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HISTORIOGRAPHICAL REVIEWS

FRENCH-ASIAN CONNECTIONS: THE COMPAGNIES DES INDES, FRANCE'S EASTERN TRADE, AND NEW DIRECTIONS IN HISTORICAL SCHOLARSHIP*

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ABSTRACT. *With the recent rise in global history as a discipline, early modern Europe's Asian trade has become a new focus of interest. In French historiography, however, this still remains marginalized. Some studies of the French East India Companies and the French presence in Asia exist, but the impact of this on metropolitan France remains woefully underexplored. This article outlines the history and historiography of the French East India Companies and their wider role and importance, outlining pathways of both existing, current, and possible future research.*

I

The French East India Company presents a puzzling case to both scholars and students. It was one of the most important and influential companies, sought to play in the same league as the British East India Company (EIC) and the Dutch East India Company (VOC), and by the middle of the eighteenth century, before Clive's decisive victories in the Seven Years War, it was Britain's most dangerous rival in India. And yet, apart from a few specialist publications directly dedicated to it, it is usually ignored in the wider French historiography. One can only speculate as to the reasons for this. Perhaps it is due to the fact that the French company did not, unlike the EIC, develop into a fully fledged colonial power in India; perhaps because unlike in the cases of other countries with East India Companies such as the Dutch Republic, Sweden, and Denmark, France built another colonial empire in the nineteenth century, which may

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deflect attention from these earlier developments: and as Jean-Frédéric Schaub has pointed out in a recent article, colonial studies themselves have until recently been a neglected field in France.¹ The problem might also be of a more practical nature: unlike the unified and easily accessible archives of the EIC and VOC, materials pertaining to the French company are split between the very sparse remnants of the Company Archives in Lorient, Brittany, and the Archives Nationales d'Outre-Mer in Aix-en-Provence, with only comparatively few relevant documents being held in the National Archives in Paris. However, the reason might also lie in the nature of the French East Indian enterprise itself. For the French East India Company was a strange beast, first and foremost because it was not one, but many. It was founded and re-founded several times over the more than one hundred years of its existence and its various guises were distinct enough as to constitute separate companies, whose fortunes fluctuated wildly.

Despite increasing interest on both sides of the Channel, it is only fairly recently that an anglophone audience would have found any work entirely dedicated to the French company. Donald C. Wellington's *French East India Companies* was published only in 2006.² A brief and concise account with a focus on the company's trade, it does not aim to match Philippe Haudrère's brilliant and exhaustive study. Such a feat would be nearly unfeasible: there seem to be few if any records pertaining to the company that Haudrère has not looked at and incorporated in some way in his recently republished work, which treats all aspects of the eighteenth-century company, rather like an encyclopaedia: its structure and history, its trade, geography, locations, personnel, fleet, voyages, and colonial policies.³ However, apart from the obvious advantage of being accessible to a non-francophone audience, Wellington's study contains a very useful statistical annexe on the company's trade and the most up-to-date glossary of (French) textile terminology, which is particularly to be welcomed, bearing in mind that the East India Companies imported hundreds of different kinds of silk and cotton textiles, most of which are now completely unknown to us. Wellington's is not the only study available to a solely English-speaking audience, but most other works are either essays in edited collections treating

¹ Jean-Frédéric Schaub, 'La catégorie "études coloniales" est-elle indispensable?', *Annales. Histoire, Sciences Sociales*, 63 (2008), pp. 625–46.

² Donald C. Wellington, *French East India Companies: a historical account and record of trade* (Lanham, MD, 2006).

³ The revised second edition makes the work much more accessible: Philippe Haudrère, *La Compagnie française des Indes au XVIIIe siècle* (2 vols., Paris, 2005). A shorter and comparative study that places the French company in the context of the other East India Companies is an easy-to-read, reasonably priced alternative for students: Philippe Haudrère, *Les Compagnies des Indes orientales: trois siècles de rencontre entre Orientaux et Occidentaux (1600–1858)* (Paris, 2006). Haudrère also co-authored a beautifully illustrated book together with Gérard Le Bouëdec of the University of South Brittany and Louis Mézin, former director of the East India Company Museum in Lorient: Philippe Haudrère, Gérard Le Bouëdec, and Louis Mézin, *Les Compagnies des Indes* (Rennes, 2010).

only particular aspects of the company and its trade or works which focus on the French presence in India rather than on the company itself.⁴ Almost none of these works evaluate the role and wider impact of the French company overall. Both Haudrère's and Wellington's studies are exemplary explorations of the structure and functioning of the companies and their trade. As such, however, they cannot present an actual argument nor analyse the overall influence or importance of these institutions. Compared to the innumerable volumes published on the Dutch and English companies, the French side remains sadly understudied.

II

The history, shape, and development of the French East India Companies are little enough known to deserve a brief outline here. First founded in 1664 by Colbert, at the very beginning of Louis XIV's reign, the company fell into a gradual decline after the former's death in 1683, not being able to absorb the heavy losses it sustained during the Franco-Dutch War (1672–8), the War of the League of Augsburg (1688–97), and especially the War of the Spanish Succession (1701–14). In those periods of company weakness, private trade flourished: it was officially permitted, albeit company regulated, from 1682 onwards, and a private consortium was the first to organize a successful voyage to China in 1698. Most of these private ventures originated in Brittany, in Saint-Malo especially, with Parisian financial backing. The resulting strength of the private shipping interest and its self-confidence built on its successes would stand in opposition to the company's monopoly throughout the following century.⁵

If the strength of independent trade was one characteristic of the French company, paradoxically, so was government control. Unlike the EIC or the VOC, the French company was a government initiative and would remain so in all its various guises. Colbert, despite modelling the company on the VOC, never managed to attract much merchant backing and a significant part of the initial funding came from the royal court at Versailles. The king continued to

⁴ The most stimulating and useful of such essays are Pierre H. Boulle, 'French mercantilism, commercial companies and colonial profitability', in Leonard Blussé and Femme Gaastra, eds., *Companies and trade: essays on overseas trading companies during the ancien régime* (Leiden, 1981), pp. 97–117; Philip Haudrère, 'The French India Company and its trade in the eighteenth century', in Sushil Chaudhury and Michel Morineau, eds., *Merchants, companies and trade: Europe and Asia in the early modern era* (Cambridge, 1999), pp. 202–11; and Paul Butel, 'French traders and India at the end of the eighteenth century', in *ibid.*, pp. 287–99. On the French presence in India see below.

⁵ For obvious reasons, neither Haudrère nor Wellington dwell much on private trade. For relevant studies of French private shipping, see Christian Pfister-Langanay, *Ports, navires et négociants à Dunkerque (1662–1792)* (Dunkirk, 1985), and for Saint-Malo the work of André Lespagnol, especially the recently republished 1991 work *Messieurs de Saint-Malo – une élite négociante au temps de Louis XIV* (Rennes, 2011).

give funds to the company, which was constantly short of money but which was perceived and run as a significant tool in the state's mercantilist policies. In return, the company was closely supervised by the government in the form of the *contrôleur général* or his agents who had the power to veto or impose any decisions on the directors and the shareholder assembly. The combination of government backing and the strength of private shipping meant that as soon as the former fell away, the latter could take over, which happened when the company finally lost its monopoly in 1769.⁶

Both in its strong state control and in its incarnations as distinct East India Companies, the French case resembles Danish developments much more than the better-known Dutch or English ones.⁷ However, the company was peculiar in even more respects: for part of its existence it was an East India Company not limited to the East Indies. When in the desperate financial straits of France's regency period after Louis XIV's death, John Law set up his famous bank and Mississippi scheme, the company was refounded and merged with the West Indies Company in 1719, and its shares provided the backbone to the introduction of the bank's paper money. After the ensuing speculation, hyperinflation, and collapse of the 'système', the new company found itself bankrupt, but also in possession of a new fleet as well as territories in North America, Africa, and the Indian Ocean. This newly created *Compagnie des Indes* was again reorganized in the 1720s, but remained an 'India Company' rather than solely an East Indian one. It held the monopoly over the sale of tobacco in France, over the slave trade, and trade with the Antilles, and the Canadian beaver-fur trade. It owned Louisiana, and posts along the West African coast. It proved unequal to the task, and after much lobbying and protests from slave traders, West Indian planters, and others, it was forced to abandon its monopolies on the slave trade, the provision of Saint-Domingue (modern-day Haiti), and also retroceded its American possessions to the crown (1731). As an *East India Company* however, it flourished in those years. It vastly expanded its trade with both China and India and, despite setbacks during the War of the Austrian Succession (1740–8), it continued to grow and entered into a bitter rivalry with the EIC.

Unlike the EIC in London, the French companies never had one unified headquarters. Its seat in Paris still stands today in the Rue de Richelieu, now part of the Bibliothèque nationale de France. Unlike the Dutch provinces or England, however, France did not have a capital with direct access to the sea. So it chose to build a base on the Atlantic, in Brittany: Lorient, originally spelt

⁶ Boulle's 'French mercantilism, commercial companies and colonial profitability' is an excellent introduction to the issue of state control. For a more extensive treatment see Glenn Joseph Ames, *Colbert, mercantilism, and the French quest for Asian trade* (DeKalb, IL, 1996).

⁷ For a good overview of the Danish case, see Kristof Glamann, 'The Danish Asiatic Company, 1732–1772', *Scandinavian Economic History Review*, 8 (1960), pp. 109–49. For a more recent analysis see Ole Feldbæk, 'The Danish Asia trade, 1620–1807: value and volume', *Scandinavian Economic History Review*, 39 (1991), pp. 3–27.

L'Orient, bore its purpose in its name. Nearly wholly destroyed in the Second World War, a barracks and part of the purpose-built company auction house are nearly all that is left of what was a unique 'company town'. The French Royal Navy was permitted to use the port and facilities, particularly in wartimes, but the town was generally wholly oriented around the East Indian trade. The company not only equipped its vessels, stored its merchandise, and held its sales in the Lorient, the town was also vast shipyard, as, again unlike the EIC, the French company built its own ships.⁸

At variance with its equivalent across the Channel in many ways, from its relationship to government and merchant communities, to the extent of its non-Indian Ocean obligations, its split headquarters, and its own shipbuilding, all part of a statist and mercantilist conception, the French East India Company nevertheless showed marked parallels with its British equivalent in several respects, both at home and in Asia. Both faced criticism at home in the well-known discourse that conjured up the linked phantoms of luxury, corruption, and Eastern despotism. Both faced storms of protests over the import of Indian printed cottons or calicoes, which became so popular in both countries that indigenous textile producers feared for their industries and succeeded in having protective legislation passed that severely limited, taxed, and banned these imports. However, unlike England, which in several acts around the turn of the eighteenth century legislated against the importation of printed and dyed cottons but permitted the printing of imported white cottons at home, France banned not only the importation of calicoes, but also the printing of white cottons or fustians, and the wearing of such printed textiles. The legislation, passed in 1686 and largely ignored by the calico-loving public, was lifted in 1759, significantly earlier than across the Channel.⁹

The French and British efforts in Asia itself also ran along similar lines.¹⁰ Both companies maintained various trading posts throughout India, both came to encourage the pursuit of the so-called Intra-Asian or Country Trade, known in

⁸ In *La Compagnie française des Indes*, Haudrère dwells on all of these aspects at lengths. On the headquarters in Paris, see vol. 1, pp. 153–62, on the construction of, and life in, Lorient see vol. 1, pp. 162–92, and on the company's shipbuilding see vol. 1, pp. 338–72. Specifically on Lorient, see Gérard Le Bouedec, *Le port et l'arsenal de Lorient* (Paris, 1994), and Adolphe Lepotier, *Lorient: porte des Indes* (Paris, 1970).

⁹ On calicoes in France, see below. For a comparative overview of European calico legislation in the period, see J. K. J. Thomson, 'State intervention in the Catalan calico-printing industry in the eighteenth century', in Maxine Berg, ed., *Markets and manufacture in early industrial Europe* (London, 1991).

The 'Scandal of Empire' to use Dirks's phrase and the discourse of corruption through company influence and imported luxuries is less well explored in the French case. For the EIC, this is particularly well summarized in the introduction to Huw Bowen's *The business of empire: the EIC and imperial Britain, 1756–1833* (Cambridge, 2006), pp. 1–28.

¹⁰ Holden Furber in his classic account is aware of both the similarities and the rivalry between the English, French, and Dutch companies. This comparative approach seems sadly to have been lost in more recent scholarship. Holden Furber, *John Company at work: a study of European expansion in India in the late eighteenth century* (Cambridge, MA, 1948).

French as the 'commerce d'Inde en Inde', as a means of raising funds in Asia itself, and, like all European nations, both faced the exact same trading conditions in China, with the trade limited to Chinese-supervised activities in Canton.¹¹

In India itself the French company first centred its activity on Surat, but Surat soon lost its place to Pondicherry as the Indian headquarters, which the French acquired in 1674. Located on the Coromandel Coast, south of Chennai, then Madras, it remained the mainstay of the French presence in India well into the twentieth century. With a fort, a seawall, and further fortifications built in the eighteenth century, Pondicherry was the seat of the superior council and governor general, with other, subordinate councils established on the Malabar Coast and in Bengal. Apart from Pondicherry, the French company maintained Masulipatam as a subsidiary to Pondicherry on the Coromandel Coast, which, together with Karikal and Yanaon, served as the French entry to the major Indian textile markets. After Pondicherry, the second most important French post was Chandanagor in Bengal, famed for its textile production. Located on the banks of the Hooghly River, and also protected by a fort, it was for a long time under the governorship of Dupleix, before he moved on to the post of governor general in Pondicherry. As the centre of the French Bengal trade Chandanagor was also the centre of French private country trade, which flourished under his encouragement. The company maintained several smaller posts in Bengal: Balasor, important to allow for the navigation of the river, Patna, a lodge for buying saltpetre and opium, as well as Dacca and Jougia for the acquisition of fine cloth. The Malabar Coast decreased in importance over the period and the main French post there, Mahé, largely served for the purchasing of pepper.

This French presence in India has provoked a whole host of scholarship: enough work has been done overall to warrant several bibliographies on the topic.¹² Two excellent studies in English on the French commercial presence in India are Indrani Ray's *The French East India Company and the trade of the Indian Ocean* and Catherine Manning's *Fortunes à faire*.¹³ Both published in the 1990s,

¹¹ The best study on the China trade remains Louis Dermigny's magisterial *La Chine et l'Occident: le commerce à Canton au XVIIIe siècle, 1719–1833* (Paris, 1964), recently supplemented, for the French case, by a beautiful catalogue for a recent exhibition in Nantes: Bertrand Guillet, ed., *La soie et le canon: France–Chine 1700–1860* (Paris and Nantes, 2010).

¹² For a useful, albeit now slightly outdated, bibliography, see Henry Scholberg and Emmanuel Divien, *Bibliographie des Français dans l'Inde/Bibliography of the French in India*, Historical Society of Pondicherry (Pondicherry, 1973). To celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of the restitution of the French establishment to India, the French National Library has also published a bibliography: *L'Inde des Français* (Paris, 1994). Liverpool University offers a very useful overview of French works published on India: Liverpool University, *French books on India: from Dupleix to decolonization* (Version 3; 24 May 2011): www.liv.ac.uk/soclas/research/Peripheralvoices/french-books/FBI-Bibliography.pdf (last consulted 18 Jan. 2013).

¹³ Indrani Ray, *The French East India Company and the trade of the Indian Ocean*, ed. Lakshmi Subramanian (New Delhi, 1999); Catherine Manning, *Fortunes à faire: the French in the Asian trade, 1719–1748* (Aldershot, 1996).

they give the reader a host of information on the conditions on the ground in India, on Franco-Indian relations, on both private and company trade in India, and on Indian and French merchants. An English translation of a collection of essays edited by Rose Vincent gives a broader picture, though not necessarily one strongly related to the company and its trade. It is in fact when moving away from the company that one finds a good deal of scholarship on the French in India more generally. Much of it is available to an English-speaking audience: apart from Vincent's collection, Glenn Ames and Ronald Love's *Distant lands and diverse cultures: the French experience in Asia, 1600–1700* provides a good introduction to the French presence in Asia in its earliest stages.¹⁴ Though not always translated into English, perhaps the best work on the French in India has been done by Jean Deloche, head of the French Institute of Pondicherry's Project, 'Pondicherry: Past and Present', by Florence d'Souza, Guy Deleury, and Jacques Weber.¹⁵

As the company's early model had been the VOC, attempts were made in the seventeenth century to find an equivalent for Dutch Batavia, modern-day Java. Thus, the company settled on the uninhabited Mascarene Islands, Mauritius and Réunion, or Ile de France and Bourbon as they were then known. Whilst they never became the company's Asian headquarters in the way that Batavia was for the Dutch, they remained the company's property until the end of the Seven Years War, when it retroceded them to the government. With all their trade under the company's monopoly, they served as important stop-over points for company ships as well as providers of coffee in the case of Bourbon.¹⁶

Unlike the VOC, and very much like the EIC, the French company constantly sought to strengthen its foothold in India itself, generally in direct rivalry with its British counterpart. After the latter gained the right to coin their own rupees in Bombay in 1717, the French lobbied strenuously until they obtained the authorization to mint rupees in Pondicherry from 1736 onwards; and when both companies began to intervene directly and militarily in Indian affairs from

¹⁴ Rose Vincent, ed., *The French in India: from diamond traders to Sanskrit scholars*, trans. Latika Padgaonkar (London, 1990); Glenn J. Ames and Ronald S. Love, eds., *Distant lands and diverse cultures: the French experience in Asia, 1600–1700* (Westport, CT, 2003).

¹⁵ Jean Deloche, *Pondicherry past and present/Pondichéry hier et aujourd'hui* (Pondicherry and Paris, 2007); Jean Deloche, *Four forts of the Deccan* (Pondicherry and Paris, 2009); Jean Deloche, *Origins of the urban development of Pondicherry according to seventeenth-century Dutch plan* (Pondicherry, 2004); Florence d'Souza, *Quand la France découvrit l'Inde* (Paris, 1995); Guy Deleury, *Les Indes florissantes: anthologie des voyageurs français, 1750–1820* (Paris, 1991), republished as *Le voyage en Inde: anthologie des voyageurs français* (Paris, 2003); Jacques Weber, *Pondichéry et les comptoirs de l'Inde après Duplex* (Paris, 1996), as well as Jacques Weber, ed., *Compagnies et comptoirs: l'Inde des français, XVIIe–XXe siècle*, numéro spécial de la *Revue française d'Histoire d'Outre-Mer*, 290 (1991), and Jacques Weber, ed., *Les relations entre la France et l'Inde de 1673 à nos jours* (Paris, 2002).

¹⁶ The literature on these colonies is extensive enough to warrant its own bibliography, though it does not always focus on the role of the company. For an exception, see Haudrère's biography of La Bourdonnais, governor of the islands: *La Bourdonnais: marin et aventurier* (Paris, 1992). For a general overview, see Auguste Toussaint, *Histoire des îles Mascariennes* (Paris, 1972).

the 1720s onwards, these generally became Franco-British conflicts. This reached its apogee in the Carnatic Wars of the 1740s and 1750s, which merged into the Seven Years War and ultimately ended with the defeat of the French in India. This defeat was partially a result of the French company's shareholders' unwillingness to support a territorial war in India, which led them to force the recall of Dupleix who had until then been uncommonly successful in his war against the British on the subcontinent. However, the main reason were two weaknesses which plagued the French company since its inception and placed it at an acute disadvantage: a chronic lack of funds and inadequate protection by the navy. This meant that the company had always suffered disproportionately during times of war, when the British navy caused it very heavy losses, and whilst the French trade quickly picked up again after the War of the Austrian Succession, the Seven Years War sounded the death knell for the company. It lost its monopoly in 1769 and went into liquidation soon after. Most studies on the company cease at this point; however, a new company, also known as the 'Calonne Company', was founded by the then controller general Calonne in 1785. It was quickly engulfed by scandal and its monopoly did not survive even the first year of the Revolution, and it was completely suppressed in 1793. A work which incorporates these later developments, in particular the 1780s Calonne Company, is Jean Tarrade's *Le commerce colonial de la France à la fin de l'ancien régime*.¹⁷

III

All these aspects are well covered by Haudrère and supplemented by the numerous studies on the French in India. However, there seems to be no reverse equivalent: it is almost impossible to find any studies considering the impact of the Asian trade on France. Situated in the new methodological approach of 'global history', and inspired by the debate about global economic divergence between Europe and Asia as expounded most notably in Kenneth Pomeranz's *The great divergence*,¹⁸ there has been a wave of recent scholarship on the impact of the East Indian trade on British domestic developments: scholars as diverse as Maxine Berg, Huw Bowen, Beverly Lemire, Patrick O'Brien, and John Styles have contributed to this.¹⁹ And yet there is next to nothing to be found about the effects of this trade on metropolitan France. The very sparse

¹⁷ Jean Tarrade, *Le commerce colonial de la France à la fin de l'ancien régime: l'évolution du régime de l'Exclusif de 1763 à 1789* (2 vols., Paris, 1972).

¹⁸ Kenneth Pomeranz, *The great divergence: China, Europe, and the making of the modern world economy* (Princeton, NJ, 2000). For a much more conservative account, perhaps the instigator of the debate in the first place, see David Landes, *The wealth and poverty of nations: why some are so rich and some so poor* (New York, NY, 1998).

¹⁹ See, for instance, Maxine Berg, 'In pursuit of luxury: global origins of British consumer goods in the eighteenth century', *Past and Present*, 182 (2004), pp. 85–142; Maxine Berg, 'From imitation to invention: creating commodities in eighteenth-century Britain', *Economic History Review*, 45 (2002), pp. 1–30; Bowen, *The business of empire*; Beverly Lemire, *Fashion's favourite: the*

and brave scholarship that does exist is often linked to the work of the above researchers. Guillaume Daudin, historian and economist, whose *Commerce et prospérité* decisively argues for the crucial role of trade, both internal and overseas, in French economic growth during the eighteenth century, is strongly inspired by the work of Jan de Vries and Patrick O'Brien and the author did indeed spend a good part of his research time at the London School of Economics. As a general rule, however, when attempts are made to link French economic developments to its overseas connections, these are generally limited to the Atlantic world, as in the recent work by Richard Drayton and Allan Potofsky.²⁰

Explicit connections with Asian trade tend only to be made in more specialized studies, which often deliberately align themselves with the new attempts of global historians to link European economic developments to the wider world. East India Company imports of fine manufactured Asian goods had a huge impact on the development of imitative industries in France and in Europe more widely, notably in the production of porcelain, japanned furniture, fans, and textiles.²¹ This has been most noticeable in accounts of

cotton trade and the consumer in Britain, 1660–1800 (Oxford, 1991); Beverly Lemire, 'Fashioning global trade: Indian textiles, gender meanings and European consumers, 1500–1800', in Giorgio Riello and Tirthankar Roy, eds., *How India clothed the world: the world of South Asian textiles, 1500–1850* (Leiden, 2009), pp. 365–90; Beverly Lemire, 'Revising the historical narrative: India, Europe, and the cotton trade, c. 1300–1800', in Giorgio Riello and Prasanna Parthasarathi, eds., *The spinning world: a global history of cotton textiles, 1200–1850* (Oxford, 2009), pp. 205–26; Patrick O'Brien, 'Inseparable connections: trade economy, fiscal state and the expansion of empire, 1688–1815', in P. J. Marshall, ed., *The Oxford history of the British empire, II: The eighteenth century* (Oxford, 1998); Patrick O'Brien, 'The reconstruction, rehabilitation and reconfiguration of the British industrial revolution as a conjuncture in global history', *Itinerario*, 24 (2000), pp. 117–34; Patrick O'Brien, 'Imperialism and the rise and decline of the British economy, 1688–1989', *New Left Review*, 238 (1999), pp. 48–89; John Styles, 'Indian cottons and European fashion, 1400–1800', in Glenn Adamson, Giorgio Riello, and Sarah Teasley, eds., *Global design history* (London, 2011), pp. 37–46; John Styles, 'What were cottons for in the early industrial revolution?', in Riello and Parthasarathi, eds., *The spinning world*, pp. 307–26.

²⁰ G. Daudin, *Commerce et prospérité: la France au XVIIIe siècle* (Paris, 2005); Richard Drayton, 'The globalisation of France: provincial cities and French expansion, c. 1500–1800', *History of European Ideas*, 34 (2008), pp. 424–30; Allan Potofsky, 'Paris-on-the-Atlantic from the Old Regime to the revolution', *French History*, 25 (2011), pp. 89–107; see also Trevor Burnard and Allan Potofsky, 'The political economy of the French Atlantic world and the Caribbean before 1800', *ibid.*, pp. 1–8.

²¹ The most beautiful introduction to the topic remains Amin Jaffer and Anna Jackson, eds., *Encounters: the meeting of Asia and Europe, 1500–1800* (London, 2004). On cotton textiles, see below; for silk, the work especially of Carlo Poni remains relevant: see for instance 'Mode et innovation: les stratégies des marchands en soie de Lyon au XVIIIe siècle', *Revue d'histoire moderne et contemporaine*, 45 (1998), pp. 589–625. On lacquer works, see Thibaut Wolfesperges, *Le meuble français en laque au XVIIIe siècle* (Paris and Brussels, 2000). Ina Baghandiantz McCabe devotes an entertaining section to the fan and other imitative productions in France in *Ornamentalism in early modern France: Eurasian trade, exoticism and the ancien régime* (Oxford and New York, NY, 2008), pp. 203–30. Specifically on folding fans at Louis XIV's court, see Pamela Cowen, *A fanfare for the Sun King: unfolding fans for Louis XIV* (London, 2003). There is a huge

the development of the French cotton industry. The French infatuation with imported printed cottons, or ‘indiennes’, was immense and its impact lasting. Whilst the only comprehensive study of this phenomenon and its consequences remains Edgard Depître’s *La toile peinte in France* of 1912, there are a whole host of individual case studies as well as a more recent interest within the context of global history studies.²² French printing on cotton in imitation of the Asian imports began in the seventeenth century. Unable to master the superior Asian techniques until well into the eighteenth century, the industry nevertheless grew rapidly, until it was hit by the bans on the import and production of printed cottons in the 1680s. As both Olivier Raveux and Katsumi Fukasawa have demonstrated, the technical knowledge that needed to be mastered did not come directly from India but via the intermediary of Armenian merchants and printers who settled in the south of France.²³ It is this global – and largely company-mediated – dimension in the development of an industry that culminated in Oberkampf’s famous factory at Jouy in the eighteenth century, which is at the centre of recent scholarly interest focused in the brilliant essay collections by Giorgio Riello and Brigitte Nicolas.²⁴ In these, even Serge

amount of scholarship on porcelain production in France. The works specifically treating company porcelain are a little dated by now. See, for instance, the comte de Lafon’s *La Compagnie des Indes et la porcelaine de la Compagnie des Indes* (Dijon, 1933). Michel Beurdeley’s *Porcelaine de la Compagnie des Indes* (Fribourg, 1962) devotes a substantive section to France. More recent is the companion volume to the exhibition at the Company Museum in Lorient in 2002 by its former chief curator: Louis Mézin, *Cargoes from China: porcelain from the Compagnies des Indes in the Musée de Lorient* (Lorient, 2002).

²² Edgard Depître, *La toile peinte en France au XVIIe et au XVIIIe siècles: industrie, commerce, prohibitions* (Paris, 1912). For an individual case-study, see, for instance, Pierre Dardel, *Les manufactures de toiles peintes et de serges imprimées à Rouen et à Bolbec aux XVIIe et XVIIIe siècles* (Rouen, 1940).

²³ Olivier Raveux, ‘The birth of a new European industry: l’indiennage in seventeenth-century Marseilles’, in Riello and Parthasarathi, eds., *The spinning world*, pp. 291–306; Olivier Raveux, ‘Innovation et transferts de technologie dans l’industrie textile européenne du XVIIe siècle: l’exemple de l’indiennage à Marseille’, in Christophe Bouneau and Yannick Lung, eds., *Les dynamiques des systèmes d’innovation: logiques sectorielles et espaces de l’innovation* (Bordeaux, 2009), pp. 103–16; Olivier Raveux, ‘Du commerce à la production: l’indiennage européen et l’acquisition des techniques asiatiques au XVIIe siècle’, in Jacqueline Jacqué and Brigitte Nicolas, eds., *Féerie indienne: les toiles peintes des rivages de l’Inde au royaume de France* (Paris, 2008), pp. 22–5; Olivier Raveux, ‘Les Arméniens et la Méditerranée, médiateurs techniques entre Orient et Occident dans l’indiennage au XVIIe siècle’, in Gérard Le Bouëdec and Brigitte Nicolas, eds., *Le goût de L’Inde* (Lorient and Rennes, 2008), pp. 44–51; Katsumi Fukasawa, *Toilerie et commerce du Levant, d’Alep à Marseille* (Paris, 1987); Katsumi Fukasawa, ‘De L’Inde au Levant: routes du commerce, routes des indiennes’, in Bouëdec and Nicolas, eds., *Le goût de L’Inde*, pp. 34–43. Also on the topic of technology acquisition, see George Bryan Souza, ‘The French connection: Indian cottons and their early modern technology’, in Riello and Roy, eds., *How India clothed the world*, pp. 347–64.

²⁴ Riello and Parthasarathi, eds., *The spinning world*; Riello and Roy, eds., *How India clothed the world*; Jacqué and Nicolas, eds., *Féerie indienne*, and Bouëdec and Nicolas, eds., *Le goût de L’Inde*.

Chassagne, doyen of the French cotton printing history, has contributed to the debate.²⁵

The company's and the Asian trade's impact on metropolitan France was by no means limited to the field of economics alone, but when it comes to assessing its role in seventeenth and eighteenth-century French politics, thought, science, and wider social and cultural life, we face an even greater dearth of scholarship. This is all the more surprising as a simple overview of the actors closely involved with the company already reveals its importance in French political and intellectual life. Take political economy for instance: virtually all of the founding figures of the discipline in eighteenth-century France were connected to the company in some way or another. Advocated by Richelieu and founded by Colbert, the company was deeply embedded in mercantilist thought, its foundation was accompanied by a public relations campaign in the field of economic thought as Colbert encouraged Charpentier to publish two tracts in its favour, the *Discours d'une fidele sujet au roy, touchant l'establissement d'une Compagnie françoise pour le commerce des Indes orientales*, and the later *Relation de l'establissement de la Compagnie françoise pour le comerce des Indes orientales*, both dating from the 1660s.

The company continued to be linked to many of the most prominent economic thinkers: François Melon, friend of Montesquieu, admired by Voltaire and author of the *Essai politique sur le commerce* (1734) that continued to shape the debate about political economy throughout the following century, was personal secretary to John Law and closely involved with his set-up of the merged East India Company.²⁶ Nicolas Dutot, author of the *Réflexions politiques sur les finances et le commerce* (1735–8), a perhaps equally influential critique of Melon, was under-treasurer of the new Royal Bank which was fused with the East India Company under Law's scheme, with which he was closely involved.²⁷

Until the 1980s and 1990s, the traditional narrative of the development of economic liberalism remained unchallenged: it was said to have begun with the physiocrats who in turn inspired Adam Smith. In recent decades, this narrative

²⁵ Serge Chassagne, 'La création de manufactures d'indiennes en France dans la seconde moitié du XVIIIe siècle', in Bouëdec and Nicolas, eds., *Le goût de L'Inde*, pp. 52–61. See, for instance, *Oberkampf, un entrepreneur capitaliste au siècle des lumières* (Paris, 1980). For a comparative dimension see Serge Chassagne and Stanley Chapman, *European textile printers in the eighteenth century: a study of Peel and Oberkampf* (London, 1981).

²⁶ Melon's role in the developing discipline of political economy is often overlooked by scholars in favour of his more famous friends and admirers, Voltaire and Montesquieu. His contribution was nevertheless of real importance. See in particular Istvan Hont, 'The early Enlightenment debate on commerce and luxury', in Mark Goldie and Robert Wokler, eds., *The Cambridge history of eighteenth-century political thought* (Cambridge, 2006), pp. 379–418.

²⁷ On Dutot, see especially Antoin Murphy, 'The enigmatic Monsieur du Tot', in Gilbert Faccarello, ed., *Studies in the history of French political economy* (London and New York, NY, 1998) pp. 57–77; and Antoin Murphy, 'Nicolas Du Tot and John Law', in Yiorgos Stathakis and Gianni Vaggi, eds., *Economic development and social change: historical roots and modern perspectives* (London and New York, NY, 2006), pp. 171–89.

has had to be revised, most notably by the inclusion of the earlier liberal movement led by Vincent Gournay which preceded the physiocrats by at least a decade and was an important precursor and pendant to them.²⁸ As a consequence, the first concentration of the emerging liberalist movement was not on agriculture, as it would be with the physiocrats, but on commerce and trade, which interested Gournay and his associates. And once again, the French East India Company was at the centre of innovation in economic thought: the economic liberalism so ardently promoted by Vincent Gournay and his circle found its first challenge in the policies surrounding the East India Company. André Morellet, in close co-operation with Vincent Gournay, himself the son of a Saint-Malo merchant, successfully fought first for the abolition of the ban on calicoes in 1759 and then for the abolition of the company's monopoly in 1769. During the latter campaign, which was very much conducted in the arena of public opinion, another figure came to the fore who would continue to dominate public life: Jacques Necker's first public campaign was in favour of the East India Company, of which he was a major shareholder and financial backer.²⁹ The physiocrats also became involved: Samuel Dupont de Nemours intervened in the 1769 monopoly debate to support Morellet's stance against Necker.³⁰ The company thus played the role of a crystallizing or driving force in the development of French economic thought: first in its association with mercantilism, then in its links to Law's paper money and bank scheme, and finally in focusing the critique of the emerging liberalist movement.

However, with the exception of the late Glenn Ames, the recent wave of scholarship on early modern French political economy seems only marginally if at all interested in this phenomenon.³¹ Whilst ignoring the calico debates

²⁸ The classic account of the physiocratic movement is by Elizabeth Fox-Genovese: *The origins of physiocracy: economic revolution and social order in eighteenth-century France* (Ithaca, NY, and London, 1976). The work most influential in re-establishing the role of Gournay in the development of French economic liberalism is Simone Meyssonier, *La balance et l'horloge: la Genèse de la pensée libérale en France au XVIIIe siècle* (Montreuil, 1989). For a concise overview of the historiographical development, see John Shovlin, *The political economy of virtue: luxury, patriotism, and the origins of the French Revolution* (Ithaca, NY, 2006), pp. 3–4.

²⁹ Not much recent work has been done on Necker's involvement with the company. The best work on this remains Herbert Lüthy's. Particularly relevant is his 'Necker et la Compagnie des Indes', *Annales. Histoire, Sciences Sociales*, 15 (1960), pp. 852–81. For a more general study, see *La banque protestante en France, de la révocation de l'Édit de Nantes à la Révolution* (originally published in 1959–61, it is available as a 3-volume reprint from the Editions de l'École des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales).

³⁰ Morellet began the debate with his *Mémoire sur la situation actuelle de la Compagnie des Indes* . . . , whose first edition, undated and without place of publication, appeared in 1769. One of the numerous responses to the tract was by Jacques Necker: *Réponse au mémoire de M. L'abbé Morellet sur la Compagnie des Indes: imprimée en exécution de la délibération de Mrs les actionnaires pris dans l'Assemblée générale du 8 août 1769* (Paris, 1769). Morellet replied directly to this: *Examen de la réponse de M. N*** au mémoire de M. l'Abbé Morellet sur la Compagnie des Indes, par l'auteur du mémoire* (Paris, 1769). Dupont de Nemours's support came in the same year: Pierre Samuel Dupont de Nemours, *Du commerce et de la Compagnie des Indes* . . . (Paris and Amsterdam, 1769).

³¹ Ames, *Colbert*.

completely, John Shovlin ought to be given credit for discussing both the 1769 monopoly debates and the scandal surrounding Calonne's newly founded East India Company.³² In his 2007 study, *Compass of society: commerce and absolutism in Old Regime France*, Henry C. Clark pays hardly any attention to East India Company connections, nor does he dwell on the company's role in the Law scheme, on the calico debates, the monopoly controversy, or indeed the Calonne scandal, though he does comment on the founding of the company in 1664.³³ Best known, perhaps, Michael Sonenscher's *Before the deluge*, whilst aware of the European dimension of the economic debates, ignores global commerce entirely, whilst Paul Cheney, despite explicitly setting his work into a global framework, focuses on ideas rather than context and when discussing the latter largely confines himself to the Atlantic.³⁴ The best work in the field therefore sadly remains Herbert Lüthy's decades-old *La banque protestante*, still unsurpassed in depth and detail.

This neglect is all the more deplorable as the debates surrounding the company had direct political repercussions: Mirabeau fils, of revolutionary fame, for instance made sure that the insider-dealing and speculation surrounding the shares in Calonne's new company became one of the scandals of the 1780s, when he published his *Dénonciation de l'agiotage au roi et à l'assemblée des notables* (1785 and 1787). And, as Kenneth Margerison has recently argued, of perhaps similar importance for the development of anti-government sentiment in the later eighteenth century was the rhetoric deployed by the shareholders who protested against the government's decision to revoke the company's monopoly in 1769.³⁵ Furthermore, the ongoing publication of the first modern re-edition of Raynal's magisterial *Histoire philosophique et politique des établissements et du commerce des Européens dans les deux Indes* is only a first step towards the appreciation of the role this highly critical and minute discussion of Europe's Asian and American trade played in late eighteenth-century France and in the French Revolution.³⁶

If the economic and political roles of the company in France are neglected by scholars, so is its intellectual and cultural impact. Kate Marsh's 2009 book,

³² Shovlin, *The political economy of virtue*.

³³ Henry C. Clark, *Compass of society: commerce and absolutism in Old Regime France* (Lanham, MD, 2007).

³⁴ Michael Sonenscher, *Before the deluge: public debt, inequality, and the intellectual origins of the French Revolution* (Princeton, NJ, 2007); Paul Cheney, *Revolutionary commerce: globalization and the French monarchy* (Cambridge, MA, 2010).

³⁵ Kenneth Margerison, 'The shareholders revolt at the Compagnie des Indes: commerce and political culture in Old Regime France', *French History*, 20 (2006), pp. 25–51.

³⁶ Guillaume-Thomas Raynal, *Histoire philosophique et politique des établissements et du commerce des Européens dans les deux Indes*, ed. Anthony Strugnell (Ferney-Voltaire: Centre International d'Étude du XVIIIe Siècle, 2010–). On another important aspect of the company's role in shaping French politics, see François-Joseph Ruggiu, 'India and the reshaping of the French colonial policy (1759–1789)', *Itinerario*, 35 (2011), pp. 25–43.

India in the French imagination, provides a welcome exception to that,³⁷ but as a general rule, even when attempts are made to evaluate early modern French attitudes to overseas trade, colonialism, and empire, the focus is on the Atlantic.³⁸ And whilst there are some excellent studies in the fields of intellectual and cultural history which discuss aspects of French–Asian relations, they do not link them to the company, its trade, its agents, and their networks and publications. At their best they remain largely disconnected, at their worst they are but pale reiterations of Edward Said’s *Orientalism*. There are of course exceptions. Despite its overly ambitious scope and perhaps infelicitous title, Ina Baghdiantz McCabe’s *Orientalism in early modern France* makes some important connections and puts France firmly in the Eurasian trade nexus; and whilst one may disagree with some of the detail and the originality of the scholarship, particularly in the sections on intellectual history, this is only to be expected from a work that is exemplary in its interdisciplinary approach.³⁹ Less interdisciplinary, both Nicholas Dew’s recent *Orientalism in Louis XIV’s France* and Etiemble’s classic *L’Europe chinoise* are examples of a type of scholarship that, whilst not necessarily taking into account the actual socio-economic exchanges and linkages between Europe and Asia through the companies and other agents, can give us valuable information about the state of debate and knowledge in Europe and France itself.⁴⁰

There is of course always light at the end of the tunnel: together with the recent developments in global history scholarship, material culture studies have picked up the baton and produced the kind of interconnected histories that one might wish for. Textile historians have, as seen above, linked metropolitan developments to France’s Asian trade, and the same is true for recent studies in French retailing culture. Carolyn Sargentson’s beautifully illustrated book on the *marchands merciers* in Paris gives us an understanding of how Asian goods were transformed, marketed, and sold together with other luxury goods in eighteenth-century Paris.⁴¹ Even more helpfully, Natacha Coquery’s work on shopkeeping in eighteenth-century Paris has explicitly considered

³⁷ Kate Marsh, *India in the French imagination: peripheral voices, 1754–1815* (London, 2009).

³⁸ See, for instance, Anthony Pagden, *Lords of all the world: ideologies of empire in Spain, Britain and France, 1500–1800* (New Haven, CT, 1995), or Madeleine Dobie’s more recent *Trading places: colonization and slavery in eighteenth-century French culture* (Ithaca, NY, 2010).

³⁹ McCabe, *Orientalism in early modern France*. Cf. n. 21.

⁴⁰ Nicholas Dew, *Orientalism in Louis XIV’s France* (Oxford, 2009); Etiemble, *L’Europe chinoise* (2 vols., Paris, 1988–9). See also Etiemble, *L’orient philosophique au XVIIIe siècle: cours professé à la Faculté des Lettres de Paris* (3 vols., Paris, 1959–61).

⁴¹ Carolyn Sargentson, *Merchants and luxury markets: the marchands merciers of eighteenth-century Paris* (London, 1996); cf. Carolyn Sargentson, ‘The manufacture and marketing of luxury goods: the *marchands merciers* of late seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Paris’, in Robert Fox and Anthony Turner, eds., *Luxury trade and consumerism in ancien régime Paris: studies in the history of the skilled workforce* (Aldershot, 1998), pp. 99–137.

company-imported Asian goods and their imitations.⁴² On the other end of the social scale, Laurence Fontaine's work illustrates how through pedlar networks these Asian goods were able to reach even the less affluent rural population.⁴³ Nevertheless, the part of Asian goods in the eighteenth-century 'consumer revolution', at least in France, remains understudied.⁴⁴

The reason for the lack in scholarship may well be due to methodological difficulties. The study of Eurasian trade, especially in the case of France, falls in between disciplinary boundaries: unlike in the British case, it does not belong into the fields of colonial or empire studies, nor does it fit into the – in the French case – only just emerging approach of Atlantic history.⁴⁵ It would undoubtedly be most at home in the new discipline of global history, and some of the best examples of connected studies have indeed been published under this umbrella, as in the essay collections edited by Giorgio Riello and Brigitte Nicolas on global and Indian textiles.

It may be a little dispiriting to realize that a phenomenon which encompassed the importation into France of tons of tea, coffee, and spices, of hundreds and thousands of pieces of high-quality manufactured goods ranging from silk and cotton textiles to porcelain, wallpaper, and lacquered furniture, which spread the habit of shareholding in France from small-scale artisans to royal princes, and which lead to far-reaching debates and debacles in early modern France, has received so little attention by modern scholars. There is, however, no reason to despair just yet. Several new research networks have sprung up in recent years which pursue both interdisciplinary, global, and comparative approaches to the study of the French East-Indian connection in general and the impact of the French East India Company in particular. The most established and most prolific amongst these is the co-operation in Lorient between Company Archives, the Company Museum, and the University of South Brittany. This has resulted in several conferences, workshops, exhibitions, books and articles, and, perhaps most notably, in the two richly illustrated, wide-ranging, and

⁴² Natacha Coquery, *Tenir boutique à Paris au XVIIIe siècle: luxe et demi-luxe* (Paris, 2011); Natacha Coquery, 'Les boutiquiers parisiens et la diffusion des indiennes au XVIIIe siècle', in Bouëdec and Nicolas, eds., *Le goût de L'Inde*, pp. 74–81; Natacha Coquery, 'The semi-luxury market, shopkeepers and social diffusion: marketing chinoiseries in eighteenth-century Paris', in Bruno Blondé, Natacha Coquery, Jon Stobart, and Ilja Van Damme, eds., *Fashioning old and new: changing consumer patterns in Western Europe (1650–1900)* (Turnhout, 2009), pp. 121–31.

⁴³ Laurence Fontaine, *Histoire du colportage en Europe (XVe–XIXe siècle)* (Paris, 1993).

⁴⁴ Probably the best work on the beginnings of a consumer society in Europe remains John Brewer and Roy Porter, eds., *Consumption and the world of goods* (London, 1997). On the French case in particular, see Daniel Roche, *A history of everyday things: the birth of consumption in France, 1600–1800*, trans. Brian Pearce (Cambridge, 2000); and Michael Kwass, 'Ordering the world of goods: consumer revolution and the classification of objects in eighteenth-century France', *Representations*, 82 (2003), pp. 87–116.

⁴⁵ On the category of colonial studies in France, see Schaub's, 'La catégorie "études coloniales"'. On France and Atlantic history, see the special edition of *French History* edited by Trevor Burnard and Allan Potofsky entitled *The French Atlantic and the Caribbean (1600–1800): French History*, 25 (2011).

wonderfully interdisciplinary essay collections, *Le goût de l'Inde* and *Féerie indienne*, which bring together the best of contemporary scholarship on the company and its wider role.

Whilst not directly concerned with the French East India Company, the seminar and research group at the Sciences Po in Paris, 'L'épreuve des Indes' directed by Romain Bertrand et Stéphane van Damme, seeks to analyse the impact of early modern global encounters and is thus ideally situated to contribute to studies of the wider role of the French India connection. Finally, Maxine Berg's European Research Council-funded project at the University of Warwick, 'Europe's Asian Centuries: Trading Eurasia 1600–1830', will hopefully make a significant contribution to the field. Collaborating closely with Giorgio Riello and focusing on the flow of Asian goods into Europe via the East India Companies, it aims to provide a more integrated and interdisciplinary study of their role and impact. So there is hope yet. And much scope for scholars of various disciplines to contribute to what hopefully is a growing body of scholarship on the role and importance of Europe's Asian connection.