Preface

This volume is the result of a three-year research project, La Méditerranée asiatique et ses plates-formes commerciales (International Trading Hubs in East and Southeast Asia) 2006–2009, funded by the Agence Nationale de la Recherche (France).¹

The research has involved extensive data collection, field studies and interviews in China, Japan, Singapore and Hong Kong. Our team included historians, economists, sociologists, anthropologists and sinologists who have repeatedly exchanged findings in order to grasp the regional character of trade and finance beyond national borders and traditional academic frameworks, bringing each perspective (historic, geographical and structural) into play.

We hope that this collective effort offers, in addition to its regional framework, up-to-date information that strengthens an original transdisciplinary analysis of a region and its economic characteristics, which will be of interest to readers within academia and well beyond.

A strong geographical perspective has been adopted for the analysis, which defines trading and financial hubs as global cities which frequently have more in common and closer linkages with each other than with their corresponding hinterlands. These global cities illustrate the extent to which world trends deeply penetrate the national territorial interior and processes that were presumed to be controlled by the State.

The study documents the fact that today major urban centres (Tōkyō, Ōsaka, Singapore, Hong Kong, Shanghai) situated on the periphery of the maritime corridor of East Asia form a system characterised by the intensity of their economic linkages and integration into the world economy. We have seen that since the mid-1980s, these major Asian cities have become the worldwide-oriented centres for production, trade and research.

The research has also shown that the concentration of control capabilities goes along with the dispersion of manufacturing capabilities (at the regional, national and global levels). As a result Hong Kong, as well as Singapore, or the Tōkyō-Yokohama conurbation, for instance, implements a new logic of agglomeration and takes part in a new geography

¹ Project no. ANR-05-BLAN-037.
of centrality and marginality. By grasping the dynamics of economic flows, the emergence of gravity centres and the evolution of hierarchies, ‘International Trade and Finance Hubs in East and Southeast Asia’ shows the existence of a system of cities characterised by a functional division of the work and responsibilities within a polycentric region.

The network of configuration of East Asian trade and financial hubs finally leads to the questioning of new attributes of sovereignty. Hong Kong shows that sovereignty no longer rests exclusively upon the territory, but on the function. In that sense, it also depends on the capacity to model economic spaces, to create and to impose technical, financial and legal norms.

These past three years of field studies and four workshops have helped to produce accurate analysis of the different East and Southeast Asia trading and financial cities and to document the degree and character of their interdependence. Specifically, field studies and documentary research have generated empirical knowledge and elaborated a conceptual framework on the following issues:

1. the power of attraction of the East Asian maritime corridor;
2. a typology of great trading centres;
3. the transnational production system – a growing characteristic of intra-Asian trade;
4. the articulation between global and local levels in trading and financial centres;
5. current economic competition within the region.

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François Gipouloux, Peking, 3 March 2011