriquis had taken (as well as Rabban Sauma, from the other way around). From this era, the "weight of the North" (that is to say, from southern China) scarcely ceased to prevail in Southeast Asia. Until then, the main impacts, whether Buddhist or Muslim, had in reality mostly come from the southwest, with "Indianisation" easily forming the most important such phenomenon. But, henceforth, Chinese ports would make the most obvious impact. From the thirteenth century, there was a Chinese community at Angkor; in the fourteenth century, there were Chinese settled in Siam who founded the new commercial city of Ayutthaya, [15] while we also hear at that time of communities established on the north coast of Java, notably at Gresik.

Painting of Khubilai Khan

The Mongol conquest is still a rather poorly understood phenomenon, but it is clear that, on leaving Central Asia, Genghis Khan and his successors wanted to organise a sort of world system that would have integrated not only China, eastern Europe, Iran, and India, but also all the islands and countries at its eastern periphery, including Japan, Vietnam, Champa, Burma, and Java. The two centuries that followed would see the emergence of new centres of gravity, the take-off of numerous port cities, and above all the development of an Eastern maritime route, linking the ports of Fujian by various stops to Luzon, Mindoro, the Visayas, and, beyond Mindanao, to Brunei in one direction, and Sulu and Maluku in the other. On the other shore at this time, the 1471 Vietnamese conquest of the Cham capital of Vijaya confirmed the decline of the Western route.

From this point on, we could say that the circle was closed and that henceforth the Nanyang operated as a Southeast Asia "Mediterranean". From the thirteenth to the sixteenth centuries, we witness the remarkable development of south Fujian's large ports: Zhangzhou and Quangzhou, then Amoy (or Xiamen). In the last two cases, a wealth of Muslim inscriptions attests to the presence of a large foreign community, comprising Arabs and Persians. Powerful Hokkien merchants now began setting up bases not only in Java, Patani, and the Philippines, but also in Guangdong and Hainan. In parallel, at the same time, a whole series of independent merchants, Japanese and Chinese (whom we call the *wokou*), took advantage of the favourable circumstances to develop a private commerce not only between ports in China and Japan but also in Southeast Asia, where no state watched over them.

Statue of Chinese admiral Zheng He (1405-1433)

During the first decades of the fifteenth century, the famous expeditions by Admiral Zhenghe not only crossed the South Seas but went as far as India, Mecca, and even Mogadishu in Africa. They were broken off after 1436, and this interruption has generally been interpreted as a Chinese desire to "withdraw". This still remains to be proven, for the stopping of the great State expeditions in no way meant Chinese emigration ceased. We can indeed wonder if, fundamentally, the Chinese had not moved on very much earlier to a system of private trading (so vaunted in our days), while the West still remained entangled in its "companies", who made war on "freebooters" for a further two or three centuries.

From the sixteenth century, things changed a bit, partly due to the presence of Europeans—the Portuguese, and then the Dutch and English—but only in part for this reason. Little by little, Fujian's primacy was receding and Canton taking back her former place, but under a less liberal system: 13 *hang*, or guilds, were set up there in 1557, and in 1720 they would begin the Kohong system that allowed Chinese mandarins better control of Westerners. One might reflect from this that, whenever China opens up via Canton, it is always done less widely and in a more controlled fashion than through Fujianese ports.

Containers at Fuzhou port

Despite the official closure of Japan in 1638, and that of China several times under both the Ming and the Qing, it is nevertheless still not certain that these great North Asian countries had chosen a "defensive" policy, in opposition to triumphant western merchants. The contrary is more likely to be true. On the one hand, they kept very much in their own hands the control of certain commodity flows, all the while profiting as the main destination of lucrative traffic (like Mexican silver, which for a long time reached

China via the intermediary of the Manilla galleon, or Chinese silks that went to Japan via Deshima). On the other hand, they created important diasporas. Through their multiple diasporas, Chinese people founded the capitalist networks from which originate almost all the "national" bourgeoisies of Southeast Asia today. As for the Japanese, who at the start of the seventeenth century had also created important "Nipponese quarters" (*Nihonmachi*) at Ayutthya, Faifo (or Hoi An, in modern central Vietnam) and Batavia, all their advantage was lost after the 1638 ruling effectively forbade the departure of private individuals, although they would regain it after Meiji and above all at the start of the 20th century.

Viewed in parallel with this, the story of the European merchants is hardly wonderful. After the "great success" won by the sixteenth-century Portuguese and seventeenth-century Dutch (who had nevertheless been obliged to surrender quite lamentably at Formosa, when opposed by Koxinga), eighteenth-century reports are rather ordinary. Macao's commerce, pushed out of Japan after 1638, took refuge in trifles at Makassar or at Timor, where the sandalwood trade certainly made some fine personal fortunes but could hardly be claimed as high priority commerce. As for that of the Dutch East India Company, we know that it was on the point of giving up the ghost when the Napoleonic crises shook Europe. The English and French[16] companies hardly fared any better. The events of the nineteenth century are well known and could give the impression that Westerners, finally in harmony after 1815, had reached an agreement to "open" China, and then Japan. But events of the 20th century by contrast leave us quite sceptical about their ability to "control" the region and to hold their own there.

In sum, the notion of the "Mediterranean" is a useful instrument that helps us to rectify a traditional "centring" which now risks being very inadequate, and to substitute another that allows us to integrate a much vaster space and much longer periods of time. Thus restored in its totality, and from a deliberately non-traditional perspective, the history of Southeast Asia might reasonably hope to escape from the "polarised" history to which it has too often been confined (with "national" histories slavishly following in the footsteps of the preceding "colonial" histories) and of profiting from a new approach that takes account of synchronisms and networks. Let me insist, with my final words, that reintegrating the south of China into our thinking will in no way "breach the dikes" (as too many timid minds imagine). The real object at stake is, in fact, as has already been suggested in passing, to open all of South China to comparative studies, a magnificent project that should not put anyone off.

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Notes

[1] This is an edited translation by Nola Cooke of an article by the late French scholar, Denys Lombard. It was first published in 1998 in a special edition of the French geographical journal, *Hérodote*, devoted to Indonesia as Islam's "Orient". See *Hérodote,* no. 88, 1988, pp. 184-92. References in brackets have been added to the original text. Many thanks to Claudine Salmon for her assistance with aspects of the translation.

[2] Lombard refers here to the Cambodian problem, and the monetary crises of the mid-1990s, especially the difficulties of the Thai *baht* and the Indonesian *rupia*.

[3] An epiphyte is a plant that grows on another without being parasitic on its host.

[4] Lombard refers to the highly influential history of the Mediterranean world by Fernand Braudel, *La Méditerranée et le monde méditerranéen aÌ€ l'époque de Philippe II* [The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Era of Philip II], first published in France in 1949 and reprinted several times since. It was translated into English by Sian Reynolds as *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*, published by Collins in 1972-73 and recently reprinted by the University of California Press in 1995.

[5] *Mare nostrum* is Latin for "our sea".

[6] *Koiné* was an ancient Greek mixture of Attic and Ionian elements that became the common Greek language, thus by extension it means any common tongue shared by speakers of difference languages or dialects over a large geographical space.

[7] J. Dumarcay, "La faîtieÌ€re tendue (histoire d'une technique)", *Bulletin de l'EÌcole française d'Extrême-Orient* , no. 49, 1959, pp. 632-36.

[8] D. Ziegler, "Entre ciel et terre: le culte des 'bateaux-cercueils' de mont Wuyi", *Cahiers d'Extrême-Orient*, no 9, EFEO Kyoto, 1996-97, pp. 203-31; T. Harrison, "The Great Cave of Niah: A Preliminary Report", *Man*, No 57, 1957, pp. 161-66.

[9] See especially Glen Dudbridge, *China's Vernacular Cultures*, "Inaugural lecture", University of Oxford, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1996.

[10] Double funerals are found throughout the Austronesian world, as far away as Madagascar.

[11] Jean Guilaine, *La Mer partagée*, Flammarion, Paris, 1994.

[12] A Persian Manichean religion that believed the world was locked in struggle between the followers of Good and of Evil.]

[13] E. H. Schafer, *The Empire of Min*, Charles Tuttle, Tokyo, 1954.

[14] S. A. M. Adshead, *Central Asia in World History*, MacMillan Press, London, 1993.

[15] Charnvit Kasetsiri, *The Rise of Ayudhya. A History of Siam in the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries*, Oxford University Press-Duang Kamol, Bangkok, 1976.

[16] On the difficulties of the French Company in its trade with China, see the excellent study by L. Dermigny, *La Chine et l'Occident. Le commerce à Canton au XVIIIe siècle, 1719-1833*, SEVPEN, Paris, 1964, 4 vols.

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