
The concept of the East and Southeast Asian waters as an Asian “Mediterranean,” applying the idea of Fernand Braudel’s “la Méditerranée”1 to a completely new geographical and spatial context, has become quite popular in recent scholarship. Relevant studies emphasize various similarities and differences to Braudel’s original thesis, incorporate different, smaller or larger parts of the Asian waters as Mediterranean, but they basically all agree on the suitability and usefulness of the concept’s application to maritime Asia—in particular in order to emphasize the intensity of exchanges in this geo-political region.2 None of these previous publications aimed at a general Braudelian synthesis of the Asian maritime world or generally compared the European with the Asian “Mediterranean” Seas.

In the present volume François Gipouloux provides the reader with a comparison of three different Mediterranean spaces—the European Méditerranées of the repubbliche marinare and the Hanseatic League in the Baltic Seas, and the Asian Mediterranean comprising the Sea of Japan, the Yellow Sea, the South China Sea, the Sulu Sea, and the Sea of the Célèbes. Chapter 1 sets the theoretical and methodological framework; chapter 2 discusses the European Mediterranean republics; chapter 3 the Hanseatic League; chapter 4 introduces relatively independent port cities and merchant structures in maritime Asia during the seventh to seventeenth centuries, chapter 5 the organization of commerce

in Asia, specifying in chapter 6 tribute and non-official trade. Japan occupied a particular position within these structures and is discussed in chapter 7. Chapter 8 summarizes the characteristics of the Asian maritime system, which according to Gipouloux appears as an interwoven, complex network of Chinese, Japanese but also Western affairs based on a number of limited large emporia. Chapters 9 and 10 treat the advent of the Europeans and changes they brought about for Asia’s maritime system, leading to the forced opening of ports. Chapter 11 presents Singapore, Hong Kong, and Shanghai as concrete examples. The next group of chapters are dedicated to modern developments: chapter 12 discusses China’s maritime structures before and chapter 13 after the opening in the 1970s. Chapters 14 to 16 analyze the competition of Hong Kong and Shanghai as commercial and financial centers. The concluding chapters investigate the modern Asian maritime system up to 2008: chapter 17 is devoted to the opening of China and the centrifugal attraction of the economic corridor from Vladivostok to Singapore seen as exogenic dynamics that disintegrated and restructured Chinese space, while chapters 18 and 19 concentrate on internal or endogenic factors and dynamics. The final chapter views China as an autarkic, collectivist continental power that gradually moves towards maritime, open, commercial, and cosmopolitan Asia, and towards its reconstruction as a flexible empire (p. 11), as Gipouloux puts it.

Gipouloux consequently introduces the history of the “Asian Méditerranée” throughout approximately five centuries, from the fifteenth/sixteenth to the twenty-first, providing unfortunately only a very brief general historical survey of the Song, Yuan, and early Ming period—an era that should be included in any discussion of intensive inter- and supra-regional exchange across the Asian waters. For, although China has basically remained a land-orientated empire throughout the centuries, its particular organization and management of maritime trade, diplomacy, and commerce have continued to have an important influence on economies and foreign relations of other countries in the macro-region of maritime Asia. One of the declared intentions and aims of the present book is to study continuities and discontinuities in maritime Asia by analyzing two types of territorial arrangements and integration: state structures and cities integrated into a larger metropolitan archipelago (p. 8), laying emphasis not simply on geographical but on institutional models of economic integration without strict territorial limitations (e.g., p. 377), and linking historical structures and models to the present. Gipouloux thus attempts not only to link the past with the present, but also provides the so far still unwritten, more general Braudelian synthesis of the Asian maritime world, comparing it additionally with two historical examples of European Mediterraneans, and putting together a great deal of relevant information. This alone undoubtedly deserves much credit.

The strength of his argumentation, however, focuses on the present, especially on the decades after the gradual opening of China with the reforms of Deng Xiaoping. The emphasis in this modern phase clearly lies on China. In