

Power and Weakness: French Presence in Southern China Sea (1840-1910)

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In the beginning of the twentieth century, a small force of French torpedo boats left Cochinchina (as the southern part of Vietnam was called by Europeans¹) to visit the powerful ironclad British fleet in Hong Kong. While gently welcomed upper deck on a vessel, drinking friendly toasts with their British colleagues, the French officers were bitterly able to measure how weak their own battle tool was. Unfortunately for them, a war started a few weeks later between the two countries and, as the British fleet appeared at the mouth of the Saigon river, the French could not do anything except sending a torpedo boat named '412' in a suicidal attack against the most powerful of the enemies, HMS *King-Edward*. Both were to sink and the numerous remaining British ships were to take Saigon; but the French would have fallen *avec les honneurs*. This summary of a battle that never happened is taken from the novel *Les Civilisés*, one of the most famous of its time: it was chosen as *Prix Goncourt* of the year 1905. Its author, Claude Farrère, was a navy officer who had served in South China Sea a few years before and undoubtedly, the book reflects very common feelings among all those Frenchmen who had an interest in the Far East – fear and/or hatred and/or admiration for British power in Asia.

¹ The French called "Cochinchine" the southern part of the present Vietnam and Tonkin the northern part of the country; in the 1880s, they also called "Annam" the central part of Vietnam. The missionaries called "Cochinchine" the part of Vietnam south of Vinh and "Tonkin" the northern part (to which they added a part of present Laos). The Vietnamese government made use of the word "Vietnam" in 1804 for the first time, but "Dai Nam" was more commonly used by the Court of Hue (Bonifacy 1904: 816-817; Rispaud 1959: 199-207; Nguyen 1992: 66). In this paper, Vietnam will refer to a geographical situation.

The history of the French presence in Southern China Sea from its beginnings to the twentieth century is a strange story of a country which had almost no commercial interest there, but which gradually appeared in the neighbourhood (ending with the conquest of a large scale colony). The first questions about such a story are: what the French did look for in the Southern China Sea and then, how were they able to establish themselves on its shores? Then, even if the prior naval weakness remained after the conquest of Indochina, the French were able to become an Asian power, minor if compared with British position, but unquestionable and they could play a role in the South China Sea. The last question will be: what did they want to do in the area thanks to their new power and which were the effects concerning the balance of power in the Southern China Sea?

I. Looking for a Way Station on the Road to China.

The prehistory of French presence in China Seas as a great power is not very different from that of the other European countries, with the sole difference that, through the times, France had always a back seat role, behind the Portuguese, then behind the Dutch, then behind the British. The first registered trips to China Sea by French ships, were organized by merchants originating from Normandy around the year 1530, shortly after the Portuguese had begun to trade in the region and, in the beginning of the seventeenth century, several commercial expeditions were set up by merchants originating from Saint-Malo and Dieppe. But, contrarily to the Portuguese who had soon settled in Macao and in Malacca, this first French attempts had no future, as these trips had not met with commercial success (Taillemite 1999: 41; Mantiene 1998). Then, prior to the end of the seventeenth century, the only French presence in the South China Sea was due to individual initiatives. French Protestants seem to have especially enjoyed Asia, either waged by Dutch colonial companies (in Batavia as in Le Cap or in Brazil) or leading their own small enterprises. French interest for overseas grew all along the seventeenth century, culminating, as far as Asia was concerned, with the great diplomatic mission of 1685 sent by Louis XIV

to Siam, whose results were at least very low and fleeting, except awaking French missionaries interest for Asia. Then, the French government and sailors acted like their Dutch and British competitors: commercial presence in such a harbor or another, creation of a chartered Company (Compagnie des Indes orientales: 1664) establishment of trading posts (as in Hung-yen in 1684 or later in Tourane/Da-nang in 1748) or factories (as in Canton or in Pulo Condore/Con Son) and diplomatic touches with kingdoms of the neighbourhood (Siam at the time of Louis XIV, southern Vietnam at the time of Louis XVI). The story of this early European presence has been often written and it is not useful to develop it here, except to stress upon the point that French actions were usually built on a smaller scale and often a little bit later: the British East India Company had been created in 1600 and the Dutch one in 1602, British traders had been much more numerous in Bantam than French ones prior to 1682 and then, after 1685, in Canton where they held a regular staff as the French had only a small factory, the Dutch possessed good crossroad harbours (with Batavia from 1619 and Malacca from 1641) that neither the French nor the British did. The trouble concerning French trade in the South China Sea was double. On the one hand, if Asian countries sold to France (exportations to France were almost 60% of those to Britain at the end of the eighteenth century), they had no need of French productions². On the other hand and above all, French country traders were very few and played a marginal role in intra-Asian trade. The Portuguese living in South East Asia in the sixteenth century had been maybe as numerous as 10,000 and the Dutch East India Company managed there more than a hundred ships; the French were only 100 in Siam at the end of the seventeenth century (Braudel 1979: 261-262; Forest 1998: I: 238; II: 17-19). One century later, in Macao, La Pérouse met two French

² A former navy officer, Vannier who had lived more than twenty years in Cochinchina in the beginning of the nineteenth century wrote that, during this time, he had seen only one Dutch ship coming from Batavia and four ships originating from Bordeaux. He thought that commercial exchanges between France and Vietnam had almost no interest because the Vietnamese had no need of French merchandises. Vannier, *Notice sur la Cochinchine* (manuscript, SHM Vincennes Ms215), folio 19.

merchant ships beside twenty-nine British ones and five Dutch ones (Taillemite 1999: 370-371).³ British and Dutch merchants were dependent upon Asian commercial networks in the eighteenth century (Blussé 1999): it was obviously worse for French traders.

Missionaries were the only Frenchmen to live permanently with relatively high numbers on the banks of the South China Sea. The beginning of French missionaries interest for South East Asia had been connected with the expulsion of the Jesuits from Japan in 1615. The Fathers, took refuge in Macao and then in Vietnam (Forest 1998: II: 127). One of them, Alexandre de Rhodes, originating from Avignon is well known for having transcribed the Vietnamese language into the roman alphabet. Alexandre de Rhodes woke up French interest for Asia by preaching in Paris in 1652 and 1653 and by publishing many booklets dedicated to Tonkin. The period was in favour of French missionaries expansion (missionaries had settled in Canada after 1632 and in Madagascar in 1648) and Alexandre de Rhodes diverted a part of this stream to Asia. Last but not least, he had stressed upon the point that missionaries activities had to be removed from the Spanish or (concerning Indochinese peninsula) the Portuguese tutelage they had held for more than one century. The main feature of the seventeenth century concerning missionaries activities was thus a big effort from the Pope to run them directly. The *Missions étrangères*, created in 1659 under the authority of the Congregation of *Propaganda fide* which stayed in Roma, were to become the tool of the Pope's willingness. Better known under the name of *Missions étrangères de Paris* where a seminar had been built up in 1663, the new organization was mainly populated with Frenchmen. From 1660 to 1800, almost three hundred French priests were recruited and sent to Asia. French missionaries location in the neighbourhood produced information (and notably maps) available to ministerial staff in Paris and to French captains.

But the strengthening of French influence must not be overevaluated. First, the *Missions étrangères* had had to establish themselves in Siam

³ Around 1773 the French ships were almost 20% of the European ones in Canton (Meyer, Tarrade, Rey-Goldzeiguer, Tobie 1991: 229).

(Olichon 1936: 284-285),⁴ instead of settling in Tonkin or China, two countries they had been dedicated to, but where persecutions made evangelization very difficult. Their information about the South China Sea was thus limited. The second source of weakness of the missionaries assistance to French navy officers or traders was that, before the nineteenth century, the policy of the *Missions étrangères* was not in favour of publishing information about the countries where they were established, contrarily to the Jesuits whose information had allowed French cartographers to publish good maps in an earlier period⁵. Last but not least, the influence of the *Missions étrangères* was more catholic than it was French, on the one hand by the goal pursued; on the other hand, by the fact that the missionaries could seldom rely upon French ships which were so few in the neighbourhood. So they had to deal with Dutch merchants from Batavia or later to travel on Chinese jonks from Macao or Canton to reach Tonkin⁶. Catholic missionaries did not like 'Heretics', either Dutch or British (the situation was to change during the French Revolution, when the *Missions Etrangères de Paris* Seminar had to take refuge in London), but they often had no other choice than to sail on their commercial ships⁷.

The Seven Years War (1756-1763) and the French Revolution Wars worsened the French position: driven out of India and then from Ile de France (Mauritius, 1810), the French Navy could not enjoy any advanced post on the way to China. This decrease of power was to look more apparent by the fact that their European competitors tended to develop their footholds in the area (like the Dutch in the Indonesian archipelago) and even

⁴ For further details about missionaries, see Forest (1998) and Mantiene (1998).

⁵ Pierre Mariette and Nicolas Sanson d'Abbeville published a map of Vietnam. Thanks to informations provided by Jesuits (Fell 1991: 99).

⁶ Thanks to their earlier successes, they were also sheltered by a network of christian sailors, either Chinese or Vietnamese, smuggling along the shores of Tonkin (Forest 1998: II: 14-18, 129-133; III: 83-93).

⁷ When the British began to invest South China Sea vicinity, they lacked good specialists and interpreters, so they did enjoy French missionaries assistance and they gave to them compensations like free transportation or the authorization to build a seminar in Penang to replace Ayudhya seminar which had been destroyed by the Burmese in 1767 (Forest 1998: I: 128).

to create new ones (like the British in the Straits of Malacca) at the same time. Consequently, the few French ships sailing in the China Sea had to be closed in foreign harbours when they needed new fresh goods, supply, careening or repairs and they hardly obtained friendly ones. As early as 1768, five years only after the loss of India, the French obtained that their vessels might be repaired in Rangoon if necessary, but it was a fleeting agreement. Qualified Burmese carpenters and teak wood were famous, but the relations with the native governments were too fluctuating.⁸ French ships had thus usually to be resupplied in Manilla, when Spain was a friendly country or in Batavia, when the Dutch were not at war with France. To call at a British harbour was quite impossible as the two countries were often in a state of war. A second element of weakness was that, without any controlled territory, the French were not able to enrol native troops to achieve their goals: by the late 1700s, the British had 60,000 Indian soldiers available, a part of them ready for Far East expeditions and they were thus able to attack Burma with 4,000 men most of them being Asians (Scammell 2000: 518): To set a comparison, when Admiral Rigault de Genouilly tried to land in Tourane on the first of september 1858 (before changing his mind for Saigon), one of his main motivations was the hope that 700 or 800 catholic Annamese could help French soldiers and he enjoyed the assistance of Asian soldiers, the Tagals from Philippines⁹. Would the French have been anxious about colonial expansion in the Far East in the early nineteenth century, the evidence is that they would not have been able to do the same¹⁰.

But the diplomatic consequences of the Treaties of 1763 were too severe if we consider the real balance of naval power. The French Navy had

⁸ To measure French weakness, it must be remembered that in the same years, the totality of the British ships trading with China had been built in India (Braudel 1979: III: 633-634).

⁹ "Souvenirs de Cochinchine" (anonymous manuscript, SHM Vincennes Ms110, Marsh 1882) Folio 8. The assistance by Tagals from Philippines is often underevaluated by French sources, but it is unquestionable. A "Spanish" graveyard still exists close to Danang.

¹⁰ To compare, "one of the cause of British pre-eminence [in Asia] is that they had added the Asian tremendous weight to their own strength" (Braudel 1979: III: 667).

reached a higher technical level, with brilliant officers and well trained crews and French cartographers were among the more active European scientists of the time (Fell 1991: 55, 87, 99, 102). Then, the French tried actively to find a 'compensation to the loss of India', an idea which was to become very popular among navy officers until the end of the French presence in Indochina. The tradition of an episodic French presence in Southern China waters was thus confirmed after 1763. The great exploration trips around the world that followed the end of the Seven Years War had mainly scientific goals, but strategic and commercial preoccupations were not absent. One of the instructions given to Louis Antoine de Bougainville (1766) was to recognize one island close to the China coast that could become a warehouse for the Compagnie des Indes in order to develop business with China¹¹ and the de Trémignon expedition (1769) had to take clove trees and nutmeg trees from Molucca Sea to Mauritius in order to avoid the Dutch monopoly on these spices. La Pérouse circumnavigation must be added to the list of these actions which allowed the French flag to be present in Asia, as he stayed in Macao and in Manilla in 1787, where he conscientiously noticed commercial practices and charted several shores around. After having been quite absent from the neighbourhood from 1790 to 1815,¹² the French quickly tried to renew their ante-Revolution naval 'high policy' during the Restauration period (1815-1830). Prevented from actions in Europe, Bourbon governments were to give full attention and credits to the Navy in the years following 1820. The only weaknesses were, on the one hand, that Navy officers were not well trained, after nearly ten years of British blockade,¹³ and, on the other hand, that France had almost no more

¹¹ Quoted by Etienne Taillemite (1999: 212). The French were looking for trading posts which could also become corsairs' nests against British trade, like Ile de France and Ile Bourbon would be in the Indian Ocean between 1792 and 1810.

¹² It must be noticed that, while the French were busy in Europe, Britons had had time to send Macartney Embassy to China in 1793 and Amherst Mission in 1816. By comparison, in 1804, the governor of Ile de France leading a navy squadron to the Straits of Malacca was not able to capture a British commercial convoy (Meyer, Tarrade, Rey-Goldzeiguer, Tobie 1991: I: 305).

¹³ The few efficient officers who had served under Napoléon had even been recalled, replaced by *Emigrés* officers who had not sail since 1792.

merchant ships. Consequently, as the white flag was to sail back in the neighbourhood of China or elsewhere, it would be mainly on navy vessels. Prior to 1830, five official trips to China Sea were organized, with varying purposes: looking for Chinese labour supposed to replace African slaves, studying whether Asian archipelagos could be a market for French goods¹⁴, or trying to be in touch again with the Vietnamese government. On another hand, several trips were organized to explore the Pacific Ocean and in order to find where La Pérouse had sunk.

The main result of these trips was to improve French knowledge of the area and especially concerning maps, which had been obviously inadequate before the end of the eighteenth century. Louis Antoine de Bougainville had bitterly noticed that the Dutch were hiding information (as the Portuguese had done in the early stages of European presence in Asia) and usually, French ships sailing in China's waters had to enroll a Dutch or a Portuguese navigator. When he came to Manilla a few years after de Bougainville, Jean-François de La Pérouse noticed too that the maps of the bay were inadequate, which is amazing for such a well known harbour. Then, when he sailed to the north he had to rely upon Japanese and Korean maps translated by Jesuit priests, which he found accurate (Taillemite 1999: 375). The main preoccupation of most of the early nineteenth century expeditions was thus the study of the shores. To take one example connected with the South China Sea, in 1817, Captain de Kergariou had to chart as many shores as he could, and he did it carefully around Hainan and Tourane, a study which was to be used after 1840. In 1829, Captain Cyrille Laplace charted briefly Natunas archipelago, the Anambas islands and then Surabaya. César Dumont d'Urville himself did the same job during his third circumnavigation (1837-1840): the Banda Sea, New Guinea, the Java Sea, the Bangka Straits, northern Borneo, Sulu (Jolo) – though briefly, as natives had recently slaughtered the crew of a Dutch ship and were reluctant to the French flag...they mistook it for the Dutch one, then, he charted the Basilan

¹⁴ These goals were obviously chimeric at this time, a fact that shows the lack of information by Minister Bureaus.

island, Zamboanga (where he was helped by Spaniards), Samarang and so on. Sheltering a diplomatic mission in 1841, Commandant Cécille had to chart Chinese harbours in view of eventual further actions. If we consider the number of wreckings or groundings of French ships in the South China Sea,¹⁵ all these chartings were really necessary and French officers had allways to be careful when sailing along the shores. During his mission of 1851, Captain De Plas steaming from Siam to China stayed 80 miles off shore to avoid the risks of wrecking. Steaming closer to the coasts on his way back, he expressed his fears by writing that he steamed with a limited confidence along a shore which seemed badly charted to him and where currents were violent. He thought that Camranh bay was safe enough but he had to navigate by soundings in the Saigon river mouth (Mercier 1889: 108). The French had anyway a better knowledge in the mid-nineteenth century than they had enjoyed in the beginning of the century, even if that knowledge was limited to the shores and to the few ways to China: like the Chinese sailors of an earlier period that Roderich Ptak has studied, the French usually tried to avoid the central part of the South China Sea.

At the same time, a group of navy officers specialized on the Asian waters had developed and they felt more and more angry about their dependence upon foreign harbours.¹⁶ Relative failures of the earlier expeditions had shown that numerous headquarter staffs were essential, considering health conditions and subsequent deaths: each expedition was then supplied with numerous junior officers who were soon to become enthusiastic and qualified commanders for further trips. One of the earlier causes of weakness, the lack of French specialists of Asia, thus vanished. A similar evolution may be seen for diplomats. Before the 1830s, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs had not many specialists in Asian affairs but after this

¹⁵ Among others, *L'Amphitrite* (Paracels islands, 1968), *le Montalembert* (Sulu, 1851), *la Capricieuse* et *le Cassini* (Yangzi mouths, 1852), *L'Hamelin* (Fuzhou, 1884), the ironclad vessel *Sully* in Halong bay in the beginning of the twentieth century.

¹⁶ Staging in Batavia, César Dumont d'Urville had been shocked by the Dutch authorities's fresh reception, but his corvettes and their crews were so tired that the governor thought (or affected to think) they could not really represent an official mission! (Couturaud 1986: 416)

period, several diplomats were appointed to Asian consulates which were gradually created (like elsewhere in the world) or enforced:¹⁷ they became ardent propagandists of the enforcement of French influence in the area. The brother of an influential politician, Adolphe Barrot was appointed consul in Manila in 1835 and he did the most he could do for the few French traders at work there. He was particularly aware of news of the first Opium War and he stayed two months in Macao and Canton (winter 1837-8) to collect information. As he gave an account of his journey in China in the influential *Revue des Deux-Mondes* (November 1839), he may be considered as the main local promoter of the Dubois de Jancigny mission which was to establish firmly the French in the South China Sea. The diplomat Dubois de Jancigny was sent to the Middle Kingdom to observe the operations of the First Opium War, with a naval force led by Commandant Jean-Baptiste Cécille. Contrarily to what had happened with former diplomats, Dubois and his assistants had a real knowledge of Asia before being appointed to their mission. Arriving in China at the end of summer 1841, Dubois soon transgressed his instructions by sending a corvette following the British to Nankin, which was a means to involve France in the war. This local initiative, highly criticized by Jean-Baptiste Cécille himself, was disavowed in Paris, but it was significant of many diplomats state of mind. The activist policy promoted by most French diplomats in Asia cannot be better pictured than by the action of the first consul in Shanghai in 1847, Charles de Montigny, who proudly rejected British protection to establish an independent French concession on a poor and muddy field. Above all, these men were jealous of British diplomats' pre-eminence, among European diplomats, particularly when negotiations arose with native governments and by promoting intensified actions in Asia, they also secured their careers.

In this way, they naturally enjoyed necessary missionaries assistance. Catholic priests were the only Frenchmen who had their own network in Asia and were able to promote their ideas both in Paris and in China. The

¹⁷ The Consulat de France in Manila became "*Consulat général dans l'Indochine*" in 1840 (Nardin 1978: 29).

Catholic revival was very impressive in nineteenth century France, from an intellectual point of view as well as for social aspects¹⁸. The main minister of the time, the Protestant François Guizot, had not been so sympathetic with missionaries expansion in the years 1830, but the catholic revival pushed him to change his mind and catholic lobbying upon governments was to act permanently even after King Louis-Philippe's fall in February 1848. Admiral Romain Desfossés, a Navy minister in a republican government from December 1849 to January 1851, sent a mission whose official goal was to visit catholic missions in Asia. Captain de Plas, who was to lead this project, went to Rome to inform the Pope before leaving to Asia with ten clericals on board (Mercier 1889: 10-29), a sign of submission which could not have been given before 1815, neither after 1880.

Compared with missionaries, French traders were very few in the Southern China Sea. The care that French Navy officers took to register each French ship they met shows that it was unusual. In his dispatch of January 1838, Adolphe Barrot had insisted on the weakness of French trade in Macao and Canton and ten years after, when the first French consul in Shanghai, Charles de Montigny, came to stay in 1847, he met only one French trader (soon followed by a wine merchant) beside several missionaries¹⁹. These figures placed French trade far behind the comparison with British or even Dutch, and later German ones, and this weakness remained even when Saigon had become French (Thomson 1877: 127; Bouchot 1927: 25). We must nevertheless notice that the diplomatic mission of 1841 would be accompanied by merchants sent by the Commercial Chambers of Paris, Lyon, Saint-Etienne and Mulhouse, four cities specialized in the textile industry. One report was presented at least to the Chamber of Commerce of Lyon in May 1846, where silk traders complained that they wanted to avoid the

¹⁸ Between 1815 and 1830, five or six priests only left France to Asia every year. Between 1830 and 1840, this average number climbed to six or seven and after 1830, it reached fourteen (1841-1850), eighteen (1851-1860), thirty (1861-1870), forty (1871-1880), forty-five (1881-1891) to culminate with sixty between 1891 and 1900 (Olichon 1936: 329).

¹⁹ Thirty years later only 3 of the 88 Frenchmen living in Shanghai were traders (Maybon, Frédet 1929: 362).

costly London intermediate on the way between China and their city (Tcheng 1936). But apart from this exception, 'French commercial and diplomatic influence in the area was virtually non-existent' prior to 1840 (Cady 1954: 11).

The French nevertheless quickly followed the British to China, after the first Opium War, a fact which is not so amazing, considering the lobbying by navy officers, missionaries or diplomats and the main tendency of French diplomacy since 1815. French governments had tried to be associated with British initiatives wherever it might be in the world, because it was a means of remaining a great power. The French Navy had thus often friendly cooperated with the British one in war operations (Algier, 1819; Navarin, 1827; Anvers, 1832)(Tramond & Reussner 1924: 24). But the cooperation did not exclude a hidden competition as the Egyptian crisis of 1840 was to show, when the British helped the Ottoman Empire to break down the revolt of Egypt which was supported by the French. For a while, a war between France and Britain seemed certain before the French shamefully retreated. French officials suddenly understood how weak their Navy was. The crisis had another consequence: quite ignorant of maritime questions, French public opinion had showed great reluctance to the unavoidable diplomatic retreat. François Guizot, had been very careful before 1840 when dealing with colonial matters; he had then to speak loudly to quiet public opinion. One of the first occurrences was the tension connected to the Tahiti island in 1842 and, this time, the French government did not retreat. After 1843, Guizot even promoted the doctrine of the *points d'appui* (base points), which could be used as sheltering places for Navy squadrons, as resupplying harbours for merchant ships and as warehouses. Naval equipment and innovation had become a top priority for the French government.

Concerning Asia, a diplomatic mission, headed by the high rank official Théodore de Lagrené, was thus sent to China where it arrived in December 1841. The government had not given precise goals: the question was to 'show the flag' and to get first hand information. Arguments connected with catholic protection do not seem to have been prevalent in the beginning, but,

while negotiating, missionary assistance to French diplomats was to appear unavoidable, especially for translations. On the other hand, following a well established diplomatic tradition, de Lagrené did not forbid himself to put forward the christian argument even if he did not really care too much of it. Anyway, the French obtained (Treaty of Whampoa, October 1844) the same commercial advantages as Britain (August 1842) and the United States (July 1844) had got before them. But unlike British traders who purchased tea and silk and sold wooll or opium in China and had thus be anxious of a free trade treaty, their French counterparts had not the same interests. Moreover, many signs showed that the Whampoa treaty remained mainly in theory. In Amoy (Xiamen), one of the five harbours opened by the treaties, French interests were represented first by the British John Connely (an employee of Tait and Co), then by other British traders, the Consul of the United States or later the Consul of Spain. The first French diplomatic agent was named in 1902 only (Bachelier 1997: 181). The success of the negotiation concerning commercial matters was not thus so significant for the inforcement of French influence in China.

A hidden instruction had also given as a goal to 'acquire a territorial foothold in the vicinity of China', mainly to be able in the future to avoid Spanish, Dutch, Portuguese or British harbours. While negotiating with Chinese officials, Théodore de Lagrené had recalled the desire to get such a place, Taiping (Humen) close to Canton at first, Ryukyu islands a little bit later (1845). But, if de Lagrené failed to get a harbour comparable to Hong Kong on the Chinese territory, French vessels had an opportunity to study various places of South China Sea shores. In Paris, Guizot himself devoted full attention to the question, arguing for such a harbour or another one. Among other potential targets, the opportunity to acquire Natuna island, Pulo Condore (where British and then French had briefly established factories a century ago)²⁰ or Tourane (but the place seemed too unhealthy

²⁰ In the beginning of the nineteenth century, Pulo Condore seemed to have been considered by French officers as an island populated by Malay people, but testimonies around 1850 described it as an inhabited place.

and presented no commercial interest) were studied. Cochinchina does not seem to have been considered as an enjoyable goal: as an officer wrote, the country would be easy to conquer, but it had no interest (Mercier 1889: 115).

This desire of a foothold which could become a universal warehouse like Singapore could be explained by the traditional jealousy concerning British colonial possessions, but it was also connected with the transition between sail and steam, a transition which is exactly contemporary of these years. Sailing vessels had been more or less autonomous, their needs limited to stuffs which may be acquired almost everywhere. At the end of the eighteenth century, after several months in Australian waters, de Bougainville had been easily resupplied by the sole resources of a small Dutch trading post. With steam, the rules changed and, more than before, naval powers had to control fully equipped harbours: higher frequency of docking, specialized workshops, and above all, coal deposits were needed²¹. That question of equipment makes the difference between a 'foothold' or a 'trading post' and a 'base point' and explains why the next base point could not be an isolated island like Natuna, Anambas, the Spratlys, the Paracels or even Pulo Condore.

One of the goals of de Lagrené diplomatic mission had been to show the flag: several years long, French vessels sailed or steamed from Manilla to Singapore, then from Batavia to Hong Kong, with stages in Tourane, Shanghai or Amoy. Théodore de Lagrené was sheltered by one frigate and two corvettes, a fact which means that the French had twice as much vessels available in South China Sea than before. A permanent Naval Station for China Seas was even created in 1843, a decision which would necessary lead to the conquest of a harbour, as a permanent Naval Station could not exist without the possession of a base point. These numerous cruises gave to the

²¹ In these early stages of steam, ships could not carry as much coal as they needed and their boilers were extinguished as often as possible. To take only one exemple, the story of a crossing in Southern China Sea by the ship *Meurthe* in 1860: she used sail instead of steam each time that the wind allowed the ship to go six knots, without steam. Letter from Captain Jauréguiberry (later Admiral and Minister of the Navy), 17 July 1860. SHM Vincennes 74 GG2 c.3.

navy officers many opportunities to act autonomously. In 1842, Captain Félix Favin-Lévêque, who had been informed by Father Libois, from the *Missions étrangères de Paris* in Macao, took the initiative to free five French missionaries that the Vietnam government had jailed, without being desavowed. Moreover, two months later, a frigate was sent with an official mission and French officers got into the habit of visiting frequently Tourane. In April 1847, a corvette coming from Macao and a frigate coming from Singapore met off the bay of Tourane and vainly bombed the town to 'protect' persecuted Christians. At this time, France had still a leading position in Vietnam among other European powers partly because the country seemed to have no commercial interest,²² partly because the relations with the Vietnamese government seemed too difficult. The frequency of tensions when dealing with Vietnam explains why the French tried to get their South China Sea foothold elsewhere.

On the eastern side of the South China Sea, Mindanao had been signaled as a possible goal by Consul Adolphe Barrot. In 1844, the chief of the Naval Station sent thus a corvette to study the Sulu islands and particularly, the Basilan island.²³ After several incidents (including the murdering of a French officer and the subsequent retaliation by a powerful French fleet) and sharp negotiations with the sultan of Jolo on one side, with Spaniards on the other side, Théodore de Lagrené and Admiral Cécille took officially possession of Basilan in February 1845. Unfortunately for the local promoters of the conquest, King Louis-Philippe rejected the agreement in order to treat with caution Spanish pride and the French officers had to find another place to conquer. Thirteen years later, the second Opium War gave to them the opportunity to conquer the foothold they had dreamed about, thanks to the numerous ships sailing in the South China Sea.²⁴ A last time,

²² Tourane was fashionable at this time if we consider that an American ship had acted in favour of catholic missionaries in 1845 or that a British mission had been sent in 1847, but the results were so low that no power was to insist except France.

²³ For a full account of the whole affair, see Denis Nardin (1978).

²⁴ Baron Gros, leader of an Embassy in 1860 estimated that French had 150 ships available in China's vicinity (among which, 61 Navy vessels) to compare with 223 British ships (Gros 1864: 4)

they tried to acquire one harbour on Chinese territory by landing in Chu San island, at the mouths of the Yangzi, but British opposition drove them to retreat and, in the end, the last reasonable opportunity remained Vietnam.

The first stages of their colonial conquest are well known and may be shortly summarized here. Admiral Rigault de Genouilly tried a first attempt on Tourane to impress the Court of Hué, without any success: he had no gunboat able to reach the Vietnamese capital, not enough rallied Catholic natives to help him efficiently and thus his small landing force suffered a disastrous blockade from the Vietnamese army. So he had to change his strategy; that he did by planning to take Saigon, a place known to be the rice granary for the whole of Vietnam. As Rigault quickly burnt the rice reserves, it must be deduced that his main goal about Saigon was not to get a base point but to put the Vietnamese Court under pressure. But the landing was a success and Saigon became the right foothold and the future base point that the French had looked for since 1763. Then, in 1862, the French took possession of Pulo Condore because they thought that British wanted to stick their flag on this island very close to Cochinchina, they established a protectorate over Cambodia (1863) and they conquered the Cochinchinese territories which had remained independant (1867) to assure the protection of Saigon harbour against threats from the land and from the sea.

II. Cochinchina as a Step to China

The possession of Saigon obviously inforced the French position in the South China Sea. The first evident consequence was that the French had now soldiers (3,500 men through the 1860s and 1870s), whose cost heavily weighed on the colony and were ready to go to northern Vietnam, China, Korea or elsewhere in Asia. Moreover, French vessels could now be resupplied in a French harbour, as the first Admirals-Governors quickly built up workshops which became gradually an arsenal able to build torpedo boats in the beginning of the twentieth Century. In 1905, Saigon was equiped with two dry docks, one of them able to repair small ironclad vessels and the Navy might enjoy the assistance of several private

enterprises with their foundries and brazeries. The Arsenal of Saigon allowed the French to maintain a relatively numerous fleet in the Far East. In January 1882, when Commandant Rivière organized his expedition to Tonkin, he was sheltered by one ironclad vessel, one cruiser, two torpedo boats and several gunboats anchored in Halong bay. But, after Rivière's death (May 1883), the French were able to send three ironclad vessels and two cruisers in order to build a blockade line off the shores of Vietnam. To the end of the colonial period, French capacity to send a couple of ironclad vessels wherever in China waters if necessary was an element of power that the French never feared to use. Chinese officials were fully aware of the change introduced by the conquest of Cochinchina. As soon as 1864 began a franco-chinese military cooperation which was to end with the inauguration of the Fuzhou arsenal in 1869. By this common venture several Chinese officials tried to free their country from British monopoly and they did so because France looked more credible after having been established in Saigon (Dubois 1997: 3).

But the French remained dependant upon British assistance for most of the operations: because they had only one base point, they needed the assistance of the British network. During the war between China and France, when *L'Hamelin*, a war vessel ran aground off Fuzhou in July 1884, he was helped by a British gunboat and then was repaired in Hong Kong before being able to steam back to Saigon (Loir 1892: 73). No doubt that the ship would have been lost without British assistance and no doubt also that the French were weakened when, a few weeks later, Britain proclaimed its neutrality, a fact which meant that neither Hong Kong nor Singapore would give more assistance to the French. Coal furniture was another source of weakness (Loir 1892: 87) in spite of the control of Hongay coal mines: the French commercial fleet was not big enough to help the French Navy²⁵ and the transportation from Hongay to Saigon would have been quite impossible

²⁵ In 1905, the Russian fleet, *en route* to Japanese waters was not supplied by French ships but by a German company.

in the case of a war with Britain or Japan.²⁶ Coal deposits in Saigon were three times smaller than they should have been and were six times smaller than those which were available both in Singapore and in Hong Kong (Cassou 1906: 348-352). The French relied also upon British assistance concerning communications. The British sea cable had reached Saigon in 1871, but its availability depended highly on British goodwill. In June 1883, as the French planned to conquer Tonkin, they had not the means to build a new sea cable between Saigon and Haiphong. The French Government had to deal with the British Eastern Company for a cable, which was later to be pushed to Hong Kong.²⁷

Military dependance did not prevent the French to try to compete with the British on commercial matters. French officers who ruled Cochinchina had conceived from the beginning Saigon as a competitor to Singapore or Hong Kong and they pursued a policy of commercial freedom, a policy which was coherent with the free-trade treaty that Napoleon III had concluded with Britain in 1861. The main weakness of the '*Perle de l'Extrême-Orient*' (as Saigon began to be called) was obviously that it could not really compete with Singapore or Hong Kong as a warehouse, considering that financial, commercial or maritime British pre-eminence was too well established at that time. Saigon activity depended therefore heavily on import-export trade from Cochinchina. If rice was a good export product, Cochinchina did not buy enough and commercial ships had therefore to come back empty. This was to change with the growth of the European population and the permanent presence of the Army: traders and merchants soon established in Saigon to fill the needs of Europeans besides other ones

²⁶ The Second World War events were to confirm that the communications between Tonkin and Cochinchina were quite impossible to secure.

²⁷ Letter issued by Jules Blancsubé (Deputy by the French of Cochinchina to the *Assemblée nationale*) the 1st of June 1883. SHM 77 GG2 d. 12. French were thus fully dependant of the British, but they payed a part of the British cable network in Southern China Sea!

who worked on as country merchants.²⁸ Connected with Chinese entrepreneurs, several of them invested too in rice transformation and rice trade. These traders were mainly people who had worked in the South China Sea before the conquest of Cochinchina, as the Denis brothers in which the elder one had sailed between Singapore and Hong Kong for more than twenty years or as the Roque brothers who had had a warehouse in Manilla before 1858. Beside French entrepreneurs, several foreign ones became the leading figures of the colony, as the American Andrew Spooner who arrived in 1861, or the German Speidel. On these structures, the first two decades of French Cochinchina were an era of prosperity for European entrepreneurs, sheltered on the Chinese network, even if Saigon traffic was far behind Singapore or Hong Kong traffic. In fact, as British governments had anticipated it, Saigon had become a secondary waystation of the European network directed to China and a commercial opportunity among others in Asia.

As Frenchmen were firmly established in Cochinchina, they tried to reinforce their presence in the South China Sea. They were not as weak as it has been so often written. In 1865, French ships represented almost 25% of Saigon traffic harbor, when British transportation represented 8% and the German flag had transported almost 6% of all the merchandises carried into the harbour. French writers were thus wrong when they insisted about the German flag 'predominance' in Saigon and their reactions showed only that the free trade philosophy was not as widely shared in France as it was in Britain. But above all, in 1865, transportation in Saigon was dominated by Chinese ships which represented more than 56% of the total traffic.²⁹ The fact is not surprising if we consider that even the Dutch of Batavia were completely dependant upon Chinese traders for commerce with China or Siam; the more amazing on this point is even that French writers did not

²⁸ To take one example, *Le Louis* and *Le Mongol*, two French ships whose activities are known because their crews mutinied, carried Chinese workers from Hong Kong to Saigon and Singapore in the 1860s (Mouriès 1991: 12).

²⁹ Saigon traffic of 1865 is described in the *Revue maritime et coloniale* (Ministère de la marine et des colonies 1866: 190).

insist so much on Chinese commercial power at this time.

Local shipowners were however reluctant about Chinese competition, which explained, as they argued, their frequent commercial failures. The colonial administration usually listened to them and granted subventions for regular services between various places in China Sea. Among others, that was the case of the Company Marty et d'Abbadie. Marty's ships had worked between Haiphong and Hong Kong since 1889, almost without competition, and they had thus got much profit. But in 1897, Chinese merchants rented German steamers from Jebsen and Co and Marty's profits had gone down. In the same area, another private company had established a line between Haiphong and Kouang-Tchéou-Wan (Guangzhouwan) but had failed after the wrecking of its sole ship. Business had then been monopolized by the Chinese and the Portuguese after 1900. Pushing forward patriotic arguments (Guangzhouwan had been a French concession since 1898), Marty tried to get a subvention to work a regular line arguing that the only element which allowed profit on this line was troops transportation (four infantry companies before 1904, one after). How exaggerated as they were, Marty's complaints showed that French companies were not able to compete with Chinese ones on a purely commercial aspect. For the southern part of Vietnam, the Compagnie des Messageries fluviales de Cochinchine had obtained a subvention to insure mail transportation from Saigon to Bangkok in 1880, with the explicit goal to move Siam trade which was directed to Singapore or Hong Kong and in the beginning of the twentieth century, the shipowner Portal got a subvention for a French line between Bangkok and Singapore and another one for a line Saigon-Hong Kong³⁰. The central part of the South China Sea was not concerned by these lines, which were mainly devoted to coastal communications. The French lines in the area were not organized to set up a network through the South China Sea, but to counteract the British imperial line from Singapore to China.

All this money was useful, as the French flag was now often shown at least on the western shores of Southern China Sea, thanks to Indochinese

³⁰ AOM (Aix) GGI 3388, 3271, 3379, 3380 and 3381.

natives who payed the shipowners subventions by the taxes they gave to the colonial government, but the commercial impact remained very small. In 1898, the French share of the traffic in Chinese harbours by the Westerners was only 1,2% (and 62% for the British, 5% for the German or the Japanese). In spite of the governmental subvention for a monthly travel from Marseille to Japan, the Messageries Maritimes great liner-ships lost money from Saigon to Yokohama. Even in Saigon harbour, French ships had carried almost 350,000 tons (200,000 on British ships and as much on German ones), but within this total, 307,000 had benefited of a governmental subvention. The 40,000 purely private remaining tons were the equivalent of the traffic registered on Chinese junks (Castex 1904: 25, 248-256).

III. Defending the New Colony Against New Enemies.

But the French had been aware of their dependency upon British maritime network. This is one reason why, while trying to secure their naval communications, they were looking too for a continental road to the heart of China. The '*Mission du Mékong*' (1866-1868), had had to study if this river could be that road. As it was not the case, the French reported their attention to the Red River (Song Khol) in Tonkin. This preoccupation of a continental road was to end by the conquest of Tonkin between 1882 and 1885 and it even later drove the French to plan an annexion of Chinese provinces close to Vietnam (Yunnan, Guangxi and Guangdong). At the time when Paul Doumer was governor of Indochina (1897-1902), the French even planned to build a railroad through inland China which would have connected Indochina to Russia in order to shunt British commercial monopoly established on the lower Yangzi. Thus, the search of a continental road had driven the French to a territorial expansion which was to alter drastically colonial practice and subsequently their conception of the South China Sea.

At the time when they controlled the sole Cochinchina, the French had conceived their possession as a springboard to China and it was easy to secure the few maritime roads that were useful between Saigon and Hong Kong or Shanghai. As they possessed a large scale colony, they had to

extend their efforts to question as native policy or economic development (the so-called '*mise en valeur*'). They had above all to assure the security of a 2000 kilometers long coast. That does explain why, from the beginning, many Navy officers expressed criticisms about the conquest of Tonkin. While fighting against the Chinese, Admiral Courbet considered the conquest of Tonkin as a marginal task and he preferred to look for harbours elsewhere than in Vietnam, as in Pescadores islands where he landed and "of which he dreams to make a French Hong Kong".³¹ The control of the gulf of Tonkin seemed to produce more drawbacks than advantages: navy officers considered it as an unuseful blind alley that they would have to protect against endemic piracy³² and maritime smuggling; they did not praised Tonkin harbours, except the bay of Halong, considered as a shelter difficult to enter but safe and Hongay for its coal mines. In France the first opposition to territorial expansion in Tonkin was organized by navy officers (Grévy 1998: 311-312). The details of the war operations did nothing to leave the navy officers like the new colony: after the Sontay conquest by the Navy infantry of Admiral Courbet, the leadership of the operations was given to the Army, a fact which obviously shocked the Navy; later, the Army chose Haiphong as the main landing harbour in Tonkin, a choice that the navy officers did not like. Several years long they tried to lobby for the abandonment of Haiphong and, beside the missionaries, they wanted to promote the creation of a new and safer harbour elsewhere in Tonkin. Common opinion among navy officers may be summarized by the one that the Admiral Réveillère expressed, when he wrote that, after 1885, the French had been 'sentenced to remain' in Tonkin³³. But Courbet's naval successes (the destruction of Fuzhou Arsenal and the difficult blockade of China were technical performances) had an unforeseen result: in spite of them, China

³¹ "dont il rêvait de faire un Hong Kong français" (Auphan 1955: 210).

³² The eastern border between China and Tonkin was established by the "convention Constans" at 108°03' East to avoid the development of piracy (Lafont 1989: 236-237).

³³ Quoted by Joannès Tramond and André Reussner (1924: 373). It must be noticed that, before 1920, the headquarter of the Naval Division was not located in Indochina but in China.

was not forced to complete surrender, and this fact sufficed to prove that the times when a handful of gunboats could force China to total capitulation had ended. From this point, if some French officials carried on the dreams of an expansion in the Middle Kingdom, they would think of a conquest by terrestrial means, which had become possible after the conquest of Tonkin.

Considering commercial matters, the former ambitions to compete with British harbours for trading with the Middle Kingdom through the South China Sea were also lowered. The conquest of Tonkin had been contemporary of a sharp evolution of world trade trends, an evolution usually portrayed as a path from 'free trade spirit' to protectionism. That French governments were among the first ones to increase custom duties is all but a surprise, considering that the free trade spirit had been less developed than in Britain. Protectionism was promoted by the same men who had promoted the conquest of Tonkin: the first increase of the custom duties was set up by Jules Méline in the first Jules Ferry's Cabinet in 1883 (Grévy 1998: 295); protectionism triumphed with custom assimilation between France and its colonies in 1887; it was enforced by the 1892 Méline tariffs. The new tendency required from Saigon to develop its traffic with France instead of being a custom-free harbour. French country merchants of Cochinchina obviously disagreed at once,³⁴ but the evidence is that they failed to be heard. Indochina was now seen less as a means to develop French influence in the Far East than as a protected market for French industries. This tendency was stressed by the equipment project planned by governor Paul Doumer after 1897. In order to build railways through Indochina and to Yunnan, he submitted to the Assemblée nationale the project of borrowing 200 million Francs.³⁵ Politicians agreed with the conditions that all the stuffs and materials needed had to be French ones and that they would be carried only by French ships. Thus, around 1900, three

³⁴ As Jules Blancsubé wrote: 'Free trade made Saigon prosperity, Customs may ruin it' ('le libre-échange a fait la fortune de Saigon, les droits de douanes peuvent la ruiner'). Note written in 1886. SHM 77 GG2 (Fonds Taboulet) d. 1.

³⁵ To set a comparison, by the Tien Tsin Treaty of 1885, China had to give a 60 millions francs indemnity to France.

new shipping companies appeared in the Far East (Chargeurs réunis from Le Havre, Est-Asiatique français from Marseille and Compagnie nationale de Navigation), carrying State merchandises to Indochina and coming back with Cochinchina rice when they could. This “imperial” tendency was enforced by the fact that, to get a subvention, a French ship had to be built exclusively in France. Thus French Indochina closed itself from Asia.

At the same time, the South China Sea had become a threat to Indochina. Before the 1880s, Indochina security had relied upon a British neutrality that was to vanish for two decades, a fact which required from the French to conceive the defence of a colony which, unfortunately for them, had become bigger and consequently more difficult to protect from the sea at the same time. Concerning Asia, the first tensions between France and Britain occurred about continental South East Asia. Ferry’s initiatives concerning upper Burma in the 1880s and then the war between Siam and France (1893) damaged the relations between Paris and London. Rumours of a landing of the British fleet of Hong Kong at Tourane or Saigon, a landing which would have had for a purpose to prevent the French to establish a protectorate upon Siam, alerted French officials (Moreau 1904: 89). ‘If a war had happened, our Indochina would have been lost. The British fleet would have entered, almost without losses, Saigon river mouth and would have anchored in front of Saigon walls’.³⁶ Two years later, the reversal of alliances in the Far East which followed the war between Japan and China provoked new fears. Before the war, Britain had protected China against the ambitions of the other powers whilst the French had friendly relations with Japan³⁷ but, during the negotiations of Shimonoseki, the French associated to Germany and Russia to limit Chinese losses whilst Britain adopted a neutral position obviously more sympathetic to Japan. The new friendship was to end with

³⁶ “Si une guerre était arrivée, notre Indochine aurait été perdue. La flotte anglaise aurait remonté, presque sans pertes, la rivière de Saigon et aurait mouillé sous les murs de Saigon” (Cassou 1906: 304).

³⁷ It must be remembered that the first Japanese ironclad vessels had been built with French assistance and that, in 1884, Japanese general Oyama had even suggested an alliance against China.

an alliance in January 1902. Indochina had thus become a citadel besieged by the Masters of the Sea, Japan and Britain. Newly appointed as general governor of Indochina in 1902, Paul Beau, a former ambassador in China, asserted in one of his first speeches that “the enemy that Indo-China may fear does not threaten the continental borders.”³⁸ Unfortunately, as navy officers had foreseen it in the 1880s, to shield Vietnam coasts from an adverse landing was quite impossible.

Indochina was not the sole colony which was threatened at that time. In the 1890s, French governments, misunderstanding British positions had adopted an expansionist policy, particularly in Africa. The Fachoda crisis (1898) reminded them that they could not plan a colonial policy without a powerful naval force and also without British friendship. A new diplomatic policy was thus set up, which was to end with the so-called 'Entente cordiale' in 1904 (an alliance between France and Britain) and concerning the Navy, an ambitious program of equipment was quickly planned in order to shield French shores and colonial possessions. But the French knew that they could not build and maintain a number of ironcladed fleets equivalent to the number of colonies they possessed all over the world (it must have been too expensive), so they planned to build strongly fortified base points able to resist for a while to an adverse landing with the help of numerous destroyers and gunboats, before a powerful ironclad fleet steaming from France would deliver them. This conception followed the main features of the naval theories known under the name of “*la Jeune Ecole*” or “*l'école matérielle*”.³⁹ which had been developed for twenty years in France.

Interestingly, these theories which would be applied in the South China Sea after 1900 were born from the observations of the Franco-Chinese war of 1885, when numerous French destroyers, mines and torpedoes had seemed to be more efficient than a few Chinese ironclad vessels. Of course, these lighter war ships were not suitable in case of very bad weather and because

³⁸ “L'ennemi que l'Indochine doit redouter ne menace pas ses frontières terrestres”. Quoted by Henri Moreau (1904: 91).

³⁹ Note written by Hervé Coutau-Bégarie in SHM Vincennes, 125 GG2 (Papiers Castex) c. 1.

they could be easily sunk, one after another, by a single ironclad vessel; these are the reasons why the *Jeune Ecole* theories were on the way to be abandoned, at least concerning the fleet located in Europe, but they still seemed to be adapted concerning the colonies. Among others, Raoul Castex, a young navy officer who had the good fortune to publish his 36 pages booklet *Le péril japonais en Indochine* the very day when Japan assaulted Russia in 1904, wrote that to look for a total control of Vietnam coastlines would be a fleeting illusion and argued in the favour of a “*bloc terrestre*” or a “*réduit défensive*” around Saigon. The influence of Castex came from the fact that he was then chosen as assistant by the Deputy François Deloncle, sent to Indochina by his colleagues and that the young officer was to write the ensuing parliamentary report,⁴⁰ but his ideas were widely shared among French officials. A decree issued in April 1899 had planned to build five such base points in the colonies, among which three were devoted to the sole Indochina and in March 1901, the Navy Minister Jean-Marie de Lanessan had obtained from the Assemblée nationale a 169 million of Francs credit dedicated to the defense of the French harbours: concerning Indochina, 3 million were dedicated to Saigon/Cap Saint-Jacques. A *Comité consultatif de défense des colonies* was even created in July 1902 and on its first meeting (8 December 1902), Indochina was described as the main priority (Abadie 1937: 26-30). Unfortunately the stress upon naval programs vanished after 1902 and the de Lanessan scheme was not to be really applied⁴¹. Moreover, with British friendship, a powerful Navy seemed less useful.

Japanese victory against the Russian ally led to a revival of the fears. “Entirely preponderant on land and on sea, Japan dominates everything; England, its Ally or its client, is subordinated, as a matter of fact, to Japan for their common and possible actions in the Far East, concerning China and

⁴⁰ About Raoul Castex, see SHM Vincennes 125GG2 (Papiers Castex) and various books by Hervé Coutau-Bégarie, his biograph. Among others: *Castex. Le stratège inconnu* (Coutau-Bégarie 1985).

⁴¹ About French naval policy as a whole, see the *pro domo* plea by Jean-Marie de Lanessan (Lanessan 1909).

maybe elsewhere".⁴² The French had good reasons to fear a Japanese aggression as they had helped, more or less discreetly, admiral Rodjevensky, in spite of a telegram by the French Minister of Colonies the 18th of April 1905. The Russian fleet had however stayed off the bay of Camranh to the 21st of May, one week before Tsushima, a fact which had been recalled by the journalist Cunningham in the *South China Morning Post* (Hong Kong). The French yacht *L'Eridan* had even been caught while resupplying the Russian fleet and its crew had been jailed in Japan.⁴³ French specialists had reminded public opinion the former supposed ambitions of Japan about Indochina which had been more or less forgotten: the presence of Japanese military experts in Siam after 1893, the voyages of Japanese officers disguised into bonzes in Indochina around 1900, the visit of a military mission at the commercial Fair of Hanoi in 1902, the dispatch by the senior officer Kodama which planned the conquest of Indochina (its conclusions were published in the French newspaper *L'Echo de Paris*), the sheltering of the Vietnamese revolutionary leader Phan Boi Chau in Tokyo and so on. Anxiety seemed to be grounded on proved facts which were removed in front of the French Parliament.

The trouble was that little had been done concerning the base point of Saigon/Cap Saint-Jacques since 1902: among the most pessimistic authors, Jean Ajalbert even wrote that Cap Saint-Jacques guns were not ammunitioned (Ajalbert 1906: 6). Emergency measures were taken by governor Paul Beau, as transporting a part of the troops located on the Chinese border to Cochinchina, but a total reorganization was difficult. On the one hand, the colony had no financial availability since the former governor Paul Doumer had wasted a large part of the 200 million borrowing to build the railway from Hanoi to Kunming. His successor, Paul Beau, had

⁴² "Totalemment prépondérant sur terre et sur mer, le Japon domine tout ; l'Angleterre, son alliée ou sa cliente, lui est en fait subordonnée pour leurs éventuelles actions communes en Extrême-Orient, en Chine et peut-être ailleurs." (Res 1907: 4). "Ailleurs" obviously meant "Indochina".

⁴³ See Lamagat (1942: II: 107). Many blockade runners had been caught by the Japanese, among which 31 British and 5 German ones (Res 1907: 63). Concerning the stage of the Russian fleet in Camranh, *France-Asie* (1953), p. 41.

abandoned the scheme of a climatic station in Lang-bian, close to Camranh, which could have been used as a garrison and he had abandoned too the railway which could have connected the troops to the coast. The famous "*Transindochinois*" which would have been so useful in the case of a Japanese landing was not to be ended before 1936. On the other hand, French officials knew that "there [was] only one available defence for Indochina: defence by the natives" (Ajalbert 1906: 14),⁴⁴ but the Vietnamese did not seem enthusiastic.⁴⁵ To obtain Vietnamese support, Etienne Clémentel, the Minister of Colonies, promoted the philosophy of "association" (February 1905), but the evidence is that the new policy could not be efficient instantly. Thus, Indochina seemed to be left without any defence from the Japanese ambitions.

In fact, it must be said that anxiety about a Japanese landing soon vanished, a landing which the better advised specialists had never believed in. Several arguments were put forward to show that Japan was to become a friendly country. First of them, concerning military means, several authors showed that Japan had obtained its victories over China and over Russia by the landing of large scale armies, an occurrence which seemed to be hardly likely concerning Indochina.⁴⁶ On the other hand, in 1905, nobody believed that England might help Japan in case of an aggression against French Indochina. Others specialists showed that Japan had been sorely affected by its victory and that it would devote much time and energy to organize its new possessions (Dorient 1906; *Le Courrier d'Haiphong* 1906.03.16).⁴⁷ As a

⁴⁴ The French colonialists had observed the war between Spain and United States and their conclusions were that the Spanish had lost their colony because the natives had not helped them.

⁴⁵ Three years later (a fact which shows that almost nothing had been done between 1905 and 1908), Paul Beau was not still certain that the Vietnamese soldiers originating from Tonkin would agree if they had to be located in Annam or in Cochinchina. Speech to the *Général en Chef* in Indochina. 26 February 1908. AE (Quai d'Orsay, Paris) PA 11 vol. 3.

⁴⁶ The argument was not so vain. In 1940, the Japanese assaulted Indochina coming from China and not from the sea. Later, the main support to Viet-Minh came from China too, even if maritime smuggling was very usefull.

⁴⁷ Jules Harmand interviewed by Eugène Jung (Jung 1908: 18).

matter of fact, an agreement was signed between France and Japan in June 1907, by which the Japanese were allowed to borrow money in Paris in exchange of what Japan would cease sheltering Vietnamese revolutionaries. Diplomacy and balance of powers had thus been a better defence for Indochina than a huge "*point d'appui*" could have been.

IV. Conclusion

From 1840 to 1910, the Southern China Sea was perceived by the French first as an access to China, and then as a potential threat to their possessions, but the French had never the means to control it or even to know it very well. The questions to know how and why the French had established themselves on the shores of the Southern China Sea are not the more difficult to answer: a kind of routine to be a great naval power and the easiness, if we consider the unequal balance of technology of the time between Asian countries and European ones. After 1890, Indochina which had been conquered to strengthen French political influence in the China Sea had become a possession to cherish for itself and a possession to protect from this threatening sea. Today's preoccupation concerning the area is mainly connected with the balance of power between China and its neighbours, heavily stressed upon Spratly and Paracels islands on. It was not the case while the French controlled Indochina. They did not care about these islands prior to the 1930s and they were not able to secure their seaways through China Sea from the beginning to the end, being dependent upon British or Japanese goodwill. The 1918 victory seemed to draw a new balance of power and Indochina was no more seen as a threatened ownership but as a springboard for greater influence. May be, this picture was a chimeric one, as French misunderstood the role of their Allies in the victory and the weight of their goodwill, especially, with regard to the Far East, Japan's goodwill. But in the eve of the 1920s, French diplomats and colonial administrators thought that Japan and the United States were to dominate the Pacific Ocean and that Indochina was to become a 'balcony' on this friendly Ocean (Morlat 2001; Giacometti 1997). Then, unlike the continental

view that had prevailed since the 1880s, the colony went back to a role of a waystation, not so much to Southern China (the dreams of a fantastic market had vanished for a long time) but also to North Eastern Asian shores and to the United States.

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