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Francois Gipouloux, *The Asian Mediterranean: Port Cities and Trading Networks in China, Japan and Southeast Asia, 13th - 21st Century*, Edward Elgar, 2011, 424 pp. \$107 Hardcover.

By Jia Hao CHAN [†]


Book Review


An English-translated edition of Gipouloux's French monography, this book entrenches readers to think of parallels between the economic prosperity, trade networks and development of an East Asian maritime corridor and a 16th century mercantile Mediterranean & Baltic. The 'Asian Mediterranean' is Gipouloux's attempt to invoke Fernand Braudel's study of the Mediterranean, but putting it to the Asian context. Like the 16th century Mediterranean, he claims that Asia's maritime space has never been homogeneous, providing bridges across various civilizations while jointing autonomous urban regions together, each endowed with ability to control the inflow and outflows of money and goods throughout this transnational space. Nonetheless, the purpose of this book is not centred on comparative studies but rather, using this initial comparison as a pretext to introduce and discuss about Asia's historical trade networks and its uniqueness, alongside structural challenges that continue to surface till today. In view of China's ongoing and upcoming One Belt One Road Initiative that is storming Asia and beyond, this book certainly yields practicality for the relevant academics intending to understand and analyse Asia's power relations, production network and financial flows against the backdrop of a larger global political economy.

Conspicuously divided into five parts, Part I and II focuses mainly on pre 17th century period, Part III on 16th to 19th century during Europeans' discovery of Asia, while Part IV and V discusses economic development and challenges of Asia's coastal cities post 19th century.

At the first glance of the book's transition from the Mediterranean (Chapter 2 and 3) to Asian kingdoms and cities (Chapter 4), readers may be misled into subscribing to the 'demonstrating effect', whereby the existence of 'Asian Mediterranean' stems out of the original Mediterranean. But when looked closely, the notion of Asia's maritime system postdating the Mediterranean's is being dispelled. While Part I heavily discusses the 'two models of expansion without borders' namely the Mediterranean and the Hanseatic league (Chapter 2 and 3), it is only in Part II where we clearly witness how Gipouloux liken the tradition of independent cities of the Mediterranean and the Baltic to an existent series of independent trading entities in Asia such as the Srivijaya Kingdom since 7th century, Malacca, Naha from 15th-onwards and Sakai in the 17th century (Chapter 4). The timeframe comparison between the Mediterranean and these port cities does overlap to indicate that Asia's trading network as a parallel development to the Mediterranean.

[†] Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, National University of Singapore, Singapore.

 +6597209423

 wilsonchanjiahao@gmail.com

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Yet, this parallel development is distinct; Gipouloux proceeds to present the fundamental distinctions of the two 'Mediterranean' by introducing government monopolies in Asia vis-à-vis private trade seen in the Mediterranean (Chapter 5), the existence of China's tributary trade system influencing regional trade (Chapter 6) and Japan's national seclusion (Chapter 7). But as he summarizes Asia's maritime system (Chapter 8), it remains clearer that his heavy devotion of the credit of this thriving Asia Maritime System to the Chinese tributary system's organization of trade that co-functions with the existence of two commercial establishments region-wide - the emporium and the entre pot (p.103), was his central argument for Asia's uniqueness. While we found accounts earlier of 'masters of commercial flows' such as Barcelona and Venice that attempted maritime expansion in the Mediterranean, such a massive tributary system stemmed upon heaven's mandate like China's and being embedded into various port cities was never present in a 'Magna Carta' Mediterranean (p. 48). Furthermore in this part, his explicit mention of interwoven trade networks between Chinese, Japanese and Western commercial activities with parallel existence of a 'free price' system (p.103) utilized in these commercial establishments appears refreshing - the concept of a successful Asian Mediterranean from 7th to 17th century possessing non-private trade (state controlled) yet having free price mechanism coexists. This paradox, if expanded and explain more in depth, may well potentially be the 'Asian classic' against modern economic concept that command economies and free market economies are dichotomous rather than complementary.

Nonetheless, such a paradox nicely but intrinsically transits into his Part III, where he addresses Asian's 'East-West Overlapping Networks' upon early European discovery and later colonialization; how they overlap and not totally dominate the Asian maritime system. However he did not address why. Linking to the above paradox, we can make some inferences here:

(1) Colonial powers wanted to control the various already existing 'free price' emporiums and entre pots for economic and resource gains alongside the fact they are well versed in the 'free price' system.

(2) However, this 'free price' system functions under states' strong control.

(3) Therefore the colonial powers understand that their exploitations through the 'free price' system in emporiums and entre pots rely heavily on a strong Asian state control.

It is therefore so unfortunate that Gipouloux had left this significant insight out as to the reasons why not all 19th century Chinese 'shangpu' (p.145) and other Asian entre pots were eyed equally by Europeans' expansions. Geography aside, could it be that Europeans' preference for dominance lies in entre pots wherever they had highest bargaining power under the free price mechanism? It would be reasonable to assume that not all entre pots had equal level of free price and negotiations. Hence, it would be understandable why Gipouloux could assert that European expansion in trade could be countered by protectionist but productive Chinese industries by late 19th century. Working on that, Gipouloux could have use this as pretext in churning more discussion on whether this 19th century play out is ever likely to occur in today's context given that 'entre pots' like Singapore have been more dominated by neo-colonial westernization waves than others, as part of a global cities discourse.

Moving to Part IV, Gipouloux seems appears to be more Sino-centric than Asia-centric. He begins by re-examining the way Chinese cities are defined in from primarily Deng Xiaoping's era, and rearrangements of hinterlands and urban cities as relocation of productions were made in accordance to dynamic agglomeration of markets and urbanisation (p.181). While important explorations such as relocation of Chinese financial centres and competition among Asian countries in being logistic hubs were raised, a large bulk of intra-Asian development and linkages between rural and entre pots are still significantly left out. Finally, Part V boldly inches to discuss about a rising China's expansionism through this East Asian

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Economic Corridor as with a historical Ming dynasty maritime silk road, its challenges against other states' sovereignty, as well as bring up the issue of regional economic disparities that had occurred throughout history, either due to geographical or strategic reasons.

As much as I would like to criticize the book for being Sino-centric, Gipouloux indeed covered first the Mediterranean, then Southeast Asia and East Asian polities throughout 7th-21st century. However, China still seems to be defence for an economically strong Asia at many part of this book. This is worsened when little of contemporary South Asian entre pots has been discussed especially so in the face of addressing European colonialism and maritime silk road involving polities like Sri Lanka which is an integral component of China's maritime 'One Road' today. Analysis of China's strategies for its expansionism is also lacking here. As mentioned throughout this review, there are also many missed opportunities for Gipouloux to work on. Nevertheless, the book has covered important and timely understanding of urban linkages similar to Sassen's (2001) discourse of global cities, geo-political issues and Asia's historical developments that economic history scholars can tap on for further global political economy studies and research.



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