Christian Taillard (ed.), *Intégrations régionales en Asie orientale*
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NOTE DE L’ÉDITEUR

Translated from the French original by Jonathan Hall

1 These two imposing works, totalling nine hundred pages between them, are intended to be read as a continuation and a complement to the two previous volumes of the Géographie universelle published by GIP Reclus, namely Chine/Japon/Corée (1994) and Asie du Sud-Est/Océanie (1995). Unlike these reference works, the present two volumes are the outcome of a more multidisciplinary approach. They are the collective work of the group known as NORAO (Nouvelles Organisations régionales en Asie orientale—New Regional Organisations in East Asia) which was set up after the publication of the Géographie universelle. Since 1997 this group of about forty research workers has brought together geographers, who are the majority, with historians, economists, political scientists, and sociologists.

2 Although they recognise that the term “East Asia” is difficult to define, the geographical area covered here includes all the countries of the Eurasian continent on the Pacific rim (China, Japan, Korea and the countries of South-East Asia). This project aims at going beyond juxtaposing separate analyses of different countries, in order to “take account of their transnational large-scale regional dynamics”. The term “regional” is taken here in
its widely accepted sense as “generally a supra-national space, between the continental and the national”, and midway “between the global and the nation states systems”. This comparativist vision, which was as familiar to the old school of Asian monsoon geographers as to the historians of civilisations, has not been until now the approach adopted by the new school of French geography. The first volume deals with various trans-regional issues, such as definitions and conceptual models of the space under study, the colonial or imperial inheritance, Asian visions of East Asia, and redrawing the relations between emergent regionalisation and globalisation. It provides us with a reflective investigation into the question of East Asian identity. The second volume takes a more classical approach, throwing light on the interactions and forms of identity in this transnational region. These include the various networks and flows, industry and commerce, the interface between land and sea, and cross-frontier relations.

3 Given the interest in this new approach, the delays in publication are regrettable. Although the editing of the two volumes was completed before September 11th 2001, they were not published until 2004. Clearly, therefore, there should have been a chapter to bring the material up to date. In addition, the overall approach inevitably entails a certain plurality of viewpoints and degrees of specialisation between the different contributions, along with a failure, on occasions, to establish any viable connections between them. The index lacks the required clarity and coherence. And above all, this topic ought to have led to a clearer demonstration of the centrality of China and the Chinese in all these domains (in terms of its territory and population, of the importance of its cultural heritage, of its economic dynamics, and of its diaspora flows and connections). This centrality has already been well established by Léon Vandermeersch in his Nouveau Monde sinisé (Paris 1968, with a second edition by You Feng in 2004) which covers the territories of China, Japan, Korea and Vietnam, thus coinciding for the most part with this work’s definition of East Asia.

4 Focusing on the problematics of East Asia around this central issue would have allowed the following questions to be aired: what territorial reconfigurations have arisen as a consequence of China’s economic boom? Since China is at the heart of continental East Asia, will it impose a structure upon this disparate collection of islands, archipelagos, isthmuses and peninsulas? Or, on the contrary, will it fall to these peripheral territories (some of which are sources of powerful flows of capital in their own right, as well as being links in the American sphere of influence), to dismantle China’s political and economic system, which is still officially communist? And in wider terms, what are the dynamics and modes of interaction operating between the continental empire of China and the surrounding maritime empires? But in their own terms, these two volumes have nonetheless achieved a significant renewal of our thinking about East Asia. They break down the old intellectual compartmentalisation in a salutary and occasionally original way, and offer a fresh vision of that powerful generative centre of populations, civilisations, and, more recently, wealth, the rapid rise of which is destined to become a shaping force in the global system of the twenty-first century.