

# **THE MAKING OF SOUTH EAST ASIA**

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G. Cœdès

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MODERN EAST AND SOUTH EAST ASIA



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Volume 4

THE MAKING OF SOUTH EAST ASIA

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# THE MAKING OF SOUTH EAST ASIA

G. CÆDÈS

TRANSLATED BY  
H. M. WRIGHT

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of  
South East Asia*

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*by*  
G. CÆDÈS

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H. M. WRIGHT



*London*  
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# Introduction

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DURING THE PAST FIFTEEN YEARS a number of general works on the history of South East Asia and of more specialized histories of Indochina have appeared.<sup>1</sup> In most of them, the first fifteen centuries are dismissed in a few chapters, or even a few pages, as a sort of preamble to the following five centuries, which are treated from a European rather than from an Asian point of view – let alone from the standpoint of an individual Asian country. Moreover only a few pages are devoted to the origins and prehistory of the peoples of Indochina and Indonesia and to the nature of their contacts with the two great Asian civilizations – the Indian and the Chinese.

By way of contrast, my history of 'The Hinduized States of Indochina and Indonesia' (*Les États Hindouisés d'Indochine et d'Indonésie*)<sup>2</sup> ends with the taking of Malacca by the Portuguese in 1511, and deliberately ignores later events. I know of no work in which a balance is struck between the account given of the events prior to this date and the account of those that followed.

It is this lack which the following pages attempt to remedy. The area covered is restricted to the Indochinese peninsula, to the exclusion of the Malay Peninsula and Indonesia. The relations between Indonesia and Indochina were never as close or as historically important as the relations the Indochinese States had with each other, and the two areas followed separate paths of development because of the greater impact of Islam on Indonesia, and because Europeans arrived and started colonizing there earlier than on the continent. As for the Malay Peninsula, its early history – of which, incidentally, little is known – is closely linked with that of Indonesia, with which it is to some extent related geographically.

So here only Indochina, in the sense of the Indochinese peninsula (the 'India beyond the Ganges' of the ancient world), will come into question – a 'crossroads'<sup>3</sup> where the most diverse racial



## Introduction

groups came into contact with each other and mixed with each other, and where since ancient times the two main civilizations of Asia have confronted each other. In Indochina these civilizations were transformed, in varying degrees, through contact with the indigenous societies, and the civilizations resulting from this contact reacted upon each other and were subsequently enriched or changed by later influences from abroad, such as Buddhism from Ceylon, and European civilization.

These Indochinese civilizations display great variety, but have a number of features in common. There is a 'unity in diversity' – to quote an old Indonesian saying inscribed by a Vietnamese writer at the beginning of his *Histoire de l'Asie du Sud-Est* ('History of South East Asia')<sup>4</sup> – which, in the linguistic field for instance, can be seen in a certain 'family resemblance' acquired by languages which were originally of different stock; or, in the legal sphere, in the survival over the centuries of certain general trends which have withstood the changes brought about by foreign influences.

The birth and development of the Indochinese civilizations can only be understood if seen in the light of certain geographical facts, certain prehistorical and ethnological data, and certain historical events such as wars, conquests, internal revolutions, and the repercussions of large-scale upheavals in neighbouring countries. It was Ch'in Shih-huang-ti's policy of commercial expansion which gave rise to Chinese colonization of the Red River delta, and it was the Mongol conquests which brought about the consummation of the decline of Indian cultural influence and the ruin of the old Indianized kingdoms. On the other hand, and whatever some people may say, the course of political and cultural history has been influenced or directed into certain channels by forceful personalities such as Aniruddha of Burma, Jayavarman VII of Cambodia, and Rama Khamheng of Thailand. Hence a large part of the present work consists of the kind of history known as *histoire événementielle* or the 'history of events'.

I am fully aware that history of this kind, with its enumeration of kings, wars, and changes of frontier, and its descriptions of customs at Court and among the ruling classes, is no more than a skeleton that lacks both body and soul, since it gives no account of the social environment, of popular customs and beliefs, of economic trends and social changes, or of the hidden forces which

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threw up the powerful personalities. But unfortunately we are not yet in a position, it seems to me, to fill in the picture in this way with any degree of accuracy, because we do not yet know enough about Indochina's past. Research in this field has been conducted for less than a century by a very small number of people, and they can scarcely be blamed for having followed the example of the Renaissance philologists and humanists in making the collection and publication of both textual and archaeological source material their first task, and proceeding from there to use the material for establishing a valid chronological framework. Only now can the possibility be envisaged of using the material for other purposes – namely, for providing sociological and economic data with which to fill in the framework and present a more complete picture.<sup>5</sup>

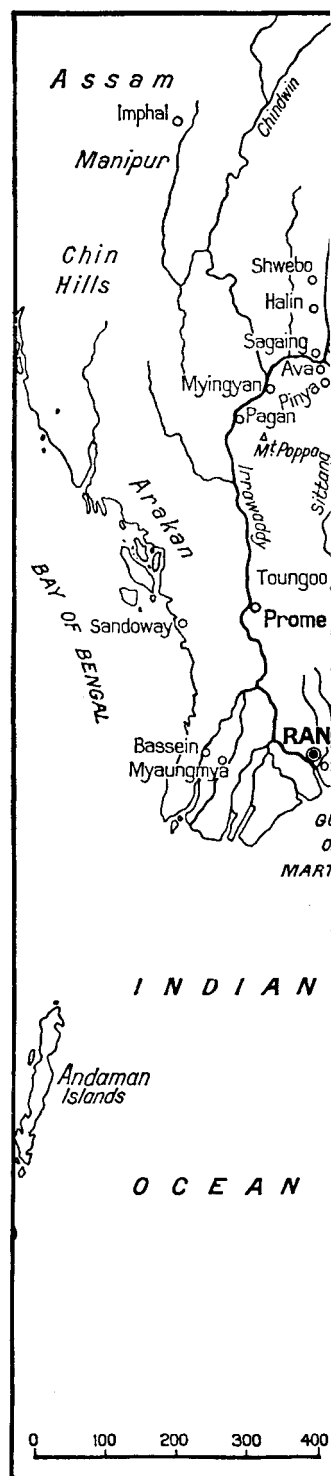
I thought it might facilitate the task of future research workers if I were to sift out the information at present available about the main events and historical personages which stand out like landmarks in the national histories of the Indochinese States, and try to introduce some order into it, straightening out the confused tangle of events and clarifying some of the obscurities, while at the same time highlighting the discussion with a few ideas concerning the institutions, religions, arts, and other cultural aspects in so far as these are known. This book, which is intended for the general public rather than for specialists, may therefore be regarded as a sort of outline sketch indicating the lines on which a future balanced history of Indochina might be planned.

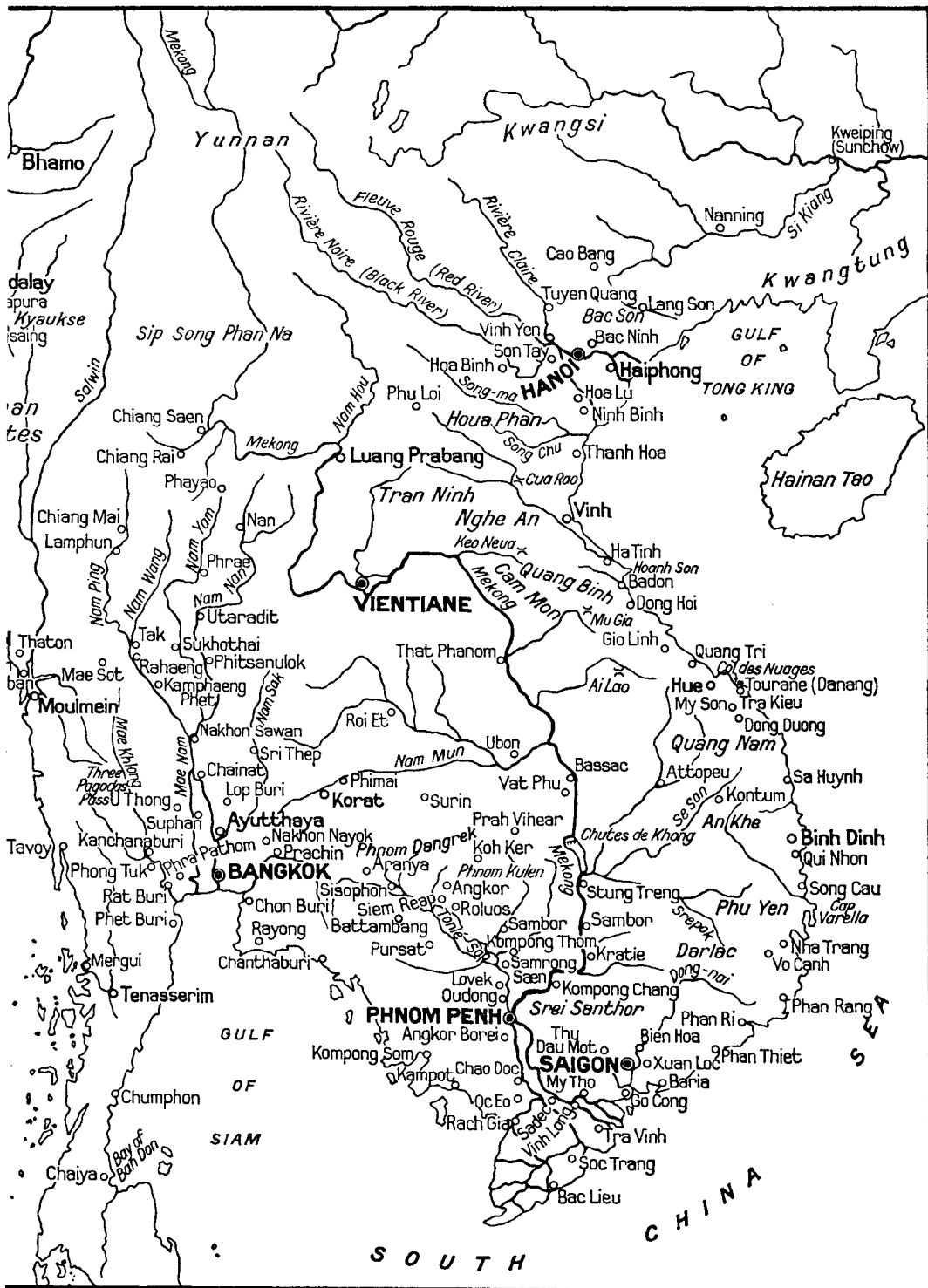
I hope I may be excused for having included in it material taken from my book *Les États Hindouisés d'Indochine et d'Indonésie* and from several of my earlier works. But if some of the material is the same, the treatment is different. There is a much fuller discussion here of the geographical framework, and of the origins of the people of Indochina and their location during prehistoric times, than in my book on the Indianized States, and I have continued my account here well beyond the taking of Malacca. I have also included the history of Viet-nam, which had no place in a work devoted to the Indianized countries, and about which I have no specialized knowledge. Another difference in treatment is in the manner of giving an account of events. Instead of taking the history of Indochina as a whole and cutting it into horizontal slices, each corresponding to a given historical period within which the history of the various States was treated synchronically,

### *Introduction*

I have used a diachronic method here, except when recounting the events of the thirteenth century. Because every country experienced the same profound break in continuity at that time, these events have been treated synchronically in a chapter which comes in the middle of the other chapters, each of which gives a continuous narrative of events in one country only. To remedy the lack of balance deplored above between the amount of space given by recent publications to the seven centuries prior to the thirteenth century and the amount devoted to the six centuries after it, I have given a very much abridged account of events during the later period, these being in any case better known to the general public than the events of the earlier period. In particular, I have reduced to a strict minimum all mention of the role of the West in South East Asia, since this had far more important repercussions on European affairs than on the political and cultural history of the Indochinese States, at least as far as the period prior to the beginning of colonization in the nineteenth century is concerned. Lastly, I have laid stress on the most characteristic period in the history of each country, or the one in which its civilization reached its highest point, and I have endeavoured to trace as accurately as possible the influences undergone or exerted by each country.

Perhaps it would have been wiser 'to content oneself once more with the publication and translation of texts . . . but, if only for educational purposes, the task of writing syntheses – general histories consisting of a chronicle of events seasoned with a certain amount of critical comment and arranged in some sort of logical order – is one that must not be shirked.' (Gaudefroy-Demombynes.)





## *Introduction*

This is precisely the task I have attempted to carry out in this book. We do not, in my opinion, have enough documentation yet to warrant an attempt to describe in full all the various aspects of each of the civilizations, but this book at least provides a brief account of the circumstances in which they arose, developed, and declined.

I have not included a detailed bibliography of works concerning the history and culture of Indochina. Bibliographies of this kind, some more and some less comprehensive, will be found in the general works on these subjects mentioned below in note 1 (the fullest being the bibliography in the work by D. G. E. Hall), and also in the specialized bibliographies.<sup>6</sup> The notes appended to each chapter refer to works dealing with points of detail, or to others which have appeared since the general works mentioned were published. To some extent they provide a bibliography of works specializing in the subjects with which the chapter deals. General works on each of the five countries of Indochina (Burma, Siam, Laos, Cambodia, Viet-nam) are mentioned in the first note appended to the three chapters of Part III and the first two chapters of Part V.

## *Translator's Note*

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THE INTRODUCTION concludes with explanations of a number of points concerning spelling, transcriptions, etc., which do not entirely apply to the translation. It explains that, since the book is intended for the general public rather than for specialists, a simplified spelling of proper names was adopted. In the translation the spelling has been still further simplified. All diacritical signs have been omitted in the transcription of Sanskrit and Vietnamese names and words. The only diacritical signs employed are those retained in the simplified version of the Wade-Giles romanization of Chinese which has here been substituted for the French form of romanization. The spelling of Vietnamese words and names used in the French text was based on that used by M. Lê Thành Khôi in his book *Le Viêt-nam*. This, except for the omission of diacritical signs, has been followed in the translation, and so has the spelling of words and names in the other Indochinese languages.

Geographical names follow current English usage, including the retention of French names for some Indochinese geographical features (such as the Col des Nuages). Vientiane is written Vieng Chan, as in the French text, in passages referring to its early history.

In the French text words of Indian origin are written in their romanized Sanskrit form wherever this can be reconstructed with reasonable certainty, so as to preserve some uniformity with the early history of other areas in which the Indian written form of the word is the only one known. The local pronunciation is written in brackets after the first appearance of the word. (Thus Sukhodaya, not Sukhothai, is used throughout to refer to the first Siamese kingdom.) This practice has been followed in the translation.

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PART ONE

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*The Pattern of Settlement  
in Indochina*

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# I

## *The Geographical Framework*

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THE PRELIMINARY TASKS for a study of the Indochinese civilizations consist firstly in getting to know something about the geographical framework, and secondly in surveying the pre-historic and ethnological data likely to throw light on the social environment which gave rise to them.

In dealing with the first of these tasks it is unnecessary to undertake a description of the physical geography of Indochina, for this can be found in the relevant geographical textbooks.<sup>1</sup> But, disregarding the present pattern of settlement, we should have a look at the map and try to discover which regions were most favourable for human habitation, or rather which regions offered the best choice from which man could select one where he would be able to deploy the means and techniques at his disposal for supplying his basic needs. Next, we must find out why some regions lent themselves better than others for the development of a centralized State based on the organized exploitation of the area by the peoples settled there. Lastly, we must investigate the natural lines of communication which could serve as channels for external influences and internal culture contacts.

Indochina lies within the tropical zone,<sup>2</sup> where countries are proverbially endowed with natural riches and fertile soil, although the riches and the fertility are perhaps more illusory than real. The

## *The Pattern of Settlement in Indochina*

only way of ensuring a supply of cereals abundant enough to provide the staple diet of an expanding population is to practise irrigated rice cultivation. Once a population of sedentary agriculturalists becomes established, it can evolve a social organization which enables it to cultivate every inch of the soil and obtain complete control over the natural environment, thus turning a naturally insalubrious terrain into a healthy one. For example, the Red River delta was well placed geographically for settlement by a people from outside the tropical zone who were familiar with the agricultural techniques suitable for this area, and it became the cradle of a race of peasants<sup>3</sup> and then the centre from which they thrust southwards in a dynamic process of expansion.

### THE SOIL

Generally speaking, the Indochinese peninsula has soil of rather poor quality, and the only areas suitable for agriculture – which in this particular instance means wet rice cultivation – are the deltas of the main rivers (the Red River, the Mekong, the Menam, the Salween, and the Irrawaddy) and the plains bordering their middle reaches, the coastal plains on the China Sea, and the Tonle Sap basin. Of these, the Tonle Sap basin, being a self-contained territorial unit with the required natural features, was best fitted to become the area of settlement for a homogeneous population of sedentary agriculturalists and to give rise to a civilization based on a centralized State.<sup>4</sup>

The mountainous regions and the high plateaux were too dry to permit of anything but slash-and-burn cultivation, and this entails a form of semi-nomadism which is incompatible with the founding of a centralized State and the development of a civilization capable of reaching the higher stages. As for the famous 'red soil' areas so much coveted in modern times, the soil there does not have the fertility that was required for the development of the early civilizations and is only suitable for the cultivation of recently imported crops such as tea, coffee, cotton, and rubber (hevea), so these areas need not be taken into account when considering the possibilities open to the first settlers.

In these circumstances, one would not expect to find large-

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scale settlement such as would lead to the rise of civilized States in any areas except the deltas and the other favourable regions. But the first settlers, or at least the first of whom traces have been found, seem for the most part to have preferred to inhabit the caves and natural shelters provided by limestone formations rather than the plains and the deltas, which, before they had been drained and brought under cultivation, must have been extremely unhealthy. These earliest inhabitants relied on hunting and fishing to supply their needs, and found plentiful supplies of game and above all of fish. For while the soil of Indochina is poor except in the areas mentioned, both its salt and its fresh waters provide an inexhaustible supply of food. The Tonle Sap or Great Lake of Cambodia is full of fish, not to mention the shellfish which prehistoric peoples found so easy to collect and to which they were so addicted; and the supply of fish from the sea is amply attested by the accounts of the ancient geographers, who mention the ichthyophagous peoples of the 'India beyond the Ganges', and by the account of the Franciscan monk Odoric de Pordonone, who visited Champa in 1320, and who relates how all the many fish inhabiting the in-shore waters of the China Sea came once a year 'to pay their respects to the king of this country'.

### CLIMATE

Indochina enjoys a tropical climate in which a hot, dry season alternates with a rainy one. This type of climate with its sharply contrasted and on the whole fairly regular seasons is due to the phenomenon of the monsoon, the mechanism of which is so well known that there is no need to describe it here. There is a great difference between the climate of the tropical south and that of the subtropical north. The contrast is in part due to the difference in latitude, but also to the difference in altitude between the low-lying lands in the south and the mountainous regions in the north. Throughout the whole of the northern part of the peninsula one has the impression of being as it were on the shores of an ocean from which from time to time a flood-tide comes in from the north, bringing positively wintry weather. This creates very different conditions, affecting food, clothing, and types of dwelling, from those in the south.



## *The Pattern of Settlement in Indochina*

### HABITABILITY

Indochina participates in the general unhealthiness of all tropical climates. If, in spite of this, prosperous States have been successfully founded there, this is due to the climatic improvements brought about by cultivation of the soil. So close is the connection between healthy climatic conditions and the presence of man, that in the case of a region which archaeological evidence proves to have been once inhabited but which is now deserted and uninhabitable, the question arises as to whether the people who inhabited it were forced to leave because the region was unhealthy, or whether on the contrary the region became unhealthy because historical events caused the inhabitants to abandon it. In a country with a naturally unhealthy climate, it is those regions where the quality of the soil has induced men to settle there that are the first to be made healthy through cultivation of the soil, and that then become centres for population expansion. The quality of their soil, through man's intervention, makes it possible for these regions to become fit for human habitation, and it is these two factors in conjunction that give rise to the kind of stable society that will eventually attain a high degree of social organization.

What all this amounts to is that the mountains and plateaux, where there are quite a number of traces of early inhabitation, were either destined to remain the habitat of social groups which had neither the will nor the opportunity to descend upon the plains and the deltas, or else to become the refuge of social groups which were pushed back there by developing societies of sedentary agriculturalists. Both types of social group were able to support themselves there by hunting, gathering, or slash-and-burn cultivation. By contrast, the plains and the deltas are for the most part suitable for wet rice cultivation, which gives two harvests per annum; and in some places this is combined with the cultivation of dry crops, for which the lower river valleys, annually enriched by fertilizing silt, offer a choice terrain.

Thus it was the plains and the deltas of Indochina that were destined to become the areas of settlement for agriculturalists who were then able to proliferate owing to the climatic improvement brought about by cultivation of the soil. The cultivation of the soil entailed drainage and irrigation, both of which are in the nature of public works carried out by, and in the interests of, the

### *The Geographical Framework*

community as a whole, and this led to a form of centralized social organization which was the initial step towards a centralized State.

#### EXTERNAL COMMUNICATIONS

The east coast of the peninsula, along which a north-to-south marine current runs, is much exposed to winds. It is a somewhat forbidding coast, being muddy in the Gulf of Tongking and at the mouth of the Mekong, and rocky in between. The modern ports of Haiphong and Saigon are inland ports; sheltered bays, such as the bay of Tourane (Danang), are few; and the only deep-water anchorages are those in the bays of Along and Camranh – but this is of no importance except for modern shipping. Even in ancient times, however, the China Sea coast of Indochina is not likely to have been a normal means of access for the importation of foreign influences. Its roadsteads and havens mainly served as ports of call for coastal shipping used by merchants in the coastwise trade.

By contrast, the western coast of Indochina on the Gulf of Siam offered easy access to boats coming from various parts of the Malay Peninsula that lies on the opposite side of the gulf, and the narrowness of this peninsula enabled merchants to ‘break bulk’ – that is, to trans-ship merchandise coming from India and the West, which could be easily done by unloading on the western coast and then reloading on the eastern coast for transportation to Indochina.

As for that part of the western coast of Indochina lying on the Gulf of Bengal, it has a number of good havens, the possession of which has been a never-ending subject of dispute between the States controlling the lower valley of the Menam on the one hand, and those controlling the lower valley of the Irrawaddy on the other.

While access to Indochina is in some places difficult by sea routes, the same cannot be said of land routes, for its land frontiers are not so much natural as historically determined – except in the west, where the Arakan mountains constitute a barrier between Assam and the valleys of the Irrawaddy and the Chindwin which is easier to go round, either to the north or to the south, than to cross.

## *The Pattern of Settlement in Indochina*

In the north, the frontier between Indochina and China could scarcely be less impregnable, and it has always been difficult to defend, whether from Viet-nam or from Laos and Burma. The Red River valley is the natural means of access to Yunnan, and this accounts for the French settlement in Tongking. From the other side of the frontier, Chinese expansion in the Red River delta was facilitated by the ease of communications between the Red River and the West River valleys, for the Lang-son and Cao-bang rivers are tributaries of the Si Kiang or West River, which flows through Kwangsi and enters the sea below Canton.

Again, the valley of the Irrawaddy has always been a natural line of communication between Yunnan and the Burmese plain, and was the traditional route for Chinese troops invading Burma. There are a number of possible routes across the region occupied by the Shan States, which is traversed by the Salween, and during the last war the main supply route to China was constructed in the northern part of this region, after the Japanese had cut off communications by sea and by the Red River route.

### INTERNAL COMMUNICATIONS

In eastern Indochina there are a number of what might be described as natural frontiers, and these make communications difficult between the regions separated by them. To the east, the mountain range that used to be known as the Annamite Chain, and to the west another mountain range which is a continuation of the mountain system of the Shan States that extends as far as the Malay Peninsula, make communication difficult between the valley of the Mekong and the China Sea coast on the one hand, and between the valley of the Menam and the Gulf of Bengal coast on the other. The more easterly of these ranges has passes lying at an altitude of over 3,000 feet at the head of the valleys of the Black River, the Song Ma and the Song Ca, in the northern part of the range. Farther south communications are less difficult. The Tran-ninh plateau can be reached via Cua Rao, and from the Nghe-an plain on the Mekong the Cam-mon plateau can be crossed via the Ha-trai and Keo Nua passes, at an altitude of 2,164 feet, or, a little farther south, via the Mu Gia pass, at an altitude of 1,370 feet. Lastly, the Ai Lao pass, the gateway to Laos, at an altitude of 1,344 feet, provides an easy means of com-

### *The Geographical Framework*

munication between Quang-tri and the reach of the Mekong north of the Kemmarat rapids. All these passes have played an important role in the history of the relations between the Vietnamese, the Khmers, the Chams, and the Laotians.

The mountain spurs which divide the China Sea coastal strip into a number of coastal plains can be crossed either by passes or by corniches, which rise to a height of 393 feet at Hoanh-son, the gateway of Annam, 1,541 feet at the Col des Nuages, and 1,312 feet at Cape Varella. But none of the plains on this jagged coastline provided sufficient space for large-scale settlement and the growth of a homogeneous social group capable of founding a centralized State strong enough to overcome particularist tendencies.

It is true that the Chams succeeded in achieving a civilization of some brilliance, but from the very beginning of their history in the second century A.D. they were under constant pressure from the Vietnamese who, under Chinese suzerainty, were firmly established in the deltas of the Red River and the Song Ma, and who embarked upon a dynamic process of expansion, using their base there as a sort of springboard for successive leaps which took in one after another of the coastal plains.

The natural barrier formed by the eastern mountain chain is characterized by a marked contrast in the environmental conditions on either side of it. Along the coast the natural environment favoured the development of small social groups that could not easily be unified, while difficulty of access to the plains and the deltas kept the inhabitants of the mountains and plateaux from participating in cultural developments there.

On the western side of the peninsula the central massif of Den Lao, between the Salween and the Mekong, divides into three mountain chains running in a general north-south direction. The farthest west of the chains is the largest and the longest. It continues into the Malay Peninsula, of which it forms the dorsal spine. It can be crossed without much difficulty via the Me Sot pass which links the Burmese port of Moulmein with the Siamese town of Rahaeng, and via the Three Pagodas pass which links the Burmese port of Tavoy with the Siamese town of Kanchanaburi on the Mae Khlong. Between the ribs of the fan formed by the three chains running south from the Den Lao massif, the valleys of the four rivers which conjoin to form the

### *The Pattern of Settlement in Indochina*

Menam all provide comparatively easy access from their upper and middle reaches to the central plain and the delta.

In the centre of the peninsula the Mekong today is a political frontier; but it is in no way a natural frontier. On the contrary, it is not only primarily a link, despite its poor navigability, between the north and the south, but also between the territories on either side of it, which in the past have always formed part of a single civilization. In addition to the lines of communication afforded by the Mekong, the passes of the Dangrek mountains (in particular the Dangkor or Tako passes) made communication possible between the Korat plateau and the basin of the Great Lake, and from the latter there was easy access westwards to the plain of the Menam via the Aranya gap and the Prachin river.

The fact that Indochina is divided internally into separate geographical areas, and the obstacles to and means of communication between these areas, were important factors determining the pattern of settlement and the general course of events in the peninsula as a whole.

The question has been raised as to whether the geographic configuration outlined above was the same in prehistoric times. It is a question which does not, of course, apply to the mountain formations, because the main orographical features were in existence long before the date of the earliest traces of human habitation. But the plains and, above all, the deltas are another matter. Some people have advanced the theory that the deltas were formed in historical times, basing their conjectures on the progressive extension of the shoreline in the Gulf of Tongking, which is thought to have gained six miles between 1830 and 1930. But it is futile to make calculations based on the retreat of the sea in an area which has been profoundly changed by the incessant labours of man in search of more land to cultivate. Indeed, between 1470 and 1830 a gain of only six or seven miles is recorded – that is, just under two miles every hundred years. In the Mekong delta the increased amount of land due to the silt deposits brought down by the river varies greatly at different points of the shore, and the Ca-mau point, which some people regard as being of recent formation, was certainly marked on the very earliest European maps of Indochina.

I do not of course mean to imply that the coasts of the peninsula had exactly the same outline in prehistoric times as they have

### *The Geographical Framework*

today. It is known for a fact that the shoreline on the coast of the China Sea has moved farther out to sea, that lagoons have filled in and dunes have shifted, that the silt from the Mekong and the Red River has added several dozen miles to the shores, and that several former ports on the Burmese Gulf, such as Pegu, have become silted up. But it is true to say that, at the time when the first signs of human habitation appeared, the geographic configuration of Indochina was, if not identical with, at least very similar to what it is today, and that the great deltas, which were important areas of early settlement, were for the main part already in existence.

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# *Prehistory*

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NOW THAT I have indicated what choices lay open to the first settlers of Indochina in the way of natural environment and soil, and have discussed the potentialities of each of the various geographical areas and their internal and external lines of communication, the time has come to introduce man upon the scene that has been set and to enter upon discussion of the peopling of Indochina.

There are here four avenues of approach. First, the prehistoric remains left by man can be studied. Second, the migrational movements leading to the earliest settlements can be reconstructed, although the results will be largely hypothetical. Third, the present geographical distribution of the various languages spoken can be examined, as well as what little is known of their history; at the present stage of research language is the only criterion for distinguishing the various ethnic groups that share the soil of the peninsula between them. Fourth, a study can be made of the social organization of the backward peoples among the present inhabitants of the peninsula in the hope that it may throw light on that of the early inhabitants.

### THE PREHISTORIC CULTURES

It is very difficult to make a general survey of Indochinese prehistory, because research work on it is at unequal stages of