Francophonie and the Orient
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Published by Amsterdam University Press

Kang, Mathilde.
Amsterdam University Press, 2018.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/66445.

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I  France at the gates of Cathay

Macau and Canton: the first European fringes

The search for the first French people in Asia undoubtedly leads back to the establishment of the Portuguese trading posts in Canton and Macau around 1514 (He Yu & Li Hua 8) or 1517 (Meng Hua 2004, 160). According to Chinese historiography, these two posts are the original entry points of Europeans post-Marco Polo. Certainly, from the first approaching European sailing ships to the appearance of oriental Francophonie, several centuries passed. But our return to the origins of European institutions will highlight the initial positioning of France in cultures classified as non-Francophone. Thus, at the beginning of the sixteenth century, after two years of sea voyage, the Europeans finally reached the coast of Macau and left the first traces of white people in Asia, since the Marco Polo era:

During the year of Dingchou under the reign of Zhengde [1517], while I was an official in the Guangtong Marine Affairs Department, two large ships appeared and entered directly into Huaiyuan port in Guangtong (Meng Hua 2004, 160).

It was a time when the countries endowed with significant maritime resources successively made an appearance in these distant countries, from which the European civilizations were once banished. Their sailboats appeared, trying to outdo each other, in the waters bordering Canton and Macau and attempting to dock near their shores. Anchored in the mythical imagination of the West, Cathay and the Indies were the leitmotif of the legendary expeditions to Asia: ‘It is to seek a new access to the empire of Cathay that Christopher Columbus took to the sea’ (Homberg 687). Far from concerning the future Indochinese colony, the first traces of French culture in Asia were the expeditions to these two countries, Cathay and the Indies, which embodied the ultimate objective of the French maritime voyages.

On the ground the situation progressed. Since the appearance of the first Portuguese ship, multiple attempts had been made to establish a permanent trading post. During these first attempts at establishment, Canton, alongside Macau, found itself at the forefront of encounters with white civilizations.

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1 In *La Chine en France au XVIIIe siècle*, Henri Cordier (1910, 5) also considers the year 1514 as the arrival date of the Portuguese in Macau.
These encounters were marked by ingenuous reports: ‘The Portuguese arrived in Canton [1517], were fairly welcomed there and managed to send an Embassy to the Court’ (Courant 125). From 1535, thanks to the bribes offered to the mandarins of Canton, the Portuguese presented the Court of Ming with their request to dock at Macau in order to trade there. The situation evolved afterwards against a background of recurring incidents, due to the countless pretexts put forward by the Portuguese to take control: stranding their ships, disembarking their wet goods in order to dry them, etc. In other words, the Portuguese continued to take a foothold in Macau and ultimately managed to reside there illegally (He Yu; Li Hua 8). The outcome of their landing in Macau was to have opened a breach so that other European powers could take advantage. As early as 1550 their trading post was used as a support and stepping-stone for any European country to advance in Asia (He Yu; Li Hua 9). France sent its first sailing ships, preparing the ground to make its own advances on the continent.

But France quickly learned, like any other European country, that this infiltration was not a matter of course. Since the feudal era until the Opium War (1840-1842), the empires of Asia (China, Japan, or Korea) were inward-looking and fiercely closed to all external influences. Such a xenophobic policy hurt the expansionist plan of the Europeans for whom these distant empires, however mythical they may have been, represented a promising outlet for commerce and Christian proselytizing; hence the readjustment strategies by France in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. At this point of the Portuguese establishment in Macau, the sea route now supplanted the old Silk Road of the Marco Polo era, which had become impracticable because of the wars then emergent in Central Asia. On the eve of the French settlement in Asia, Macau, the ancient port overlooking the Yellow Sea and bordering on Hong Kong, had become one of the first landmarks and the hub of any journey from Europe. It is right to assert that this Portuguese outpost created a breach that cleared the way for the influx of ships, including those of the French. From then on, the evangelical missions were to increase, alongside the trade missions and together multiply the expeditions to Asia.

Catholic missions as a touchstone

Indeed, this period of gestation for the French presence in Asia saw two categories of foreigners arrive: ‘merchants and missionaries’ (Broc 40). Historically, it was the Catholic missions that paved the way for the advancement of trade; both contributed to the dissemination of French civilization in the heart of indigenous civilizations. In the case of China, the arrival
and penetration of French culture took place at various times in favorable circumstances. During the 268 years of the Qing (1644-1912) reign of incessant emperors, the Manchu dynasty bequeathed to posterity the legendary reign of Kang-Xi (1662-1722), whose penchant for art and science opened up a breach for the spread of the Jesuits in China. Historically, we can already see that Francophonie in the East goes beyond the borders of French Indochina.

At the dawn of the French settlements in Asia, the religious body played the role of pivot and vector. Six Jesuits were sent to China in 1663 and in 1685 for the purpose of dialogue (1990 Qian 4). Christianity penetrated and from the sixteenth century sought to establish itself with the dispatch, by Louis XIV, of the first embassy to sail towards China (Dufrenoy 272). Similar dispatches were also made to other kingdoms: ‘In January 1791, the French Congregation for Foreign missions, that had not yet been too rigorously persecuted […] succeeded in sending six of its members to India and Cochinchina’ (Veuillot 992). The famous ‘Quarrel of the Rites’ gives an account of the state of the religious communities in their evangelizing missions in Asia, especially across China, from which appeared the first French and Portuguese Jesuits, then in competition with the Society of Foreign Missions, which was founded by the Comptroller General Colbert. Then, there was the messy situation in the three dioceses of Macau, Nanking, and Beijing, following the Pope’s decree (Shun-Ching Song 263). Other communities followed the example of the Jesuits, such as the Sisters of Saint Paul de Chartres, an order founded in Beauce in 1696, whose first foundations in China date back to 1848 (Claudel 1995, 210-211). This significant step, carried out by these founding missions of various Christian communities on the ground, paints a favorable first picture of white people within the indigenous societies. These good works thus promoted the encounter between Europeans and local peoples in the spread of French civilization in Asia.

The first Europe-Asia maritime line

In this first period of European presence in Asia, the English immediately took the lead. As early as 1637, their sailboats reached Canton and penetrated the Pearl River (Zhujiang) with great force, heading for the main town of Guangzhou (He Yu & Li Hua 9), thus laying the groundwork for the first European-Asian maritime routes: Lisbon-Liverpool-Macau-Canton. This line inevitably created a relay situation in Canton where the Qing ordered all European ships to carry out their transactions on site. Thus slowly began

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2 Henri Cordier confirms for his part that five Jesuits were sent (Cordier 1910, 29).
a history of openness and cohabitation with the Europeans in Canton and the neighboring seaports. However, given the intransigence of the Ming and the Qing with regard to all foreigners, this breakthrough was nonetheless modest in scale and scope. In fact, the trading posts in Macau and Canton were restricted to sporadic exchanges with Europe; the same went for the silk trade in Japan. These few commercial trades in no way altered the enclosing of the Europeans in Canton, the only port assigned before the Opium War: ‘up to 1715, there were only six boats a year arriving in Canton’ (Favier 8). This says a lot about the marginality at the time of the commerce maintained with the outside by this single port open to Europe. The exclusion of every European from the interior of China remained fierce; very few people accessed Beijing. Even the tea made in Fujian, a neighboring province of Macau, the Chinese preferred to transport to Japan, the Philippines, and India, rather than letting the Europeans come to get it directly from them (Favier 9).

Canton, Pondicherry’s replacement

Another issue that determined the advancement of French expansion in Asia was the fate of their adventures in India, which were dictated by the desire for economic gain. ‘It is still the commercial interest that we find prioritized in our establishments in India’ (Bouet-Willaumez 944). In fact, the expedition led by François Caron in 1667 reached Surate, and succeeded in establishing a first French trading post in India (Blerzy 140-141). Appointed General Director by letters patent of Louis XIV in February 1701 (Blerzy 144), François Martin took over and acquired from a Hindu leader a rather large area by the sea. About sixty men settled there and succeeded, against all odds, in founding ‘a factory in the village of Ponditcherri’ (Camille 2). This new acquisition, called Pondichéry (Blerzy 142), supplanted the post set up in Surate and marked an advancement in the French settlement in India. Alas, this was only short-lived. Despite its promising beginnings under the reigns of Henri IV and Louis XIII, growing into a privileged company, the French East India Company, which had written the first pages of French colonial history in Asia, fell into bankruptcy. The vicissitudes of France in the Indies are connected to the fortune or misfortune of decisions taken in the metropolis. And the company, which was badly run in Europe, was ruined thirty years after its creation in 1708. When the war broke out again with the Dutch, Francois Martin had to capitulate. The whole failure of the French settlement in India was that it went against the original French ambition by redrawing the maps and orienting the colonial plan towards
two movements. On the one hand the French stronghold was to move to 
Canton; on the other hand, the loss of interest in India would create a need 
for compensation that would dictate the French strategy later on.

Moreover, such a failure in this important site of the French Eastern 
Empire had serious ramifications for the French presence elsewhere in Asia. 
Pondicherry, the capital of the French settlements in India, and even the 
whole of Asia at the time, would from that moment on evoke only glorious 
memories of yester so that its fading glory gave way to Canton, which took 
over as the main target for French expansionism in Asia. Officially it was in 
1698 with the ship the Amphitrite leaving for Canton that Franco-Chinese 
commercial relations were inaugurated. These relations grew following 
the creation of the great Company in 1719. In fact, since the high point of 
the Company of the East Indies, the Chinese city has resonated along with 
Pondicherry in the collective European memory. The reputation of Canton is 
synonymous with the magical places from which originate the products that 
the Company resold in its premises in France (Dodille 33). It is unquestionably 
the first Chinese city where traces of the French presence were established:

Canton, the first city in this country where the French mission of which I 
was a part was established, brought together the history of a great Chinese 
city with the energy of one of the most considerable commercial centers 
on the globe (Haussmann 298).

From the time of Colbert, the French ventured there through the migration 
of settlers from India:

The Portuguese and Spaniards first appeared in the sixteenth century 
on the soil of Asia. [...] From the beginning, however, in the wake of the 
Portuguese, who had set foot in Macau, the colonists of India had ventured 
into the waters of China, and had obtained permission to create factories 
in Canton, where silk and tea were sold. (Lavollée 1883, 189)

From the outset, the growing French presence in India was paralleled by 
Cathay, so that after the defeat, the posts in Pondicherry would make way 
for those in Canton. In the history of French colonization, it is fair to say that 
Pondicherry is twinned with Canton and that the two cities, side by side, lay 
the foundations for the French presence in the Far East. Having contact with

3 Note that Broc (41) and Favier (9) confirm the same source, while Cordier (1910, 28) says that 
it was in 1697.
the Europeans as early as the sixteenth century, Canton, where the French presence was intimately linked to the fate of Pondicherry, would really take off after the Opium Wars. It would become one of the first cosmopolitan cities in Asia and a favored site for the post-Pondicherry French trade. We shall see later that this tradition of exchanges with the Europeans is so anchored in Canton that the opening of the five ports after 1842 would not slow it down: business continued to be carried out there. What is more, the Qing, in order to slow down the forced opening after the defeat, played with internal fiscal policy maneuvers to reduce the effects of opening up to the French. To conclude, the influence of the French Eastern Empire in Canton attests to the French presence outside the Indochinese borders, and the withdrawal of French interests in the Indies is a sign of France’s strategy to reposition itself.

**Drawing up the concessions**

Among the trials and tribulations of the French adventure in Asia, one event stands out in its importance: the Treaty of Paris (1763), which marks a turning point, an irreversible decline. The reduction of the French presence, affected moreover by the suppression of the Compagnie des Jésuites since 1773 (Veuillot 992), ultimately weakened French interests in the Indies. And the coup de grace experienced by the interests in Pondicherry required a change of survival strategy. Moreover, the nineteenth century sees the rise of the English East India Company. This new situation gave the English a regular presence in Asia. Faced with such covetousness, Japan and China put the brakes on the Europeans. The shock felt by the English was widely shared by the French, who also cast their post-Pondicherry eyes on the Chinese market. If Cathay and the Indies were the original objects of the French expeditions, the loss or withdrawal of the Indies would render all the more evident the necessity of compensating by growing their interests in China. But the Middle Kingdom does not share the language, culture, or mentality of the Indies. The French and the English were required to adapt themselves to the modes of acting and thinking of the land of the Son of Heaven. This was not obvious to them.

For on the ground the situation was glaring. In spite of the breach opened up since the Macau era and until the setting up of the trading posts in Canton, the relations between the Europeans and the Chinese could still be summed up in terms of ‘constant vexations, administrative harassment, tyranny, and the greed of mandarins and interpreters’ (Favier 81). Foreigners were still forbidden to have any relationship with the city of Canton itself.
Without free movement, without rights, without status, every European was subject to the humiliation and contempt of the Mandarins. This abominable fate reserved for foreigners was to be blown apart from 1840 by the English and French canons conjoined at the gates of Cathay. The iron grip of the non-negotiable peripheral constraints and the oppression that the Herculean Qing Empire visited on the whites had loosened forever.

On 25 January 1841, at 8.15 in the morning, the English invaded the port of Hong Kong.\(^4\) This seizure came to symbolize the reversal of the balance of power between the Chinese and the Europeans and, by the same token, propelled the advancement of the French presence in China and the neighboring countries. The meaning of this unprecedented victory was that it put an end to the confinement of the Chinese Empire, which until 1715 received only six boats a year in the Canton enclosure, by means of exchange with the outside.\(^5\) With the British wind in their sails, French expeditions sped into the slipstream left by the British guns, which reduced to dust the ramparts of the Qing dynasty, leading to the opening of the five post-Macau ports. The two Franco-Chinese treaties of 1842 and 1844 drove the nail further in, thus marking the rise of post-Pondicherry France, and sounded the beginning of the ruthless disintegration of the Middle Kingdom.

One of the historical repercussions of these wars was the successful realization of the concessions, establishing European sovereignty within the Chinese Empire itself. Non-negotiable distributions drew the first outlines of the segmented territories. The territorial division began with England, which was the first to gain access to the strategic sites: the seaports (Lavollée 1851, 741). The first designated ports were places such as Shanghai, Hong Kong, Ning-bo, and Amoy (Xiamen), which were then able to receive English ships. And the French followed suit. History would prove correct the choice of Hong Kong, which was only a rock in 1842, but with access to the sea – an observation post – offering an ideal place to stop off for any European fleet passing by Canton.

**The beginning of the French Eastern Empire**

Thanks to the victorious canons of the English and their having terrified the Beijing Court, the French obtained their share of the cake without spilling a drop of blood, and succeeded in negotiating the same advantages

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4 Memoirs of an English sailor called Edward on board the warship *Soufre* on a round-the-world trip, cited in Li Wenhai (33).

5 See note 8. The extreme confinement of the Westerners at the time is also confirmed by other researchers (Cordier 1910, 29).
as England. Thus France accomplished a giant step that would strengthen its post-Pondicherry presence in Asia. The 36 articles of the Huangpu Treaty (Whampou) signed on 24 October 1844, gave the green light to the massive penetration of French interests in China. Giving advantages to trade and Catholic proselytism, this treaty somewhat counterbalances the later loss of French interests in their expeditions to the Indies and elsewhere in Asia. On the one hand, France was granted the Colonial Concession in Shanghai and, on the other, the title of Favored Trading Country. This facilitated the start-up of a series of hospitals, churches, schools, and cemeteries, in strategic areas throughout imperial China. For example, the first seminars in Beijing and Shanghai (Charles Maybon 15, 54), the orphanages (the orphanage of the Holy Childhood), the numerous schools, the works of the missions (Piolet 65-131) are all proof of the penetration, diffusion, and anchoring of France in the heart of the Chinese imperial landscape.

In addition to emancipation by Catholic works, the commercial mission was also under way. The establishment and infiltration of French investments began with the Treaty of Tianjin (1858), the first navigation treaty, which aimed to transfer maritime technology to the Chinese. Presenting itself as an ally and a benevolent power, France committed itself to training Chinese workers, which meant that the French language, culture, and know-how were passed on at the same time. Among the works of cooperation, we can cite the construction of the famous arsenal at Fuzhou, which was made possible thanks to the 1866 agreement. With the subcontractors who worked on it, the arsenal made this city a true melting pot and ‘the experimental colony’ (Weber 1997, 93), which soon became ‘one of the most important French overseas colonies’ (Weber 1997, 93). Thus the first sites of the French-speaking zone in China were born. If the port of Fuzhou is described as a ‘colony’ or even ‘one of the most important French colonies’, it says a lot about the role of this dynamism in South-East Asia during the birth of Indochina.

On the ground, other cooperation agreements were signed, including bilateral exchanges and shipments, as well as a series of arsenal-building projects in several ports. In connection with the arsenal in Fuzhou, a maritime

6 The various French plans may be found in Documents des Qing, cited in He Yu; Li Hua Li (48).
7 Given in Beijing, 19 January 1924, the speech by Charles Maybon (1872-1926), tracing the accomplishment of Benoît Edan, mentions the Seminary of Tsang-ka-leu in 1853.
8 Such as the House of the Immaculate Conception or the House of the Sacred Heart founded by the Lazarists, who had taken over from the Jesuits after the eighteenth century.
9 Christophe Dubois, ‘L’arsenal de Fuzhou et la présence militaire française au Fujian (1869-1911); (Weber 1997).
school was created to train the Chinese elites, starting with learning the French language (Claudel 161). In the history of Francophonie in Asia, this school has a mythical reputation, both for its pioneering role as one of the first French schools in Asia and the eminence of its graduates who became the first generation of Chinese Francophones. Think of Yen Fu (1854-1921), reformer and instigator of the opening up of China at the end of the Qing period, or General Chen Jitong, the first French-speaking diplomat. We shall see later that the first manifestation of Chinese literature of French expression emanates from this cradle of Francophonie.

The Macau trading post opened up a permanent breach for the European presence in Asia, from which came the fortune and the misfortune of the French adventures and resulted from their losses in India. The withdrawal from the Indies redrew the contours of French presence in the Far East, and marked the beginning of the affirmation of French presence in China following the Opium Wars. This new positioning entailed numerous agreements with the Qing, including the establishment of a first arsenal in Fuzhou, neighboring the future Indochina. The arsenal would become one of the first French strongholds in Asia. The movement of the French axis from India to the South of China is also in line with the wish of the Herculean Qing dynasty to build a modern fleet capable of symbolizing Chinese sovereignty in the face of European encroachment. This conjuncture gave rise to the flourishing of French interests on Chinese soil. For contemporary Chinese historiography, this period of early French expansion in the heart of broader European expansion that established its interests in trading posts, concessions, lease territories, arsenals, and French schools, is commonly referred to as semicolonization. These irrefutable historical landmarks continue to demonstrate that Indochina was not at the origin of the French exploits in Asia, nor did it constitute their focus, but that it came later and developed as compensation for the future losses of their interests: ‘that our Indochinese Empire has, to a certain extent, compensated for the losses of the last century’ (Camille 1). Close to the future Indochina, French interests in Fujian and later in Guangzhouwan would serve as a cornerstone, and finance the advancement of French strongholds throughout Asia.

The intrinsic links between China and Indochina

The French did not operate only in China, they also ventured into its vassal states. Although the Jesuits, as well as the East India Company, had explored the regions of the future Indochina, these regions were not, a priori, foremost
in the sights of the French. The origin of the first Frenchmen penetrating the Empire of the Annam dates back to 1585, the time when the Jesuits set foot in the kingdoms of Cambodia and Annam. As early as 1610, their famous *Relations* presented these kingdoms to European readers, preparing the general public for those unknown countries that would be part of the expansionist plan. In these early stages of trial and error in the Far East, the Society of the Jesuits assumed the role of figurehead; its missionaries were the pioneers. Father Alexander of Rhodes traveled through Cochin China in 1624 and Tonkin in 1626 (Cultru 1). However, we must wait for the Opium Wars to see a decisive turning point in the advancement of France, which was beginning to encroach on these kingdoms, and before the French stronghold in Asia really took shape.

**Indochina as a springboard**

In the eyes of Chinese historians, even if the French advances in these places are to be compared with those in India and Cathay, the vassal states of China became the future Indochinese colony, and served as compensation to repay France’s losses in the Indies without constituting a goal in itself (Li Wenhai 429). Thus, in spite of an undeniable advance into these places, for Chinese historiography, the future French Indochina plays only a secondary role in the French expedition:

> the ultimate goal for France in invading Indochina, is obviously not to take little Vietnam, but rather China, in its intention to take Yunnan, in order to penetrate Sichuan, following the Yangzijiang River, bringing together Chinese maritime cities as a net to dismember China along with other European powers. (Li Wenhai 451)

And that is not all. The Chinese still quote the threat uttered by the Consul of the time: ‘France must occupy Tonkin as an ideal staging post; because on the day when the European powers begin to dismember China, we will be the first to be in the heart of China’ (Li Wenhai 232). In other words, French Indochina serves as a stepping-stone and a means of preparing for further penetration into the Chinese southwest (Lei 2000, 193). Thus, with the aim of clearing a river route to China and under the pretext of the assassination of a Jesuit, the French fleet conquered Tonkin in 1856 and then seized the Mekong Peninsula (called Lan Changjiang in its Chinese part). After the
Treaty of Saigon in 1862, France thus settled in Tonkin and Annam. But it was still far from envisaging an Indochinese Union, and the new French stance in these places was directly linked to their advance in China.

Indeed, wherever they were in Asia, whatever the apparent wars they were fighting, the European nations all had their eyes on the Chinese Empire. And France was no exception. Its war on the ground in Indochina was conditioned by the state of the French Empire in China:

But it is a fact that can be observed: the conflicts that agitate the Far East, whatever the apparent motives or the immediate causes, are in reality only episodes in the struggle for the control of China. [...] It was around China that the European colonies settled; clinging to its flanks, they hold on to it with their ravenous appetites. (Pinon 1904, 628)

If Chinese historiography interprets ‘French penetration in Indochina as a springboard and gateway to the Middle Empire, which remains the ultimate goal of the whole project of the French Eastern Empire’ (Li Wenhai 438), it is not alone in its thinking. This view is widely shared among Western scholars. In 1680, when the first ships of the Eastern Company were anchored in the China Sea, the company set its sights not on the future Indochina, but on ‘the Chinese provinces bordering on Tonkin, which it would take some time to appropriate for itself in order to access to the basins of Central China’ (Wasserman 22). This means that from the start the experiments in Tonkin and Annam were carried out with the aim of reaching China, which is the ultimate ambition of the French presence in the region. Thus the intention of France in Annam as in Tonkin is to ‘use the new possession as a springboard for penetration into China, which was the main objective’ (Fourniau 6).

The France-China-Indochina maritime line

Moreover, the very first project after the conquest of Tonkin revealed the real French ambition: ‘We are instructed to seek a passage from Indochina to China’, recalls De Carné (6). Meanwhile, the exploration of the Mekong (1866-1868) by the mission of Doudart de Lagrée surprised everyone: it did not reach China (Fourniau 6). In turn, François Garnier surprised people by venturing into the Red River to reach the southern provinces of China. For France this was a turning point. Operating simultaneously on several fronts at political and economic levels, France traded with China, Cochin China, Cambodia, and Annam, even if these countries were not prioritized by the French. The lists of trade and commerce between France and China and
between France and Cochin China from 1841 to 1849 (Lavollée 1851, 746)\(^{11}\) offer an incontestable example of the colossal economic importance that the Chinese market represented compared to the future Indochinese markets, and consequently shows how these empires were not a priority for France.

Similarly, the list of imported goods from Europe received by Chinese cities, such as Shanghai, Hong Kong, Canton, Tianjin, and Fuzhou (Gadoffre 71),\(^{12}\) pending reshipment elsewhere in Asia, gives an idea of the significant quantity of exchanges between France and China that took place on a daily basis. In the light of these exchanges one can measure the importance of Chinese cities in the coming of the French presence to Asia. The primacy of the Chinese market was maintained throughout the second half of the nineteenth century:

France had become the leading importer of Chinese raw silk. Given the immensity of the country and the interest in penetrating the interior, the Third Republic ended up in those years with fifteen consulates in China (Wasserman 23).

In addition to the colossal size of the Chinese market, the potential promise of China’s economic power over that of the Indochinese kingdoms can be further explained by other causes. From the outset, a factual element as important as it is revealing is that there is no direct line between France and Indochina; everything goes through Shanghai, Hong Kong, or Fuzhou. The role of indispensable hub and relay point that these Chinese cities play in the founding of the French Empire in Indochina stands as a historical fact.

The reverse is also true. The hostilities between France and England also implicated the Indochinese ports that were on the front line in the transactions between France and China, which were often difficult to reach because of the disruptive tactics of the English. This explains the advice given by Claudel to Doyère (Claudel 1995, 104),\(^{13}\) then director of the arsenal of Mamoï, to divert the itinerary of embargoed French cannons (destined for the Fuzhou arsenal, but detained in Hong Kong), to have them pass instead by the arsenal of Saigon. The detour of these cannons via Saigon is evidence of the intertwined links of these places in the routing of transactions between France and China. In other words, the presence of French interests in China also required the contribution of the Indochinese cities.

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11 See the list by Charles Lavollée of the goods and the statistics of their commerce.
12 See the figures mentioned by Gilbert Gadoffre.
13 See the letter from Claudel to Doyère dated 10 May 1902 at Fuzhou.
China as the rear base of Indochina

Towards the 1880s when, following its definitive retreat from the Indies, France was forced to choose a permanent, strategic site in Asia, the use of Indochina became imperative. Faced with the influence of English institutions, especially in Hong Kong, the importance of French interests in China in the destiny of Indochina cannot be underestimated:

If Indochina is a market which will benefit our industrialists and our traders, if it is a land where our nationals will be able to colonize and traffic safely in the present and the future, if it is the starting point, the ‘operational base’ of French commercial penetration into the Middle Empire – these are the real issues in the present debate. (Pinon 1903, 573)

China became an essential player in the future of Indochina, not only at the level of commercial and material transitions, but also at the human level. The province of Fujian became the hinterland of Indochina, Claudel stated in his letter to the Minister of Foreign Affairs: ‘All I could do in the last year: the signing of a contract opening the Foukien as a site of recruitment of workers for the French colonies’ (Claudel 2005, 179).

The development of French interests in Indochina was hampered from the start by an irresolvable manpower shortage on the ground. Fujian and its two neighboring ports, Amoy and Swatow, were then mobilized to serve as recruiting posts for workers hired from deepest China to Annam and Cambodia:

In this country, especially in Annam and Cambodia, the State has immense national reserves available. [...] There is a lack of manpower for the exploitation of these immense regions. [...] It is therefore necessary to call on the Chinese labor force. [...] This movement of emigration is currently limited to the two ports of Amoy and Swatow, which each year dispatch nearly 80,000 coolies to the destinations mentioned above.14 (Claudel 2005, 179)

As limited as it was insignificant, Indochina proved incapable of offering an abundance of raw materials and of absorbing in exchange the consumption of products manufactured in France. It was far from capable of supplying and sustaining a market conceived by French colonial ambition. Thus, in

14 The Chinese translation of coolies is: poor manual laborer.
all phases of the French conquest in the Far East, Indochina was not able to assume a role of its own, but functioned as a complement and a ‘plan B’ for France in Asia. To remedy this, ‘it will be a matter of making French capital grow by linking the economic development of Tonkin with that of China’ (Gadoffre 18).

During the various periods of colonial France in Asia, it is undeniable that China’s involvement in Indochina operated on several levels, such as politics, economics, and geography. After all, there is no a priori country or nation bearing the name of Indochina; Indochina is only an artificial administrative name coined by the Franco-Danish geographer Malta-Brun, founder of the Geographical Society of Paris:

But as these countries have sometimes been subjected to the empire of China, and as most of the people who inhabit them are very similar to the Chinese […], we proposed, several years ago, to designate this great region of the world the new, but clear, expressive and sonorous name of Indochina.15 (Ajalbert 219)

Thus Indochina is a ‘geographical’ construction! The official birth of the Indochinese Union in 1887, joined by Laos in 1893, and the leased territory of Guangzhouwan in 1898, merely consolidated and intensified its links with China.

Moreover, the installation of a telegraph cable linking the Chinese provinces of Guang-Xi and Yunnan to the Mekong gave an invaluable boost to the communications and exchanges existing between Indochina and its neighboring Chinese regions:

It had taken not less than nine years, from 1885 to 1894, to complete the work of installing the cables between Mon-Kay and the boundaries of Kouang-si and Yun-nan. The infinitely more extensive section between the common border of the Kouang-si and Yun-nan and the Mekong, was completed in less than eighteen months. (Claudel 1991, 321)

True ‘factories’ of human resources and staging posts for multiple commercial transactions, the ports in southern China, whose economic life was intimately linked to the fate of Indochina, were endowed with state-of-the-art

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15 Quoted by Jean Ajalbert in 1909, this name was widely quoted throughout the twentieth century. However, no researcher deigns to indicate the origin of this designation. See for example, Yves Clavaron (23).
means of communication. These devices could further stimulate their commercial links with the French colony, as Yves Bachelier writes:

The arrival of Bernard in the port of Amoy, in February 1902, follows France’s decision to open a telegraphic office in Kulangsu [now Gulangyu, southern China] intended for the exploitation of the recently installed Tourane-Amoy cable. This cable, which brought China closer to the South of Indochina, must have indicated to the French ships anchored at Tourane the possibilities offered for maritime commerce by the Amoy region.16 (Weber 1997, 181)

Although the South of China was not integrated into the Indochinese Empire, on the ground everything was intimately linked: Guangzhouwan, Fujian, and Amoy (Xiamen) function as essential agents in the coming to be of French Indochina. It would, however, be naive to believe that their close relationship was down to France, which, in its colonial fever, tried to link the South of China to Indochina. As vassal states, these regions subordinated themselves to the Middle Empire with which they held secular relations on many levels. Such relations were maintained after their annexation by the French protectorate. An example of this was the use of the Annamite code, which was ‘borrowed from the Chinese laws of the Ming dynasty. [And what is more,] Chinese writing and literature alone were adopted, at least by the upper classes. The Annamese language existed only as a spoken language’ (Bellecourt 440).17 In these kingdoms there are only two genres in literature, either the direct and coarse countertype of Chinese literature, and local literature. It is therefore not surprising that the Annamite elites recognized only Chinese literature (Levi 1931, 157).

Certainly, the panorama of France in Asia extended over several kingdoms of the Levant, the full extent of which will not be described in this chapter. In any case, the historical relations established between China and its vassal states (the future Indochina) testify to the deep ties that continued after their annexation as a French colony or protectorate. Such intimate links, woven by history, emphasize all the more the preeminence of the French

17 In addition, Bailly’s work, Cochinchine française. Dictionnaire chinois-français (Saigon: Rey & Curiol Commercial Printing, 1889) affirms the anchoring of the Chinese language in Cochin China.
Empire in China. If India and Cathay initially were the focus of the French expeditions, Indochina was but the culmination of the future misadventures suffered by France in these places.

The ramifications of the French presence

On its way to the conquest of India and Cathay, the French expedition spotted other kingdoms that were in line with its ambitions, such as Korea and Japan. The presence of European cultures in Japan would seem to date from the same period as that in China, with the arrival of the Jesuits in the sixteenth century and then the Franciscans (Hideichi 1). The French influence in the neighboring countries of China remained very limited, until the eve of the Opium Wars. In fact, ‘France will play no role in Japan before the reopening of the country in the mid-nineteenth century’ (Furansugo vii). My hypothesis is that the survival of French heritage in Japan occurs in the same way as in China, so that Francophone manifestations in several Asian kingdoms could be identified using the same analytical model used in the Chinese case. Certainly, to give a sense of Japanese or Korean Francophonie depends on long-term background studies on all aspects of this branch of Francophonie. I will limit myself here to a succinct overview in line with the example of that for Chinese Francophonie. This glimpse, however panoramic, of the French influence in these strategic Asian countries, will further highlight the Francophone connections on the continent and the crucibles of today’s Asian Francophonie.

The French presence in Japan

Located on the maritime route of the European expeditions, Japan was part of the colonial design and of the Far-Eastern ambition of France, which had just got its hands on some of the Chinese ports. If Canton was the only place in China reserved for trade with the Europeans, in Japan, it was forbidden for any foreigner to circulate inside without requesting a passport. The free movement of foreigners became possible only from 1899 onwards (Blanchon 153).18 Recalling the restrictions in the Middle Kingdom, this fiercely defended barrier set up by the Japanese has an air of déjà vu. But the posture that Japan would adopt is proof of a well-informed country (based on the Chinese precedent). China’s obscurantism, caused by its millennial

18 Gérard Siary, ‘La présence française au Japon depuis l’ère Meiji (1868-1912)’, (Blanchon).
isolation, and especially its vain resistance against the attempts of the Europeans, shook and enraged the Japanese. Between resisting the West or bowing down to it, after many twists and turns, the spirit of openness prevailed. This opening up to foreign countries by Japan, was due first to one of its influential ministers at the Court: Midzouno Etkisennokami, who ‘had the boldness to propose to his colleagues to open up Japan to the men of the West’ (Lavollée 1863, 880). This way of thinking was subsequently shared among the Japanese elites of the time, including several Kanga princes who wrote many pamphlets to exhort Japan to open its ports to the West before the latter came to claim them by force (Lindau 1863, 76).

History soon proved them right. In 1853, the Japanese were amazed at the arrival of the American fleet under Commodore Perry (Lindau 1863, 77). The invincible commodore had the Japanese sign the first treaty with the West allowing trade exchanges and the appointment of a consul general of the United States in Japan. The ease and rapidity with which the West set foot on Japanese soil brought to mind the Chinese precedent. The fate of the Qing Empire resulting from its stinging defeat continued to enrage the most resistant minds:

China, Perry told the Japanese court, was completely defeated; it had sufficed for England and France to send a small part of their powerful fleet and their considerable armies to subjugate the Middle Empire, which was ten times larger and more populous than Japan. (Lindau 1863, 79)

The irreversible defeat of the neighboring giant in the face of ‘civilized’ powers – which led to the dismemberment of the Middle Empire – provided a terrible lesson for Japan, which drew its own conclusion. Everything led one to believe that by avoiding the role of the defeated party that China was then playing, the Japanese would escape from putting their country under colonial control by offering compensation through concessions and leases.

This amicable infiltration by the Europeans – without colony or concession – into Japanese territory meant that French acculturation remained limited, in comparison with the Chinese case. It goes without saying that, although French investments were found to be lower in several regions in Japan, the Francophone element seems also to have been significant. On the other hand, even if the opening up of Japan was different to that of China, what traditional Japan needed was similar to what China wanted, namely the knowledge of maritime techniques and modern ways. Thus, the modalities of Franco-Japanese exchanges were more or less modeled on those of the French presence in China. Think of the arsenal in Yokosuka and the
foundry in Yokohama set up by the French professionals recruited by the Meiji government between 1854 and 1868 to teach the Japanese how to build and repair their boats (Blanchon 155). These two maritime sites built by French engineers attest to the same mode of French involvement in Japan as in China. In other words, the French contribution was distinguished above all in the military and shipbuilding: ‘The Meiji era saw the realization, in many areas, of major governmental projects led by the French’ (Blanchon 157).

Inevitably, the introduction of French interests in Japan brought in its wake the infiltration of French culture even if compared to China, where France possessed a colony, concession, and trading post, but where French cultural presence was limited. Still, the anchoring and the manifestation of French life in Japan roughly followed the Chinese model on a relatively smaller scale. There is every reason to believe that the genesis and emancipation of the French-speaking sphere in China would provide a model that can be applied to other Asian countries that have experienced the same phenomenon, with some exceptions. For during the same period, several countries of the Levant faced the same dilemma regarding the West, and what is more, the needs of these countries were also similar.

**The French presence in Korea**

Like Japan, another kingdom of the East was in the path of the French fleet. Korea was also on the frontline of the encounter with French civilization. The fact that the first appearances of the French ships La Boussole and L’Astrid anchored near the coast of Korea as early as 1787 (Jong 66-67) suggests that, after China, Korea was in the firing line of the French colonizers. Nevertheless, the dilemma remained the same. Resisting the West or yielding to its penetration; the kingdom had to decide. Korea, which had maintained a ‘sporadic exchange with Westerners since the 17th century’ (Jong 11), was also concerned about external intrusion. It is through its giant neighbor that the hermitic Kingdom, whose constitution dates back to the year 669, tentatively felt its way about the West. Books of Western philosophy, mathematics, astronomy and Christian religion, composed in Chinese by European missionaries, made their way into Korea from Beijing:

Every Korean ambassadors went to Beijing to pay tribute to the Emperor [...] to meet the Jesuits in residence at the Court. The Jesuits gave them

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19 See also, Beato; Loti; Stillfried; (Edel 20).
20 This subject will be expanded on in Chapter IV.
Chinese books, written by them, which dealt with the natural sciences and Catholicism’ (Destombes 18).

Between openness and isolation, the Korean kingdom, like its neighbors, thought carefully about this unprecedented dilemma. As the Court vacillated, the presence of Western fleets increased, especially after the Opium Wars. When Korea finally emerged from its isolation, the first trade treaty it signed was not with the West but with Japan in 1876. Nevertheless, this outward breach enabled the European countries to also wrest treaties, including that with France in 1886 (Jong 11). 21

Even more isolated and closed off than China and Japan because of the limited extent of its writing, Korea until the eighteenth century had no means of communication with the French. Everything passed by the detour of Chinese writing, with which it shares the same characters, with a different oral pronunciation. It is thanks to this linguistic medium that the Jesuits of China were able to settle in Korea (Jong 41). As a result, the first trace of the French presence in Korea is tinged strongly with Christian proselytism, just as in the Chinese case. If Yi Sŏng-hun was the first Korean Christian to be baptized in 1784 and Korean historiography holds Chŏng Ha-sang as the first Korean to have learned French, it should be noted that French was not diffused there before the opening up of Korea to foreign countries. Thus the first French school in Seoul dates only from 1896 (Jong 192-193), when France already had been working in Shanghai and other Asian cities for almost half a century. On the other hand, if the French influence (or Francophonie in Korea) has been slowed down or its growth has lagged in the contemporary history of Korea, this is due to the interruption of Franco-Korean diplomatic relations for 41 years (1906–1947), due to the annexation of the kingdom by the Japanese Empire (Thiébaud 2005, 81).

As succinct as it is, this panoramic overview of the French presence in the countries and kingdoms bordering on China gives an idea of the whole of the French advance across the Far East. The willingness of Japan and Korea to amiably allow French penetration into their lands would undoubtedly have an impact on Francophone life in these two cultures, which had not experienced a colonial concession. Without going into it any further, our brief overview will have the merit of having shown that there is a different degree of Francophonie in the countries of the Levant, which is due to the extent of the French presence in these places.

21 See also Kim Hwa-Young, ‘Introduction et réception de la littérature française en Corée: autour d’Albert Camus’, (Pei 134).
Is there a Francophonie in the East?

This quick overview of the history of the French presence, its origin, penetration, and distribution in China, India, and to a relatively lesser degree, Japan and Korea, leads us to ask an essential question: does there exist a Francophonie in the East beyond the French establishment in Indochina? Whatever the conclusion, given the current state of thought in this field, the answer to this question must take into account the French strongholds in all places once influenced by French culture. As the Middle Kingdom was coveted by the eight ‘civilized’ countries at the time, France had every interest in carving out its own place. In fact, the tearing up of China by the European powers and in particular the cessation of Hong Kong to England led France to consolidate its position and to devise an equivalent strategy in the South of China. Hence the French interest in Indochina. Already, the phenomenon of Francophone elements in Asia, and the issue over whether there is indeed a Francophonie in the East beyond Indochina, appear beyond question.

On the other hand, the misfortunes of France in India served as a catalyst for its breakthrough elsewhere in Asia as a counterbalance and compensation. Thus the fate of the French adventure in India and China influenced the future fortunes and misfortunes of the French in Indochina. As a reaction to and consequence of the losses incurred upstream, the importance of Indochina resides in its role as the last outpost of France in Asia. If the first pages of the French Empire in the Far East were written in India, Cathay served as a relay point and Indochina marked its loss, embodying the last surge of post-Cathay French interests, a kind of ‘swan song’ of French Eastern colonization. As the ultimate hope and despair of France in Asia, Indochina is not in itself the apotheosis of the French colonial period in the East; this was Shanghai, the crucible and the highlight of post-Pondicherry French colonial life. My conviction is that the neglected Francophone phenomenon in these Asian regions/territories, generally classified as non-Francophone, deserves to be re-examined according to a transcultural approach. Historically excluded from the Francophone sphere and omitted from the Francophone field of study, Asia apparently has no place in the French-speaking world. As a result, there is an urgent need for substantive studies on the Francophone Asian area, and within it, the distinctive character of this form of Francophonie. Moreover, this overview will have highlighted the position and the attitude of France in these regions/cultures, former hosts of French civilization.

Thus, from the establishment of posts/relays in Macau or Canton, to the opening of the ports/concessions in Shanghai or Fuzhou, passing by the high
point of the East India Company in India, the map of ‘the French incursion’ indicates spaces that were formerly ignored. However, these landmarks represent the presence of the French Eastern Empire before Indochina. From Pondicherry to Shanghai via Guangzhouwan, the back roads of conquest testify to the hardships suffered by the peoples of these ancient strongholds in non-Francophone spaces. The trials and tribulations of these places in their encounter with French culture led to the subsequent establishment of Indochina. A fortiori, these places with their sonorous names testify above all to the accomplishment of a transnational Francophonie where the French culture and the local cultures made contact.

The history of the above-mentioned places only reinforces the relevance of my hypothesis on the existence of an enlarged and protean Eastern Francophonie. Already, the omnipresent equivalence made between Indochina and Francophonie in the East is shattered and leads the debate to a horizon hitherto unexplored. As a result, we require a new approach, because the Francophone elements in Asia will need to be brought to light according to a methodology that reflects the multifaceted nature of the Francophone manifestation in these cultures classified, a priori, as non-Francophones. In other words, the recognition of Francophone zones with heterogeneous shapes and forms in India, China, Japan, and Korea requires studies that depart from the old methodology, such as the trilogical approach. Because the French elements in these cultural spaces are not found in the whole country but in ports, trading posts, and territories in contact with French culture. In other words, French does not serve as a linguistic medium or as an official language, but it is a language among other cultural languages. In short, in a country that escaped colonization and whose local regional culture weaves a relationship of cohabitation with the new masters in diverse ways, the French elements require a form of recognition other than the uniform application of the trilogical method.

These distant cities, which have left their imprint on the collective Francophone memory, whether it be Canton, Pondicherry, Shanghai, or Guangzhouwan, each bear the vestiges of the French presence across their contemporary history. Even if the degree and nature of their Francophone acquisition vary because of the vicissitudes which these places underwent in their cohabitation with French civilization, this in no way detracts from their belonging to the French-speaking world of the East.

The literary aspect further reinforces this historical observation. The twentieth century witnessed the emancipation of Chinese/Japanese literature of French expression, which will be the subject of Chapters IV and V. At the end of these analyses we will be able to affirm that neither the concept
of Indochina as a reference for Eastern Francophonie, nor that colonization was the only means of access to the French-speaking world, remain tenable. Many works published in France, Quebec and elsewhere, originating from literatures labeled non-Francophone, authored by Francophone writers of Asian origin, strongly attest that French-speaking literature is not confined to Francophone countries. These French-speaking (Chinese/Japanese/Korean) literatures, originating from the places that once bore the traditions of French culture in Asia, deserve to be looked at closely in the hope of reconfiguring contemporary Francophone literature.