



# NOUVEAUX REGARDS SUR L'ASIE

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A new perspective on Asia and the diversity of its issues and cultures,  
combining the views of experts and high-level players.

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## EDITORIAL

**by Jean-Raphaël Peytregnet**

Editorial Director and former French diplomat.

**I**f there is one trait that characterizes East Asian countries, it is undoubtedly the patriarchy rooted in Confucianism, which continues to exert a dominant influence in this part of the world today. Men were (and still are) considered superior to women (zhong nan qing nü 重男輕女).

Confucius thus expressed the idea that "women and petty people are the hardest to deal with" (wei nüzi yu xiaoren nanyang ye 唯女子與小人難養也), and according to this doctrine, women were expected to conform to the "three obediences and four virtues" (sancong side 三從四德): obedience to the men in their family (father, husband, son) and the obligation to maintain modest and moral behavior in both words and actions. The rules of Islam in Muslim Asia—such as in Indonesia (the world's most populous Muslim-majority country), Malaysia, or especially under the Taliban in Afghanistan (plural form of Taleb, thus with no "s" at the end)—are not significantly more favorable to women, even though, according to the Quran, men and women are said to be equal before God [1].

In China, as in India and Vietnam—to name just these three Asian countries—giving birth to a girl is seen as "wasting water" (po chuqude shui 潑出去的水) or "losing money on the merchandise" (peiqian huo 賠錢貨), since she will eventually join her future husband's family.



In this context, early detection of a baby's sex (as also in India, for example), through ultrasound scans (a practice theoretically forbidden), has encouraged the termination of pregnancies when the fetus is female.

Some might argue that this practice was more "civilized" than drowning a newborn girl in a well or a barrel of water, but fifteen years after the introduction of abortion techniques, the damage was done.

Thus, in Asia, there are up to 120 boys born for every 100 girls, whereas the global average is around 105 boys for every 100 girls. The only exception is South Korea, where awareness campaigns and coercive measures have succeeded in changing attitudes to restore balance.

As for East Asia, a glimpse of the situation was evident during the presidential election held on June 3rd in South Korea, where during the electoral campaign, the highly sensitive issue of the Ministry of Gender Equality was a backdrop to the debates.

In a televised debate preceding the election of candidate Lee Jae-myung from the Democratic Party (center-left, progressive), he faced a direct attack from a lawmaker on the issue of women's rights, who used insulting language toward women. Meanwhile, South Korean women—conspicuously absent from the vote, a first since 2007—had previously been at the forefront of the mobilization that led to the impeachment of former president Yoon, following six months of political chaos resulting from his brief and baseless declaration of martial law, made only to cling desperately to power.

So far, Seoul has had only one female head of state and president of the opposition Grand National Party (GNP), Ms. Park Geun-hye (2013–2017), daughter of the military dictator Park Chung-hee. She was sentenced in 2017, just weeks after leaving office, to 32 years in prison for abuse of power, corruption, coercion, and embezzlement, before receiving a presidential pardon from President Moon Jae-in in 2021.

The new Japanese parliament (465 members) includes only 73 women, which in itself is already progress. No woman in the archipelago has ever held the position of Prime Minister, in a society where machismo remains dominant.

Yet the question of the place of Asian women is of great importance when one considers that, out of the approximately 3.6 billion women in the world, more than half live in Asia. And while

Thailand, led since 2024 by businesswoman Paethongtarn Shinawatra, holds the world record for female business leaders, Asian women still earn on average only 70 to 80% of male salaries for equal work. Again, weighed down by the burden of tradition, economically advanced countries such as South Korea and Japan lag behind in the number of women holding executive positions (2 %).

Not so long ago, one could say that politics was the only field in which Asian women performed better than the global average—especially when compared with countries like France and the United States, which to this day have never had a female president (though France has had two female prime ministers: Edith Cresson and Elisabeth Borne). But this trend seems to be reversing, judging by the fate of a number of prominent Asian women—most of them, admittedly, from ruling dynasties—who, like their fathers before them, often met a tragic end.

Among them was Indira Gandhi, daughter of the "pandit" (great erudite) Nehru, the first Prime Minister of independent India (1947). A wartime leader during the 1971 conflict with Pakistan, she ruled with an iron fist under the guise of an unexplained state of emergency between 1975 and 1977, and, upon returning to power, brutally crushed Sikh autonomy movements with the bloody assault on the Golden Temple of Amritsar—an act that led to her assassination in 1984 by her own bodyguards, who were followers of Guru Nānak.

Freed from British colonial rule, the Republic of India has had two female presidents to date, although the role is largely ceremonial: Pratibha Patil (2007–2012) and the current president, Droupadi Murmu—both, remarkably, from the "untouchable" lower caste and, moreover, not products of dynastic politics.

Indian women hold significant roles in this predominantly Hindu/Vedic society, as evidenced by the large number of them appointed as "Chief Ministers" of Indian states. Tradition accords them a form of "feminine power" (shakti शक्ति), on par with goddesses such as Pārvatī (the mountain), first wife of the god Shiva, and her avatars Durgā (the inaccessible) and Kālī (the destroyer); Lakshmi (the benevolent), consort of Vishnu; and Sarasvatī (goddess of knowledge and mistress of the arts), consort of Brahma.

Benazir Bhutto, twice Prime Minister of Pakistan in the 1980s and 1990s, was the daughter of former Prime Minister Zulfikar Bhutto, who was overthrown by the army in 1977 and later hanged in 1979 following a military coup led by



Army Chief Zia-ul-Haq (who was himself later assassinated). Accused of corruption, Benazir Bhutto paid the ultimate price for her political commitment: in December 2007, she was killed in a terrorist attack, and her husband, Asif Ali Zardari, succeeded her as head of state with the backing of the Muslim League.

One might also mention Megawati Sukarnoputri, daughter of former president Soekarno, who was herself elected head of the Indonesian state in 2001; Gloria Macapagal Arroyo (2001–2010), the second woman in Philippine history to hold such high office and daughter of former head of state Diosdado Macapagal in the late 1950s; the former Prime Minister of Bangladesh, now deposed and exiled in India, Sheikh Hasina, daughter of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the founding father of independent Bangladesh (formerly East Pakistan), who also met a tragic end, assassinated in 1975. During her 15-year rule, Sheikh Hasina's main opponent was Khaleda Zia, wife of dictator Zia Ur Rahman, who was himself assassinated during a counter-coup in 1981; Corazon Aquino, widow of Benigno Aquino Jr., the assassinated leader of the Philippine opposition, who became president of the archipelago in 1986 after a popular revolution against dictator Ferdinand Marcos; and not to forget Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, daughter of the general and founding father of Burma's independence, who was also assassinated.

"The Lady," former State Counsellor (the equivalent of Prime Minister) from 2016 to 2021, has been imprisoned since December 2022, sentenced by the ruling military junta to 27 years in prison. Criticized within her own party for her excessive authoritarianism, her stances against the persecuted Muslim Rohingya minority—oppressed both by the Buddhist majority and by state authorities—have led to her marginalization both within the international community and among members of the National League for Democracy, of which she was once the president. As a result, there is now little interest in the fate of the 1991 Nobel Peace Prize laureate.

And the list could go on of these strong (not to say authoritarian) Asian women, who—curiously enough—never showed a particular willingness to fight for the betterment of women's conditions in their respective countries.

Still, they can claim to have all come to power through democratic elections—something that has not always been the case for their male counterparts in Asian leadership... China has distinguished itself by reviving the Confucian doctrine, traditionally distrustful of

women [3]. In 2023, out of the 2,977 delegates sitting in the National People's Congress, 791 (or 26%) were women—a percentage slightly lower than their representation in the Party (29.1% of the 95 million members of the Chinese Communist Party). In China, as one ascends the administrative or Party hierarchy, women tend to disappear.

Since October 2022 and the CCP's 20th National Congress, not a single woman has been included among the 24 members of the Politburo, nor in its Standing Committee—the innermost circle of power—composed of 7 men. In the lower echelon, the Central Committee, there are only 11 women out of 205 members, or 5.4%—a first in twenty years. As always, the new Premier, Li Qiang, who is also the CCP's number two, is a man.

The four Vice-Premiers are also men, whereas in the past ten years, two women had reached that rank. One must go down to the level of State Councilors—a rank below Vice-Premier but theoretically above Minister—to find a single woman. Among the 26 ministers in the government, only two are women.

In contrast, Taiwan—once nicknamed "the island of women" (nürendao 女人島) due to the presence of many matriarchal societies (nürenshi 女人社) among its indigenous

Austronesian peoples—serves as a striking example to its powerful neighbor that courts it with threats. In Asia and around the world, Taiwan is known for its highly progressive policies. It relies on a multiparty democratic system considered exemplary since 1996, when President Lee Teng-hui, "the father of Taiwanese democracy," was re-elected by direct universal suffrage. His worthy successor, Tsai Ing-wen—the island's first female president—was decisively re-elected in January 2020. Women make up 42% of elected members of parliament, making Taiwan "the most gender-equal country in Asia." This status was further affirmed by the legalization of same-sex marriage in May 2019.

As one observer pointed out, in Taiwan, gender equality is far from being the most appealing argument for political parties. Similarly, social demands as a whole are far from being the most prominently promoted reforms. Instead, political parties prefer to focus on the Chinese threat...

And one could continue along the same lines by suggesting that the rise of a woman to the highest office in an Asian country at least has



the advantage of attracting the attention of Western countries, which themselves are no more accustomed to this fact than their Asian counterparts.

As I conclude this editorial, and ahead of the articles and interviews to come, I wish you a very pleasant vacation and look forward to seeing you again in September for the resumption of "Nouveaux Regards sur l'Asie".

[1] Their Lord answered them: "I will never deny any of you, male or female, the reward for your deeds. Both are equal in reward." (Qur'an 3:195).

[2] "It is only when Shiva unites with you, O Shakti, that he becomes the Almighty Lord. Left to himself, he does not even have the strength to lift a finger." (Devi Upanishad).

[3] Perhaps also keeping in mind the dark legend linked to Wu Zetian (624–705), the only reigning empress in all of China's history; Cixi, the "Dragon Empress," regent (1861–1908) of the last Qing dynasty after ordering the poisoning of her nephew, Emperor Guangxu; or the "Red Empress" Jiang Qing, last lawful wife of Chairman Mao Zedong.



**Jean-Raphaël Peytregnet**

*A career diplomat, after devoting himself to sinology (E.N.S. de Saint-Cloud, Inalco, Shida University – Taipei, Fudan University – Shanghai, Beijing National Academy of Theatre) in France, then to development aid as UNESCO international expert in Laos (1988–1991), Jean-Raphaël PEYTREGNET has, among other things, held the positions of Consul General of France in Guangzhou (2007–2011) and Beijing (2015–2018), as well as in Mumbai/Bombay from 2011 to 2015. He was head of Asia at the Centre d'Analyse, de Prospective et de Stratégie (CAPS) attached to the cabinet of the Minister of Europe and Foreign Affairs (2018–2021), then Special Advisor to the Director of Asia-Oceania (2021–2023).*



## Interview Nouveaux Regards

# Nicolas Chapuis, Former E.U. ambassador to China.

Interviewed by Jean-Raphaël Peytregnet

**Jean-Raphaël Peytregnet :** You have undertaken the translation into French of the complete poetic works of the great poet of the Tang dynasty 唐

(618–907), Du Fu 杜甫. A fourth volume of his monumental work, which includes 1,144 poems in regulated verse (shi 詩), will be published on August 22 by Les Belles Lettres.

**During your career, you have held very high-ranking positions as a diplomat, notably in China where you served as the European Union ambassador, and have therefore dealt with subjects related to international relations in the present day. What motivated you to take an interest in this ancient era and in this particular poet, whose work and life seem at first glance very far removed from the vicissitudes of the modern world?**

**Nicolas Chapuis :** I have been reading and rereading classical Chinese poetry since my Chinese studies. Diplomacy has reinforced my belief that language is not only the obvious instrument of dialogue but also, at its highest level, the means to understand a culture — the ultimate tool of rapport. It so happens that, in ancient Chinese times, diplomacy was conducted in verse, with a subtle interplay of allusions and verbal sparring, as evidenced by the Annals of Spring and Autumn (Chunqiu zuozhuan 春秋左傳). Thus, through the ongoing study of classical Chinese poetry, I have found a way to better understand the workings of thought in this great civilization, particularly regarding the long-debated question of the foundations of Chinese humanism.

This has been of great help to me in my successive missions in China, my interlocutors appreciating this personal commitment and thereby granting me a trust that would no doubt have been more difficult to establish without this recognition of cultural closeness. As the Chinese say, I “know the music” (zhi yin 知音), in other words, I was for them an alter ego with whom it was possible to engage in profound dialogue.

The translation into Chinese of one of my essays, “Tristes Automnes”, has further consolidated this enviable position for a diplomat.

I came to Du Fu for the simple reason that he is regarded in Chinese tradition as the greatest of the classical poets and thus embodies, better than anyone else, the very essence of the culture. It is universally accepted without the slightest dispute that his poetic genius has never been surpassed, even though he was often imitated.

**To my knowledge, you are the first French sinologist to embark on this titanic task. Others before you, mostly Anglo-Saxon scholars, have attempted it.**

I am thinking in particular of Stephen Owen, who spent about eight years translating the complete works of the poet into six volumes, completed in 2015. I also think of the translations by William Hung and Albert Davis, compiled in the book *Tu Fu* published in 1971, as well as those by Burton Watson, author of *The Selected Poems of Du Fu* published in 2003.

**Before you undertook this work, it seems that there was little interest within French sinology for this great poet, despite his worldwide fame, judging by the very small number of his poems translated into our language. The BBC even dedicated a documentary to him, comparing the genius of the “greatest” Chinese poet to Dante Alighieri and William Shakespeare. How do you explain this?**

It is true that few of Du Fu’s poems were accessible in French before the bilingual collection of the Bibliothèque Chinoise by Les Belles Lettres, overseen by Anne Cheng, Stéphane Feuillas, and Marc Kalinowski, decided ten years ago to include the complete works of his poetry, thus remedying this regrettable lack.

Eminent French sinologists have translated the most famous poems, those that Chinese children learn to recite at school; I am thinking in





particular of François Cheng and Florence Hu-Sterk. There are also interesting versions by non-sinologists, such as André Markowicz, Claude Roy, and Jean-Marie Le Clézio, which attest to the universality of Du Fu's voice. But overall, these partial translations do not truly convey Du Fu's unique position in relation to other classical poets.

The only explanation is disappointingly banal: Du Fu's poetry is very difficult, far more complex to decipher than what came before or after it; classical commentators used to say that Du Fu was "incomprehensible" (bu ke jie 不可解).

Even Stephen Owen, who remains today the greatest American scholar of Tang poetry and whose doctoral seminar I was fortunate to attend at Harvard in 1987–1988, acknowledges the sometimes insurmountable difficulties he encountered in producing his translation. Sometimes the context is missing, or the text is corrupted, suffering from more or less fanciful variants; sometimes we suspect wordplays that escape us today, thirteen centuries later.

**David Hawkes (1923–2009), author of a very fine translation of the famous classical novel Honglou meng 紅樓夢 (The Dream of the Red Chamber or The Story of the Stone in its English version), said of Du Fu's poetic work, and I quote, "his poems do not as a rule go through very well in translation." Do you share this view?**

**What are the particular difficulties in translating his poems? And above all, in conveying as faithfully as possible his literary style and expression?**

David Hawkes knew exactly what he was talking about, as he was the author of a commented translation of thirty-five Du Fu poems collected in the Three Hundred Tang Poems 唐詩三百首 (A Little Primer of Tu Fu, 1967). He demonstrates that the density and conciseness inherent in Du Fu's expression are lost in any translation. Should we therefore give up? The challenge is as much proportional to the poet's genius as to the reader's ability to grasp his intention.

Once again, Du Fu is "incomprehensible"—this must be accepted, while paradoxically striving to "understand" why his voice remains so powerful and still audible today.

In my work, I started from two preliminary considerations: the musicality inherent in classical Chinese poetry is impossible to render in another language—the loss is immediate and can only be compensated by seeking a rhythm, a cadence akin to singing (for Chinese poetry was sung). Secondly, the most distinctive prosodic feature in Du Fu's work is the absolute

parallelism in the composition of a couplet: one color corresponds to another color, one action corresponds to another action, and so on. This parallelism can be conveyed in translation, but only at the cost of linguistic discipline as rigorous as the original.

Another difficulty in both reading and translating lies in the ad libitum use of literary allusions. Stephen Owen compiled a lexicon of the allusions used by Du Fu to help the English-speaking reader familiarize themselves with a corpus of references unknown in their own culture. As for me, I address these allusions in the detailed commentary that follows the translation of each poem: indeed, unlike Owen, I do not deliver just the poem but also an interpretation of the text, which allows the French-speaking reader to grasp how Du Fu structures his composition.

Finally, the French text must, depending on the case, move or impress the reader as much as the original text. This is probably the most difficult aspect to achieve in translation. The first volumes published since 2015, containing about a hundred poems per book, have been praised by critics for the clarity and elegance of the diction: I expect no more than that, hoping this work will inspire young sinologists to take up the mantle, as there remain so many essential texts to translate into French, starting with Du Fu's bedside book, the Wenxuan 文選 (Anthology of Beautiful Writings), dating from the 6th century.

**Another great figure of classical poetry is Li Bai (701–762), who lived during the same period as Du Fu. Li Bai's poetry differs from that of his friend and contemporary.**

**Du Fu earned the nickname "Saint of Poetry" (Shi Sheng 詩聖); Li Bai, that of the "Immortal Poet" (Shi Xian 詩仙). Du Fu himself dedicated, if I am not mistaken, a poem to this colorful writer and drink enthusiast—the "Song of the Eight Drunken Immortals."**

**They share the fact that both failed the imperial examinations and, in a way, were "cursed poets" of their time (both died in poverty) because they were somewhat marginal and ignored in their era. What do you think? What, in your view, distinguishes or unites them?**

Li Bai was ten years older than Du Fu. The latter was fascinated by the personality of the former—a daring adventurer and champion of justice—who enjoyed a brief moment of glory at the court of Emperor Xuanzong despite his erratic behavior. Du Fu, on the other hand, was swept away by the civil war that devastated the Tang Empire in 755. Tradition has preserved a few



exchanges of poems between the two poets, from which one can discern that Du Fu expected more from Li Bai than the latter was willing to grant him.

Both embody the golden age of the Tang, that of the years 730–750, when the Empire was the most populous and prosperous state on the planet, with a cosmopolitan capital, Chang'an (today's Xi'an), which counted a million inhabitants and welcomed merchants from the famous Silk Road.

When the war broke out, Du Fu took the road into exile toward the west and then the southwest, while Li Bai, for reasons not fully understood but perhaps linked to an oversized ego, chose to join the imperial prince Yong in the southeast in a failed coup attempt. Li Bai was sentenced to death, then ultimately pardoned and exiled to Guizhou. He died in 762, eight years before Du Fu.

It is remarkable that Du Fu, despite his unwavering loyalty to the throne, forgave his friend for his political misstep. In a splendid poem dating from 759, entitled "I Dreamed of Li Bai," Du Fu presents a dialogue with his ghostly apparition, confiding in conclusion: what is the worth of an eternal reputation? After death, there is only silence.

**The first, Du Fu, seems to adhere to Confucian and humanist thought, whereas the second, Li Bai, appears to have been more influenced by Taoism and a certain form of anarchism. Is that the case? Could you provide our readers with one or two examples of the poetic forms that distinguish these two great poets?**

Indeed, the two scholars did not share the same ideological attachments. Steeped in a rigorous Confucian education, Du Fu seems to have envied in his youth the libertarian aspirations of his elder. But the war swept away these inclinations, and Du Fu, somewhat like Victor Hugo in exile on Guernsey, dedicated his life in exile to composing political poems that denounce imperial mismanagement and call for the restoration of public morality.

I will give here a particularly evocative example of the difference in tone and inspiration between the two poets by taking the theme of the moonlight. For Li Bai, the moon is a companion who comes to ease his solitude, as it casts a shadow with which he can dance; for Du Fu, the moon brings no comfort because its light reveals what the night strives to hide: the poet's aging and the violence of war.

Li Bai: "The moon and my shadow are temporary friends; to have fun, one must enjoy the spring. I

sing while the moon strolls; I dance, and my shadow scatters." (Solitary libation under the moon)

Du Fu: "(The moonlight) brings only suffering to a loyal heart, adding light to white hair. One can clearly see that spears and lances are everywhere: cease illuminating the camp west of the Capital!" (Moon)

**Literary critics describe Du Fu as an epic, lyrical, and committed poet. History and morality seem to be two important components that have marked his work.**

**How does the work of this great poet still speak today to those who read him, whether in the Chinese world or beyond?**

Like Hugo, Shakespeare, Dante, or Goethe, Du Fu embodies what is universal in humanity exposed to the suffering of existence: a lofty sense of idealism that transcends vicissitudes. In the Chinese world, Du Fu is the quintessential scholar: confronted with the worst tragedy of his time—a civil war that caused millions of deaths over six years, destroyed the dynastic order to which he had devoted himself, and caused the death of one of his children—he set out to bear witness; he records both the flaws of princes and the sufferings of peasants torn from their land and soldiers slaughtered in battles of rare cruelty.

No one before him had shown such realism and empathy, far from the image of court poets seeking to entertain the Son of Heaven while craving prebends or honors. He speaks candidly of his shame at being powerless, yet remains steadfast in all circumstances to speak the truth, denounce injustices, and preserve his honor.

This is why the greatest Chinese intellectuals have identified with Du Fu over the centuries. Toward the end of their lives, Qian Zhongshu 錢鍾書 (1910–1998) and Yang Jiang 楊絳 (1911–2016), the most revered intellectual couple in contemporary China, spent their evenings calligraphing Du Fu's poems—an homage to his refusal to compromise and his moral integrity.

I hope that my French translation of the complete poetic works of Du Fu, as well as Stephen Owen's English translation, will help readers better understand the figure of the Chinese scholar.

The West obviously does not have a monopoly on the public role of intellectuals; understanding that in today's China there are scholars devoted to a moral ideal like Du Fu helps put many



narratives about Chinese absolutism into perspective.

Not that the regime is not totalitarian—it is, without any possible ambiguity—but civil society, fragile though it may be in the face of repression, is rich with individuals who make honor a cardinal virtue and shame a driving force of resistance. Such, in my view, is Du Fu's remarkable legacy.



**Nicolas Chapuis**

*Nicolas CHAPUIS, born in 1957, studied Chinese language and civilization at Langues'O (INALCO) and Université Paris VII. A career diplomat, he spent over fifteen years in China, where he was Cultural Advisor to the French Embassy (1989-1992), Consul General in Shanghai (1998-2002) and European Union Ambassador (2018-2022). In addition to his translations of contemporary literature (Ba Jin, Yang Jiang), his interest in classical Chinese poetry has led to a translation of Qian Zhongshu's Five Essays in Poetics (1987) and an essay entitled Tristes Automnes - poétique de l'identité dans la Chine ancienne (2001). The Bibliothèque Chinoise published by Les Belles Lettres welcomes his bilingual translation of Du Fu's complete poetic works. Four volumes, out of a planned set of fifteen books, are available: I - Poèmes de jeunesse, II - La Guerre Civile (755-759), III - Au bout du Monde (759), IV - Chengdu (760).*





## Interview Nouveaux Regards

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# Emmanuel Lincot, Lecturer at the Faculty of Letters of the Institut Catholique de Paris and at the Institut Français de Relations Internationales (IFRI).

Interviewed by Jean-Raphaël Peytregnet

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**Jean-Raphaël Peytregnet:** In your latest book published in 2023 [1], you offer readers interested in this region a very rich overview—the book is teeming with information—of the role China is playing in Central Asia. Its title, *The Great Game*, is inspired by that of a British Indian Army officer who used it to describe the colonial and diplomatic rivalry between the Russian and British empires in their 19th-century quest to dominate Eurasia (the “Heartland”).

The crucial stake of this “Great Game” was, to summarize, control over what is now Afghanistan, a crossroads of Central Asia, but also a pivotal zone representing, in the minds of the great powers of the time, the key to global supremacy.

The Great Game continued uninterrupted through history until the Soviet intervention (1978–1992) and then the U.S.-led coalition (2001–2021). Since then, a new player has entered the scene, if I may say so, in this same quest for global dominance: China, which in 2013 launched its Belt and Road Initiative (Sichou zhi lu 丝绸之路), whose overland component passes through the Uyghur Autonomous Region of Xinjiang to conquer Eurasia and even beyond. Opposed to this is the Indo-Pacific strategy of the Western powers, concerning maritime routes that Beijing is also trying to control through this same initiative.

Do you think China will succeed in its endeavor, if indeed it is such, where all the previously mentioned countries have failed? What is the current status of its project, which some analysts believe is floundering as the countries involved become increasingly reluctant to engage out of fear of incurring too great a dependence, notably financial, on China?

**Emmanuel Lincot :** China is investing in the western part of its hinterland by reconnecting with a centuries-old policy, although one that has constantly been challenged by neighboring powers, among which, as you rightly recall, in the 19th century, Russia opposed Great Britain. Today, the number of actors has multiplied, and the region attracts many desires (rare earths, energy) that need to be secured.

Hence the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative, which makes the region one of the priorities for Chinese authorities; they have skillfully crafted a discourse based on a very ancient narrative and history to legitimize their actions. This shows how China has managed to rediscover a space that, fundamentally, was not foreign to it. Historical figures such as the Buddhist monk Xuanzang 玄奘 (602–664 CE) have been revived and are systematically invoked in Chinese communiqués to strengthen ties between these countries and China, but also with India.

We have thus witnessed a rehabilitation of the imperial period as well as Buddhism through the valorization of this ancient heritage within China itself. This is all the more striking given that sixty years ago the Chinese Communist Party exhorted to make a clean break with the past. This turnaround has also been accompanied by a renewed emphasis on the country’s periphery from the center.

And notably from Xinjiang, which constitutes the true pivot of China’s strategy not only regarding Central Asia proper but also Kashmir, whose recent conflict between India and Pakistan



reminds us of its importance. The development of China's vast western region (including Tibet) is substantial in terms of infrastructure. Highway interchanges, railway networks, wind farms, and solar panel parks have radically transformed this vast area—three times the size of France—once called Chinese Turkestan by Europeans (to distinguish it from Russian Turkestan).

This modernization goes hand in hand with a forced Sinicization of the Turkic-speaking Muslim Uyghur population. This Sinicization is manifested through very strict control of the population. One million out of the twelve million Uyghurs are detained in reeducation camps. Reports attest to abuses and torture. Women who have survived have testified about attempts at forced sterilization.

However, part of the Uyghur population is in revolt. Armed men have joined terrorist groups close to Al-Qaeda or ISIS, and those of the East Turkestan Islamic Movement, which has declared jihad, the holy war against China. These guerrillas have found refuge in mountainous areas of neighboring countries (Afghanistan, Tajikistan).

They live off drug trafficking, and their eradication occurs with the collaboration of other member countries of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (created in 2001), but also through the establishment of Chinese military outposts in the upper Badakhshan region of Tajikistan. From there, Chinese military incursions are conducted into Afghanistan. Although there are no official relations between the Taliban regime and Beijing to date, the two countries have already exchanged ambassadors. This Chinese security obsession and strong concern about drug trafficking echoes its historical struggles linked to the Opium Wars (1839/1856). China's bet is to buy social peace through economic development.

Paradoxically, these Chinese initiatives provoke discontent among the populations concerned. In this, the Belt and Road Initiative responds to real development needs that the European Union has been slow to address.

Let us not speak of the United States, which, since its shameful withdrawal from Kabul in 2021, has lost interest in the region in favor of the Indo-Pacific, primarily in its purely strategic aspects, while it should be noted that the European Union does not exclude, in this case, the prospect of cooperation not only strategic but also economic. This Indo-Pacific project is rightly presented on an ideological level as a competing project to the Belt and Road Initiative.

In this context, ancient international relations theories have been rediscovered, contrasting the Heartland (the core of the Eurasian continent) with the Rimland (the maritime fringe of Eurasia). But the Chinese project is ultimately much more ambitious, as it is a global project that encompasses both a land-based and maritime configuration. It is a project that integrates new perspectives offered by digital technology and, consequently, data control, which does not sit well with respect for human rights.

Several European Union countries have expressed concerns and condemned their cooperation with China. I am thinking particularly of Italy, for example. But other countries around the world have, on the contrary, strengthened their cooperation in the digital domain. Iran is a very interesting example here, showing how the Iranian regime tends to be shaped by this Chinese paradigm.

Consequently, the Chinese project has faced refusals and has been scaled back, as in Africa, either due to lack of financial solvency or because the Chinese economy itself has experienced a relative recession since COVID-19 and as American sanctions have intensified.

However, Xi Jinping has in no way abandoned this project. His political legitimacy and worldview depend on its realization.

**In their endeavor and determination for this project to succeed, securing Xinjiang and the Himalayan region—as we have seen in Beijing's actions in this regard—seems to be, for Chinese authorities, one, if not THE absolute priority. Could you explain the reasons behind this? And provide concrete examples?**

First, these are frontier regions located on the margins, which, as we mentioned, makes them strategically crucial. Xinjiang, with its railway hub at Khorghos, offers China a gateway to the European Union, its primary trading partner. Meanwhile, control over Kashmir, supported by its strategic partner Pakistan, secures an alternative energy supply route from the Middle East via the port of Gwadar on the Balochistan coast—developed by China itself as a contingency in case the United States and its allies block the Strait of Malacca.

China is backing this policy with substantial means. Its military shows assertiveness along the disputed 3,800-kilometer border with India, which it does not officially recognize. Clashes are frequent and have already led to a war in 1962—somewhat forgotten in Europe due to the Cuban Missile Crisis that same year—between



China and India. That conflict ended in defeat for New Delhi, which to this day still demands the return of a small territory, Aksai Chin, contiguous to Ladakh.

This forcible annexation at an altitude exceeding 5,000 meters enabled the construction of a strategic road connecting Tibet to Xinjiang. Now, Chinese authorities plan to build a railway that, in a few years, will link Lhasa to Kashgar.

These infrastructural links between China's western regions follow economic growth and territorial planning logic, with a clear intent to secure these gains by military means. In terms of defense, China has partially demonstrated its coercive capabilities through its "useful idiot," Pakistan.

Although Islamabad suffered precise strikes during the recent Kashmir conflict that paralyzed much of its retaliatory capacity, the Pakistani army managed to shoot down an Indian Rafale fighter jet using Chinese-supplied equipment. This incident proves that Chinese military hardware is likely more effective than commonly perceived in Europe or the United States.

**Can Xi Jinping's policy of Sinicization/Hanicization towards non-Han 汉/漢 "minority peoples" and religions, particularly Islam, be explained at least in part by Beijing's desire to "conquer the West", synonymous with an expansionist policy or at least a quest for geopolitical gains? What's your take on this? Can this aspect be demonstrated through specific examples that come to mind?**

The idea, I believe, for the Chinese government is to eventually create a Chinese citizenship that disregards any ethnic or even religious affiliation, as is the case with the Hui 回.

This specificity, which recognizes the ethnic singularity of the Han, some of whom converted to Islam a long time ago, is a legacy of the principles laid down by Lenin in Baku, which the Chinese Communist regime has adopted. Fundamentally, recognition of this particularity enables China to claim a share of its Islamism from other Muslim countries.

It offers a token of openness to the Sunni countries of the Middle East. In reality, this choice to use Islam and China's Muslims was a policy originally initiated by the nationalist Guomindang government, to compete with a very enterprising policy in this respect pursued by Japan in the thirties and forties.

And Beijing is doing so with real success. Who, in Riyadh or Doha, criticizes the Chinese exactions

against the Uyghurs? Not even Erdogan's Turkish government, which is well aware of the deep-rooted relationship between Turks and Uyghurs, as well as the affinities of language and culture (Altaic), has deigned to protest. And yet, as we know, the situation of the Uyghurs is dramatic, and that of the Hui is increasingly worrying. Many of their mosques, judged not to conform to the vernacular architectural criteria of the Hui communities in Gansu and Ningxia provinces, have been destroyed.

Since 2001, women have been banned from wearing the headscarf in public spaces. Stormy debates have torn opinion apart over the ban on halal food choices served by airlines... In short, through social networks, Islam has become a veritable repellent. The Bataclan attacks in France, for example, unleashed a very real hatred of the so-called "greens". This anti-Muslim vindictiveness is the expression of an exacerbated nationalism that accepts no differences. The regime is obviously no stranger to this radicalization.

It also cultivates a form of coherence that is nonetheless schizophrenic in substance, between these national realities on the one hand and its foreign policy choices on the other.

His support for Hamas, for example, by refusing to recognize its status as a terrorist organization, is to be understood in two senses: to strike a chord with Muslim opinion, which makes no secret of its pro-Palestinian sympathies, and to conciliate Muslim world opinion in the name of Third World sympathies and what is now called the Global South (the undeveloped countries).

**In your chapter "Friends or enemies", you write: "Apart from the fact that Xinjiang is a strategic region that opens onto both Central Asia and the Indian subcontinent, it (i.e. Xinjiang) is a laboratory for the Party-State and national cohesion". Could you extend this idea with some examples to illustrate it?**

Xinjiang is a constant reminder of the primacy and interests of the majority, the Han race. This region is a force field, highly sensitive to the upheavals caused by the collapse of the Soviet bloc, and to the identity claims born of this shock.

This region is also a permanent test for the Chinese Communist Party. Its legitimacy as guarantor of national authority and coherence is put to the test. The regime first tested the use of surveillance cameras, algorithms and social credit in the northern province of Karamay, in Dzungaria.



This system has become so widespread as to turn the regime into a cyber-cracy. Its control practices are now nationwide. This is unprecedented in the history of the world. Because this authoritarian regime relies on an extremely sophisticated technostucture. In this respect, Xinjiang – even before the advent of Xi Jinping – has been a laboratory.

**You also write that “after Vladimir Putin’s setbacks in the face of Ukrainian resistance, Central Asia could once again inflame Russian appetites”. Could this also see the return of a rivalry between Beijing and Moscow, the latter having every reason to worry about what could look like an attempt by its quasi-ally in the war against Ukraine to take control of this ex-Soviet region? Are we already seeing signs of this?**

There are some telling signs. In September 2022, at the Shanghai Cooperation Organization summit in Samarkand, Uzbekistan, Xi Jinping, following Vladimir Putin’s lead, called for the creation of a new international order, but at the same time criticized his partner, insisting on the need to respect state sovereignty. In April 2023, the China–Central Asia summit takes place.

Sign of the times: Moscow was not invited. Since then, Central Asian leaders have been trying to establish a certain distance from the Kremlin, while rolling out the red carpet for their European counterparts, notably Emmanuel Macron’s France, in whom they see as many possible alternatives for opening up and escaping their overdependence on both Moscow and Beijing. For the time being, China seems to have reached a compromise with Russia regarding Central Asia.

The Russians retain substantial bases there, and the security of its interests is assured at a lower cost. In reality, the compromise rests on the will of two men: Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin. When they disappear, the appetites of both will reappear.

New forms of radicalism will emerge. They are already taking shape, with the abandonment of the Russian language, for example. A slow decolonization of consciousness is taking place with regard to Russia, while Turkey, and to a lesser extent Iran, are rediscovering this culturally and linguistically close space.

A great game is thus being played out between these different players, with China set to play an increasingly prominent role each year.

[1] Emmanuel Lincot, *Le très Grand Jeu. Pékin face à l’Asie centrale*, Paris, Le Cerf, 2023



**Emmanuel Lincot**

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## Analysis

# Travel diary : Japan

By Yves Carmona

The author of these lines was unable to return to Japan last year, so it was with great emotion that he rediscovered this distant route and spent four weeks in the archipelago. Here is his logbook.

As soon as she arrived, a dinner party was organized with a group of ladies in their fifties, and we naturally began by talking about recipes – one of them is a chef for pleasure – but we also touched on more public subjects.

The story is well known: how Owada Masako was threatened into marrying the Crown Prince, now Emperor, despite being one of the most brilliant diplomats of her generation. When she finally gave in, she was literally cut off from the world; even her telephone was confiscated by the imperial household, which goes a long way to explaining her long depression. In the photos, she wears a frozen smile, perhaps the effect of tranquilizers. As an added bonus, she only had a daughter after the birth of the Crown Prince's son, and the order of succession is still uncertain. A recent parliamentary committee, supposed to arbitrate between the various hypotheses, including that of an empress for whom a precedent has in fact already existed in Japan, preferred not to decide. Fortunately, the reigning emperor is in very good shape and has many years ahead of him.

That same day, Pope Francis' funeral took place, which would quickly open the doors to the conclave. And yet, we had just seen the film of the same name, an astonishing anticipation of reality, even though it was filmed earlier. It depicts a situation very similar to the one we know today, with a completely unexpected ending at the moment of the white smoke.

The political situation in Europe was also discussed, including President Emmanuel Macron's vain efforts to resist Putin's destructive enterprise.

Among all the reasons the author of these lines had for returning to Japan, the master's degree on which he is trying to make progress has taken him to various libraries, the first of which is that of the Diet [1]. The librarians – without whom it would be difficult to go any further, because in addition to the difficulties inherent in the language, there is the exaggerated use of

multiple codes – are remarkably kind and competent. Going there for several days is an opportunity to walk along the Diet district and see and hear several demonstrations, a few hundred people closely watched by the Police but who are content to talk about their concerns into a megaphone. In the morning it's farmers, and we know they're in a bad way, some even saying in the paper that it's not worth continuing; and in the late afternoon, women denouncing "hara" ハラ (harassment), discrimination in this case male, an involuntary echo to the subject of the master's degree.

Nothing to do, no doubt, with the TV series, once produced by NHK, now produced for a syndicate of channels and which remains, after decades, a benchmark of Japanese life and the evolution of its society. The prime-time "drama" [2], broadcast day after day after breakfast, today features three middle-aged women who have managed to find a new job after losing their first one either because of divorce or health problems. It both shapes and reflects public opinion. For the remarkable difference with foreign series, which are recorded weeks in advance, is that this one was generally recorded a few days before broadcast, which means it is in tune with social issues, not as in the West with demonstrations whose sole function is to highlight those who organize them, but in a more light-hearted way through a different kind of staging. A French friend who has lived in the archipelago since 1977 confirms that "hara", harassment, abuse of authority and even rape used to be acceptable, but today, as elsewhere, it's no longer.

May 1st, Labor Day, is a public holiday in Japan. In Émile Zola's novel *Germinal*, published in 1885, it's also the day of the miners' strike in the north of France, which ends badly for them. Zola was a fast writer, but it took him a year to get the story published, and in the meantime, a serial in the magazine *Gil Blas* kept him going. Wasn't the inspiration for this story the same as that of a





drama a century later: to stick as closely as possible to current social events?

It's always a thrill to see two Japanese friends and their wives we met 35 years ago, one retired and the other approaching retirement. The younger, in one of his first diplomatic posts, had the thankless task of calling ambassadors all over the world to tell them it was time to retire, usually with two months' notice – Elon Musk, before distancing himself from the state, used to give them until evening... Isn't this (relative) cruelty part of the Japanese flavour? Isn't this aesthetic that temporarily blends excellence – it was in front of exceptional tables that these dinners took place – and pain one of its charms, the famous wabi-sabi 侘寂 [3]?

Tōkyō is also home to some remarkable exhibitions. Foujita (1886–1968) was born a Shintō Japanese, but spent decades in Paris after the First World War, took French nationality and even converted to Christianity, not without returning to paint the 35 m wall of the Museum of Akita, his hometown, where he paid tribute to local traditions. This cosmopolitanism gave rise to the “7 passions” [4] that form the title of the current exhibition – the only word in French, incidentally. Once again, it's the precision of a follower of the abstractions of his time – surrealism but also cubism – that make him particularly remarkable. The son of a general, he quickly refused to fight, but uses the palette to describe the horrors of war in a straightforward manner.

Another painting, Shinjuku Gyoen: Japan's most famous park. This is where the cherry blossom festival takes place in early April, in what was once an imperial park. On this Sunday, it's open free of charge and thousands of people, also taking advantage of the summer weather, stroll, canoe, eat picnics, walk, chat and laugh. It's one of the characteristics of Japan: in the heart of one of the capital's busiest districts, the park is large enough to provide solitary, quiet corners.

Another place of beauty, the Nezu Museum, ever more splendid: the museum itself and its large garden, all just a stone's throw from the towers of the pretentious Omotesando fashion district [5], with its French, Italian and other brands that have made shopkeepers fortunes there. This is one of the most endearing aspects of this country: in the heart of a world capital, the calm of a beautiful garden with a pond in the middle, adorned with irises in full bloom, where the only noise is the clicking of cameras and where you can even drink from a tea ceremony bowl. No photos in the museum, which exhibits both Chinese sculptures and Nō theater masks, a

plunge into history in the midst of an ever-attentive crowd.

It's the return of very old impressions: the Japanese public, joyful and sometimes noisy when they find themselves in a place where they can drink beer, are extremely attentive when they visit an exhibition, queuing up without request, whereas in so many cities a visit to the museum is just a pretext for chit-chat with no relation to what's on the walls. It's an admirable ability to switch from relaxation to concentration.

The next day, we get lost in the pouring rain in an urban chaos where everything looks the same and we can't find our way back: this is how we discover Tōkyō and its countless neighborhoods. What if an earthquake suddenly struck? A friend wanted the late Prime Minister Michel Rocard (1930–2016) to be warned of the risk this would present in such a megalopolis... Fortunately, earthquakes always happen in unexpected places, but just in case, the evacuation zones are there, and smoke-crawling drills are supposed to help you survive the fire. And then, even at the hospital, the extreme care given to patients, right down to a simple respectful bow as they leave.

Kamakura, the former imperial capital, a hefty hour's drive from Tōkyō: as soon as you get close, the greenery takes over from the concrete and the sea is there, a few surfers and sailboats, a calm gulf on the Pacific but with markings everywhere indicating just how high a tsunami like the one in 2011 that killed over 22,000 people in Fukushima would rise. There's only one solution: take to your heels to reach a higher point, and of course a sign indicating where to seek safety. Apart from a few routes indicated by the guidebooks, few tourists disturb the peace and quiet of the less-frequented temples, so serenity is the order of the day. The ritual is the same everywhere: wash your hands quickly over a special basin where mountain water flows continuously – 1600 mm of annual rainfall means there's no threat of drought here, despite climate change.

A city of culture? On weekends, mornings and afternoons between showers, short strolls along the ocean's edge, dotted with surfers and sailboats, allow yachtsmen to indulge in their favorite pastime under the guidance of an instructor – in Japan, venturing out on your own is out of the question. A few quotations are inlaid on the sidewalk, recognizing the names of writer Natsume Sōseki (1867–1916) and poetess Yosano Akiko (1878–1942), as well as a local writer. Municipal cultural policy? In Kamakura, as we wandered through temples and caves,



surrounded by flowers – hydrangeas among them – accompanied by the song of the nightingale, we were lucky enough to visit a temporary exhibition that was closing the next day on the famous painter Hokusai (1760-1849), whose “The Wave” is world-famous – she was there too, since this woodcut technique allows works to be widely reproduced; But the museum mainly contains paintings, which Hokusai did less of in his (long) life, and which demonstrate a remarkable sense of observation in the scenes of daily life he sketches.

Back to Tōkyō, where the author of these lines met a French pilgrim friend. Yes, he's quite a character, going from temple to temple, sometimes up to 50 km depending on the route, because sometimes the path passes through deserted countryside, and then only cookies keep him from starving. In more urbanized areas, he reserves room and board – but sometimes has to put up with the snoring of another pilgrim. So, what he prefers are long, solitary journeys where he's left to his own devices. To do this, he has to accept the heavy load and the blisters on his feet, but, he says, “it's in the head that it happens”. One day, the account of his hikes that he is currently writing will be published. We were lucky to meet him before leaving this extraordinary country.

Izu Peninsula, what a storm! It's rainy-season weather, a month ahead of schedule – the Japanese call it climate disruption. Rough seas, rough and dangerous coasts, not a good day for diving. At the hotel, on the other hand, luxury, calm and pleasure: spacious and comfortable, with a view of the sea – if the weather were fine.

Osaka, Tōkyō's traditional rival: at the World's Fair, lots of people of all ages, many schoolchildren wearing their school hats. Getting there was a pain: crowded subway, long waits to get through the entrance gates due above all to meticulous police checks, terrorism has been through here; we'll have to stretch out a canvas because the sunburn is already hitting, an ambulance bears witness to this! But sitting in the shade on comfortable wooden benches, the Japanese visitors quietly eat the onigiri おにぎり [6] they've brought along. Some have brought their own canvas squares, which they lay out on the ground, as they do when the cherry trees are in bloom.

Business is booming: the store is packed with people, selling cards, fetishes of all sizes, sunglasses and so on. And above all, good humor and kindness, as always in this country, make up for the little organizational problems. A brief tour of the Exhibition, the main purpose of

which was to meet up again with the friend in charge of the French pavilion, an exceptional guide. Through the window of the Shinkansen on the way back, we were pleasantly surprised to see Mount Fuji 富士山, despite the clouds, and delighted to contemplate the rice paddies cultivated to the last centimetre, well-kept rectangles where the rice is starting to grow – it's about time, as its high cost due to a poor harvest is becoming a political problem for the government – the Minister of Agriculture had to be changed in the following days, his successor is the son of a former Prime Minister, this mode of appointment remains dominant.

A final comment: the previous article on the trip to Japan (December 2023) ended as follows: “Let's see if the next general election (no later than January 2025) brings to power a different Japan, one more open to foreign influences than its conservative majority.” Excessive optimism: the Ishiba government, born on October 1, 2024, is fragile, but it's holding firm!

[1] Japan's bicameral parliament.

[2] In Japan, a Japanese “drama” (テレビドラマ terebi drama, from the English TV drama) is a television series of several episodes running consecutively. This specific short format developed in Japan in the late 1970s and was subsequently exported to Asia.

[3] Wabi-sabi is made up of two intertwined principles: wabi, which refers to the plenitude and modesty that can be experienced when observing nature, and sabi, the sensation we feel when we see things with the patina of time or the work of human beings. The ethics of wabi-sabi therefore advocate a life led by controlled sobriety, where we are able to detect and appreciate impermanence, the beauty of all things humble and imperfect.

[4] Self-expression, landscape, avant-garde, East and West, woman, child, Paradise and angel.

[5] Nicknamed “the Champs-Élysées of Tōkyō”.

[6] Japanese culinary preparation consisting of a rice dumpling, usually wrapped in nori seaweed (edible black or green seaweed).



**Yves Carmona**

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## Asian news

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# "Géopolitique", a daily podcast offering an insight into international politics.

By Pierre Haski on France Inter

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- A new president for South Korea in the midst of strategic uncertainty, June 4, 2025.

Six months of political chaos in South Korea may have come to an end on June 3 with the comfortable election of progressive candidate Lee Jae-myung to the presidency. South Korea's instability was a luxury that the country could not afford for long in a particularly volatile regional and international context. Lee Jae-myung takes the helm of a country facing major existential challenges: its nuclear-powered neighbours and the unpredictability of its American ally.

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- Why Donald Trump proclaims his "love" for Xi Jinping, but finds him too "tough", June 5, 2025.

This is Donald Trump's cry from the heart: "I love Chinese President Xi, I've always loved him and I'll always love him, but he's very tough and it's very hard to make a deal with him." This sentence from Donald Trump deserves a closer look. What did the American president imagine when he imposed 145% tariffs on China, subjected it to a technology blockade, and announced a review of visas for the 270,000 Chinese students in the United States? That the General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party would capitulate? By the very nature of its political system, China has a greater capacity than the United States to bear the pain, and it has the means to counter-attack.

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Pierre Haski

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The program can be found at: <https://www.inalco.fr/evenements/assises-de-lanthropologie-francaise-des-mondes-chinois>



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