

## 1498: The Other “New World”

Ewa TARTAKOWSKY

**In the sixteenth century, Europe and India began to trade. Their connected history assumes multiple forms, touching on topics as diverse as vegetable cultivation, the spice trade, literature, and architecture.**

Reviewed: Jean-Louis Margolin et Claude Markovits, *Les Indes et l'Europe. Histoires connectées, XV<sup>e</sup>-XXI<sup>e</sup> siècle* (The Indies and Europe: Connected Histories from the Fifteenth to the Twenty-First Centuries), Paris, Gallimard, collection “Folio histoire,” 2015, 976 pp., 14.90€.

In 1498, Vasco de Gama landed in Calcutta, India. Having set out to find “Christians and spices,” he marked out a new sea route, allowing Africa to be circumnavigated. The impact of this voyage, which was far more important than those of the European merchants in India who preceded him, such as Nicolo Conti or Afanasy Nikitin in the fifteenth century, marks it as an inaugural moment in Asian-European exchanges.<sup>1</sup>

This is the starting point of Jean-Louis Margolin and Claude Markovits’ fascinating book, which has adopted the fruitful “connected histories” approach.<sup>2</sup> Their book seeks to reconstruct the convergences and similarities in the ways in which imperial powers function, as well as the socio-political dynamics between Asian countries, which are usually left out of national histories.

### **An Infinite Number of Tiny Contacts**

Along with this “connected” approach, the desire to reconstruct a non-teleological and non-totalizing history—one that has little in common with a homogeneous account of the European presence in Asia—is another of the book’s qualities. Indeed, the point is to convey the plurality of European and Asian actors, the contradictions in their respective projects, and their convergent and divergent interests. In fact, “there was no ‘East-West encounter,’ but an infinite number of generally tiny contacts and complex interrelations.” (p. 20)

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<sup>1</sup> On the role of this historical construction and the exploit’s relative character of, see notably Sanjay Subrahmanyam, *The Career and Legend of Vasco da Gama*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1997 (translated into French as *Vasco de Gama : légende et tribulations du vice-roi des Indes*, Paris, Alma, 2012).

<sup>2</sup> Sanjay Subrahmanyam, “Connected Histories: Notes towards a Reconfiguration of Early Modern Eurasia,” *Modern Asian Studies*, 31-3, 1997, pp. 735-762. See, too, Anne-Julie Etter and Thomas Grillot’s interview with Subrahmanyam, “Le Goût de l’archive,” January 27, 2012, *La Vie des idées* (available here: <http://www.laviedesidees.fr/Le-gout-de-l-archivage-est.html>); Subrahmanyam, *Is Indian Civilization a Myth?*, New Delhi, Permanent Black (distributed by Orient Blackswan), Raniket, 2013 (available here: <http://www.laviedesidees.fr/Le-roman-de-l-histoire-connectee.html>). For another example of a connected history, see Romain Bertrand, *L’Histoire à parts égales*, Paris, Seuil, 2011 (see here: <http://www.laviedesidees.fr/Pour-l-histoire-connectee.html>).

In this way, the book completely rejects Edward Said's conception of the presumed coherence of the "imperialism of categories," which he derived from Michel Foucault's thought. Rather than seeing Europeans as uniformly motivated by the conviction that they were the sole bearers of universal knowledge,<sup>3</sup> "it is appropriate, rather, to acknowledge the complexity of relationships that were eminently variable over time and space and contingent on social milieu and even individuals" (p. 24).

From this perspective, European colonial domination, which began towards the middle of the eighteenth century, is in no way a continuation of the period instigated by Vasco de Gama's voyage. The authors emphasize that the colonization of Asia was characterized by a gradual transition, distinct from the violent means whereby domination was imposed in Africa and the Americas. Indeed, the domination of Asia was finally achieved only in 1858, for India, and, for southeastern Asia, in the early twentieth century—a process that lasted five centuries.

Initially, the opening of the sea route had only minor consequences. In practice, the Mediterranean route, controlled first by the Mamelukes, then by the Ottoman Empire, was for a long time more frequently used. Moreover, rich and intense commercial and cultural connections between southeastern Asia and India have existed since the first millennium, since the century before Europeans arrived China. This explains why, despite Europe's entrance into Asian commerce, Chinese merchants would always play a predominant role in regional trade.<sup>4</sup>

The authors also deconstruct the teleological conception of the European project by emphasizing the non-expansionist character of European states at the outset of this encounter with Asia. Their goal was rather to edge their way into the spice trade and to find Christian allies against the Mameluke state. Nor should these two Portuguese motivations (economic, on the one hand, ideological and religious, on the other) be ranked, as they have been in a number of previous studies.

### **Mutual Influences**

It is this slow European evolution, in which the colonial future is not written in advance, that Margolin's and Markovits' book explores. This approach, by analyzing European expansion, helps us understand why there was so little reaction on the part of Asian states. If the Europeans were no cause for concern, it was because they were few in number. For instance, the territories controlled by the United Provinces had 600,000 inhabitants, amounting to a few thousandths of the Asian population.

Furthermore, the major wars before 1750 were intra-European, as Europeans were not yet in a position to rival the great Asian states. Only in the years between 1740 and 1765 did the nature of the European presence in southeastern Asia change: at this point, the Europeans became major political actors, which coincided with the end of the Mughal Empire and the collapse of the Hindu state of Vijayanagara, all of which favored European action.

This approach also makes it possible to take stock of the way both societies have mutually influenced one another. Indeed, in addition to its later economic and political

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<sup>3</sup> Hervé Inglebert's book shows that the desire to write a "universal history"—that is, to "go from local meaning to global significance"—was not unique to Europe. See Hervé Inglebert, *Le Monde l'histoire. Essai sur les histoires universelles*, Paris, Presses universitaires de France, 2014.

<sup>4</sup> Marie-Sybille de Vienne, *Les Chinois en Insulinde, échanges et sociétés marchandes au XVII<sup>e</sup> siècle d'après les sources de la V.O.C.*, Paris, Indes Savantes, 2008.

consequences, the cultural effects of the new sea route were immediately significant: new themes appeared in Portuguese literature, notably with Camões' *The Lusíads*; Manueline architecture was born; new motifs emerged in sculpture and decorative arts; and "Indology" made its debut, with the Italians Filippo Sassetti and Roberto de Nobili, who lived in Portugal's Estado da Índia.

Moreover, this relationship with Asia partook in the birth and the subsequent consolidation of the "European sentiment," a point emphasized by the authors:

Asia was the Other that made possible a surge in self-consciousness. The encounter with Asian civilizations with a long history and highly developed institutions but that knew nothing of the Christian revelation was an enormous cultural shock, even greater than the discovery of America. It provoked questions about the nature of European culture that ultimately resulted in the Enlightenment. (p. 253).

In Asia, in addition to the important role played by the arrival of American silver through the Asian monetary circuit, the European impact manifested itself through the introduction of new plants (manioc, tobacco, maize, peppers, and potatoes) and by increased demand for certain goods, notably textiles, which also meant the creation of new jobs.<sup>5</sup> In human terms, these relations also resulted in the birth of mixed-race children to *casado* couples, i.e., Portuguese men and their Indian wives. Yet Europe's influence remained limited in the religious realm—except in the Philippines and to a lesser extent in Ceylon—as well as in the political sphere, where "nothing specifically indicates any direct influence of European political models prior to the late eighteenth century" (p. 231).

### Forms of Resistance

Woven into this history one also finds resistance. The book analyzes the different forms of resistance—active as well as passive—that accompanied this very long encounter. It deals in particular with the resistance of Indian state of Mysore and the Maratha Confederacy in the later eighteenth century, the revolts of various social groups such as the *sanyasi* (who were ascetic beggars) and the *poligars* (local peasant chiefs), who became increasingly important after 1857, with the Sepoy Mutiny in India.

Resistance could also be cultural, particularly in the Bengal, where it benefited from the development of printing. They also took the form of "evasion": this is the term used by James Scott to describe a large highland region of 2.5 million square kilometers in an Indochinese peninsula that he refers to as *Zomia*, where the population expressed a tendency towards an anarchist rejection of state and, consequently, colonial restrictions.<sup>6</sup>

Breaking decisively with teleological conceptions, this history—which encompasses the twentieth century—helps us to understand why, as the colonial order was being destabilized, "there existed several version of emancipation, rebirth, and the future" (p. 578). Among the exogenous causes of this collapse, the authors cite the rise of the Soviet Union and the considerable appeal of Community ideology. It is a shame that the USSR is not analyzed as an actor in its own right in this connected history. In addition to a few military treaties, the USSR

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<sup>5</sup> This contribution has been assessed by the Indian historian Om Prakash. See Om Prakash, *The Dutch East India Company and the Economy of Bengal*, Princeton, University of Princeton Press, 1995.

<sup>6</sup> James C. Scott, *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia*, New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 2009 (French translation: *Zomia, ou l'art de ne pas être gouverné*, Paris, Le Seuil, 2013. A review of it can be read at: <http://www.laviedesidees.fr/Zomia-la-ou-l-Etat-n-est-pas.html>).

participated in scientific exchange programs and had an impact, notably in terms of publishing: by the second half of the twentieth century, classic Russian and Eastern European authors had been widely published and distributed throughout India and other southeastern Asian countries.

But this minor criticism takes nothing away from the quality of a book that is a superb example of the connected history method, the fecundity of which is fully on display in this study. By reminding us that “the histories of Europe and southern Asia became connected histories, inextricably tied to one another . . . , even if Europeans and South Asians are rarely aware of it” (p. 759), this book, in addition to its scholarly importance, is particularly welcome at present.

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