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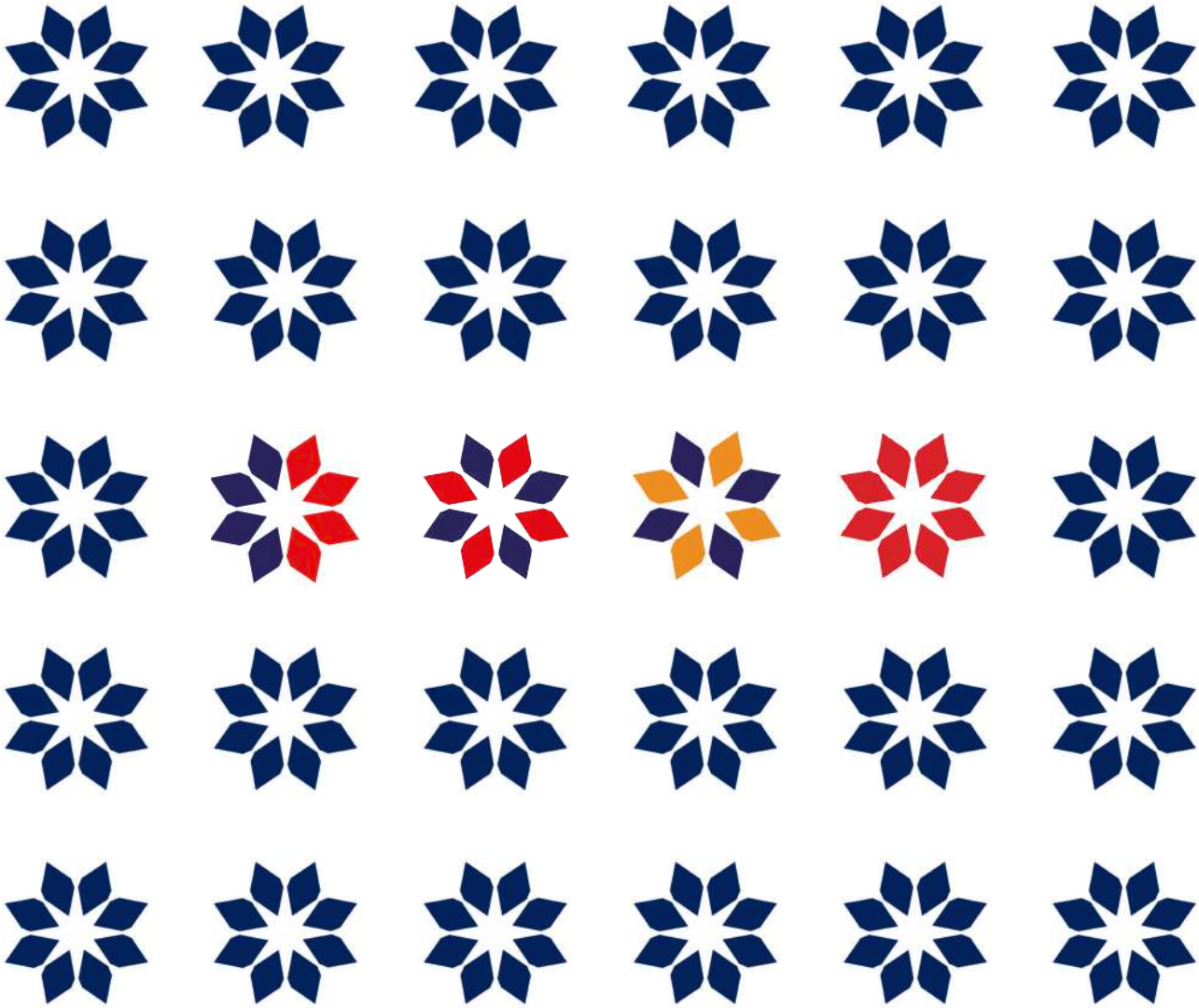

A new perspective on Asia and the diversity of its issues and cultures, combining the views of experts and high-level players.

Dear friends,

On behalf of the Fondation France-Asie and Nouveaux Regards sur l'Asie, we would like to express our gratitude to all those who, through their ideas, reflections, and enthusiasm, have contributed to enriching the content of our bilingual monthly publication throughout 2025.

As the year comes to an end, we look forward to continuing this collective adventure with you. We hope to see even more of you in 2026 so that we can continue to explore the richness and diversity of the Asian continent together.

A huge thank you for your trust and loyal readership.

We wish you a very happy holiday season.

The editorial team.

AGENDA

December 9

France-China Track 2 Forum in Paris

Created in 2018, France-China Track 2 is a joint initiative of the France China Foundation (FCF), the Chinese chapter of the France-Asia Foundation, and the Chinese People's Institute of Foreign Affairs (CPIFA). The aim is to hold closed-door discussions on relations between France and China, with a view to improving mutual understanding. The meeting will take place in two stages: first, an assessment of the state of relations between China and France in the European and international context, followed by an in-depth discussion on cooperation in the face of climate change.

More information is available on the Fondation France-Asie website
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Jean-Raphaël Peytregnet
Editorial Director and former diplomat

EDITORIAL

The days are long gone (1967) when the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) comprised only five countries: Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand. In the Bangkok Declaration [1], the Association's founding document, these nations expressed their solidarity in countering—without stating it explicitly—the communist expansion at their own borders, with the blessing of the United States, haunted by the "domino theory," which made them fear a contagion spreading across all of Asia [2].

This fear ultimately proved unfounded, especially as the former Soviet Union disappeared from the global stage in 1991, allowing ASEAN to expand until it had doubled its number of members: Brunei (1984), Vietnam (1995), Laos and Myanmar (1997), Cambodia (1999), and then a total of 11 with the arrival of Timor-Leste, admitted during the 28th ASEAN Summit (26–28 October) in Kuala Lumpur, holding in 2025 the rotating chairmanship of the Association.

Aiming for economic integration comparable to that of the European Union, while respecting the national sovereignty of member states as disparate as Vietnam, Laos, Myanmar, and Cambodia, ASEAN is today (2024) the most important regional organization in Southeast Asia, with a combined GDP of roughly US$3.8 trillion and a total population of around 700 million inhabitants.

The now eleven countries that make it up place the Association as the third-largest economy in Asia and the fifth worldwide (in nominal GDP terms), behind the United States, China, Germany, and Japan.

Because of its immense potential but also of its geostrategic importance in the region, ASEAN has now become one of the principal arenas of confrontation between the world's two major economic and military powers.

In 2018, when the first Trump administration imposed massive tariffs on China, Beijing circumvented the obstacle by implementing its "China Plus One" strategy, also known as "transshipment," consisting of relocating part of its production to certain Southeast Asian countries. Indeed, countries such as Vietnam, Thailand, Malaysia, and Cambodia subsequently experienced a significant influx of Chinese investments and manufacturing activities.

Determined to put an end to this circumvention practice, the Trump II administration threatened these countries on April 2, 2025 ("Liberation Day") with prohibitive tariff increases—particularly Cambodia (49%), Laos (48%), Thailand (36%), and Vietnam (46%)—the four being primarily targeted for serving as the main destinations for Chinese products re-exported to the United States.

After a series of intense negotiations, most Southeast Asian countries obtained confirmation in Kuala Lumpur of a figure far lower than the initial threat (around 19%, except for Laos and Myanmar, both taxed at 40%), though not without having to grant, as strategic partners (Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Vietnam) or as U.S. allies (the Philippines, Thailand), a number of economic concessions

to Washington… coupled with the threat that the concerned countries would return to square one should they go back on their commitment to shut the door to their Chinese neighbor [3].

This not-so-selfless attention from Donald Trump toward the region was also marked by his participation, after eight years of absence, in the said Summit [4]. It enabled him, among other things—taking the place of ASEAN, although it should have been its role—to once again put himself in the spotlight by appearing at the signing of a peace agreement between Cambodia and Thailand, for which he claimed credit, just as he had for the previous one between India and Pakistan [5].

Prime Minister Narendra Modi, for his part, was notably absent—allegedly, according to Malaysian Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim, because of the five days of celebrations for the Festival of Lights (Diwali) requiring his presence at home… though also likely because he still had not digested the 50% American tariff hike imposed in retaliation for India's purchases of Russian oil.

According to other accounts, Donald Trump's participation in the Kuala Lumpur Summit—before flying off on an official visit to Japan—was also conditioned on the exclusion of any Chinese official (a dialogue partner of ASEAN, just like South Korea and Japan), on the grounds that Beijing had played no role in the negotiations between Bangkok and Phnom Penh, which had instead been facilitated through Malaysia's mediation.

The Kuala Lumpur Summit also provided Washington the opportunity to announce an initial countermeasure to Beijing's newly announced regulation of October 9, requiring authorization for any export of an item produced using Chinese rare earths, through the conclusion with Malaysia of a memorandum of understanding on critical minerals "that will lead to expanded trade and investment [between the two countries] in this area, including exploration, extraction, refining, manufacturing, recovery and recycling […] and will help diversify global supply chains for critical minerals" [6]. A similar MOU would be signed with Thailand [7], and the following day in Tokyo with Japan (as well as earlier with Ukraine and Australia) [8].

Meanwhile, China, through its Premier Li Qiang, positioned itself as the champion of "free and open trade" by concluding, once Trump had left, the "CAFTA 3.0" (China–ASEAN Free Trade Agreement), the third major upgrade of the free-trade accord with the Association's member states, covering nine areas: digital economy, green economy and sustainability, supply chain connectivity, technical standards and conformity, competition and consumer protection, SMEs and innovation, trade and inclusive development, modernized services trade, and customs cooperation and trade facilitation.

This agreement overlaps with the IPEF (Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity), concluded by the United States with 13 countries, including seven Southeast Asian nations (excluding Myanmar, Cambodia, and Laos, the countries closest to Beijing), intended to strengthen America's presence in the Asia–Pacific region and to offer these countries an alternative to an increasingly influential China.

As we can clearly see, Southeast Asia is today more than ever the arena of a confrontation between the two major economic powers on the planet. And while the hearts of Southeast Asian countries continue to oscillate between China (trade) and the United States (security), a report published on April 3—based on a survey conducted by the ASEAN Studies Center (ASC)—showed nonetheless that, on the question of strategic alignment, 52.3% of respondents preferred Washington over Beijing (47.7%) if the region were forced to choose [9].

This narrow margin once again highlights the delicate balance ASEAN must maintain, where for these countries economic interdependence with China is set against security considerations that only the United States is theoretically capable of providing in the region. But for how much longer?

[1] https://agreement.ASEAN.org/media/download/20140117154159.pdf

[2] The "Domino Theory" was formulated by President Dwight D. Eisenhower during his press conference of April 7, 1954: "Finally, you have broader considerations that might follow what you would call the 'falling domino' principle. You have a row of dominoes set up, you knock over the first one, and what will happen to the last one is the certainty that it will go over very quickly. So you could have a beginning of a disintegration that would have the most profound influences."

[3] « OTR : How Southeast Asia negociated lower US tariffs », Asia Media Center, 7 August 2025, https://www.asiamediacentre.org.nz/otr-how-southeast-asia-negotiated-lower-us-tariffs; https://www.whitehouse.gov/fact-sheets/2025/10/fact-sheet-president-donald-j-trump-secures-peace-and-prosperity-in-malaysia/

[4] https://www.whitehouse.gov/gallery/president-donald-trump-attends-the-ASEAN-summit-at-the-kuala-lumpur-convention-center/

[5] The "Kuala Lumpur Peace Accord," signed on 26 October 2025 in Kuala Lumpur during the 47th ASEAN Summit,

nevertheless remains fragile, with various incidents having occurred since on both sides of the Khmer–Thai border.

[6] https://www.whitehouse.gov/fact-sheets/2025/10/fact-sheet-president-donald-j-trump-secures-peace-and-prosperity-in-malaysia/

[7] https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/2025/10/memorandum-of-understanding-between-the-government-of-the-united-states-of-america-and-the-government-of-the-kingdom-of-thailand-concerning-cooperation-to-diversify-global-critical-minerals-supply-cha/

[8] https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/2025/10/united-states-japan-framework-for-securing-the-supply-of-critical-minerals-and-rare-earths-through-mining-and-processing/

[9] https://www.iseas.edu.sg/centres/ASEAN-studies-centre/state-of-southeast-asia-survey/the-state-of-southeast-asia-2025-survey-report/

Jean-Raphaël Peytregnet

A career diplomat who studied Chinese studies in France and then worked in development aid as an international expert for UNESCO in Laos (1988-1991), Jean-Raphaël PEYTREGNET has held positions including Consul General of France in Guangzhou (2007-2011) and Beijing (2015-2018), as well as in Mumbai/Bombay from 2011 to 2015. He was responsible for Asia at the Center for Analysis, Forecasting, and Strategy (CAPS) attached to the office of the Minister for Europe and Foreign Affairs (2018-2021) and finally Special Advisor to the Director for Asia-Oceania (2021-2023).

Pierre Haski
Journalist

Asian news

Géopolitique, a podcast offering a perspective on international affairs.

By Pierre Haski on France Inter

November 14 - China attacks Japan's new prime minister, calling her an "evil witch."

For having said that a Chinese attack on Taiwan would be an "existential threat" to Tokyo, Japanese Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi has become the target of an intense hostile campaign in China. It never takes very long for disputes between China and Japan to escalate, with insults and political tensions quickly surfacing.

Listen to the podcast

November 27 - When Taiwan's president eats sushi to show support for Tokyo against Beijing.

For having said that a Chinese attack on Taiwan would constitute an "existential threat" to Japan, the Japanese prime minister has been facing Beijing's wrath for three weeks. Taiwan's president, Lai Ching-te, was filmed eating a Japanese sushi dish, smiling broadly.

Listen to the podcast

December 3 - The challenges Emmanuel Macron must navigate during his visit to China.

Emmanuel Macron begins, on 3 December, a state visit to China described by the Élysée as "strategic." But the president will need to avoid several challenges, ranging from Europe's positioning in the face of the two giants of the 21st century, China and the United States, to the question of Taiwan. It cannot simply be a matter of trade deficits or lifting restrictions on Cognac: everything is on the table, Ukraine, Taiwan and Japan, Donald Trump, and the rebuilding of the international order.

Listen to the podcast

Pierre Haski

French journalist, former correspondent in South Africa, the Middle East, and China for Agence France Presse (AFP) and then for the newspaper *Libération*, co-founder of the news website *Rue89*, Pierre HASKI has been president of Reporters Without Borders since 2017. Since 2018, he has been providing insight into international politics through his morning show "*Géopolitique*" broadcast on France Inter.

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7 nov.
2025

15 mars
2026

Chine

Empreintes du passé

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7, avenue Vélasquez – Paris 8e

Liuzhou 六舟 (1791-1858), Chen Gang 陈岗. *Liuzhou examinant une lampe en bronze de l'époque Han (détail)*. Dynastie Qing (1644-1912), 1837. Encre et couleurs sur papier. Musée Provincial du Zhejiang

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VILLE DE PARIS | PARIS MUSÉES

Catherine Capdeville-Zeng

Anthropologist, sinologist and professor at Inalco

Interview Nouveaux Regards

From rock to "tangping", Chinese youth facing social change.

Interviewed by Jean-Raphaël Peytregnet

Jean-Raphaël Peytregnet : As part of your doctoral research, you conducted fieldwork in China in the early 1990s, focusing on the emergence and structuring of rock music in China. Why were you interested in this subject in particular, and specifically at that time?

Catherine Capdeville-Zeng: I first arrived in China as a student in 1982 and remained there until 1989. I was living in Beijing, and when I decided to specialize in social anthropology, I looked for a topic that would be feasible given the socio-political context of the time. It so happened that in Beijing there were Chinese rock music bands —a musical style that I personally found appealing—and that this milieu was open enough to allow for thorough fieldwork. Moreover, the emergence of this music in China seemed to me a fascinating way to explore the transformations taking place within Chinese society at that moment.

Why did Chinese youth at that time embrace this form of musical expression originating in the West?

One must situate this in the context of China barely emerging from the ten years of chaos brought about by the Cultural Revolution from 1966 to 1976.

Two years later, China's new leader, Deng Xiaoping, launched a policy of reform and opening. What followed was a period of intense effervescence during which Chinese youth expressed an extremely strong aspiration for more freedom and a desire to discover everything coming from abroad, after more than thirty years of "closure." It was in this context that rock music suddenly appeared in China.

Bands were formed with the idea of creating a new kind of music, becoming autonomous by organizing their own concerts, and living from the commercial revenues generated by these performances.

It was in 1986 that Cui Jian began performing on stage; he would later become a celebrity along with his band. At the time, there were about fifteen music groups sharing the stage.

In reading your work, one understands that Chinese rock distinguished itself from its Western counterpart by integrating elements of Chinese culture and thought, forming two distinct types of groups: an "imperial" type inspired by the Legalist

tradition, and a "holistic" type opposed to the first and aligned with the Confucian tradition. This is an intriguing analysis. Could you explain it for our readers who may not be familiar with Chinese culture and philosophy?

These bands indeed adapted this new musical form from the West to Chinese culture, having often practiced traditional Chinese instruments beforehand, such as the bamboo transverse flute dizi, the suona, a type of oboe, various Chinese percussion instruments, or the zither guzheng, etc.

In my research, I was led to develop categories, new concepts, based on my observations and long-term interactions with these musicians. I noticed that in their discourse they opposed two principal and distinct forms of groups, quite starkly differentiated in their way of producing and interpreting their songs. Hence these two categories, with Cui Jian as the figure considered at that time, and still today, the most respected, including within his own band. He was regarded somewhat like an emperor.

This description may sound a bit strong, but there was indeed something of that. He had a great aura, which he still retains today. In the course of my research, I attempted to reflect on the structures of these groups by linking them to the major currents of Chinese thought, according to how they expressed themselves on stage and in their interpretations.

The second type of group was referred to by musicians with the Chinese adjective zhengti, designating a highly community-based social body, which I translated as "holistic"; this type of group drew more upon the broadly inclusive, yet still strongly hierarchical, Confucian tradition.

You later state that young people eventually turned away from the rock embodied by a star like Cui Jian, preferring instead softer and above all apolitical popular songs. Does this reflect a shift in mentality within a triumphant China, economically powerful and thus less inclined to the democratic aspirations expressed by the youth at the time you were conducting your research for your doctorate?

One must remember the brutal halt the regime imposed in 1989 on the Chinese youth who aspired to more freedom and democracy. The years preceding that protest movement had been relatively "free."

Afterwards, political control over the population tightened considerably, and rock bands were themselves subjected to control, bans, and censorship.

Rock music was no longer heard publicly at such a level. Gradually, in the 2000s, new styles of popular music inspired by sounds from abroad emerged—punk, disco, rap, which is very popular today. But all of these musical genres remain extremely controlled by the authorities. Rock music still exists but in a much more discreet way.

It seems to me that rock music was, at least in the West, a way for youth to express a kind of revolt against society?

As far as China is concerned, I would not use the word "revolt." Western media interpreted it as a form of dissent. I have always rejected that term. Chinese youth did indeed benefit from the reforms being implemented and never actually voiced political demands.

However, it is also true that these young people had clear ideas. Their lyrics could be extremely powerful, expressing a desire for freedom, for existence—simply a desire to be oneself. Their songs did not have an explicitly political tone, except perhaps for "A Piece of Red Cloth," performed by Cui Jian. They expressed more an existential problem, as in his most famous song, yi wu suo you ("I Have Nothing").

Is this comparable to the European existentialist movement, with the musical groups performing in Saint-Germain-des-Prés?

I don't think they had an in-depth knowledge of that. After the end of the Cultural Revolution in 1976, they strongly wished to become the masters of their own destiny, to carve out and develop their own path without being instructed how to behave, as is the case in a communist society. There are certainly similarities with what happened in the West: when a society develops and suddenly opens up, new ideas and desires inevitably emerge.

What does the current youth movement known as tangping ("lying flat") express? What are they trying to convey through this stance?

It expresses a form of malaise. In the West, we talk a great deal about China's economic power. But we often forget that Chinese society faces enormous social problems.

Many young people feel constrained in a society where one cannot freely express oneself or effect change.

This posture is a type of cry of despair, a sign of giving up, of withdrawal from society: a refusal to marry or have children, a refusal to over-consume, to work fifteen hours a day...

Is there today in China a Generation Z, as we have recently seen express itself, sometimes violently, in several countries of South and Southeast Asia?

That is absolutely impossible under the current Chinese political system. But young people do have other ways of expressing themselves: for example, very high-quality films made by young Chinese directors. Some things still manage to get published, and there are initiatives, such as young urbanites trying to go live in the countryside.

Even though the government keeps tight control over the youth, there remains a real vitality among many young people. China is a country of extremes.

As a sinologist and anthropologist, you have taken a particular interest in Fei Xiaotong (1910–2005), considered one of the founders of Chinese sociology and anthropology. He is not very well-known in the West. Could you tell us about his approach and the influence he exerted both in China and abroad?

Fei Xiaotong belonged to the first generation of Chinese sociologists and anthropologists trained in the 1920s–30s–40s, before the regime change in China in 1949. Many of his generation were trained in the Anglo-Saxon academic tradition. Large numbers of Chinese students studied abroad at the time, especially in the United States. Fei Xiaotong chose England, where he studied under the great anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski.

Throughout his career, he produced several major works, including the one I had translated and published by the Presses de l'Inalco, At the Roots of Chinese Society.

It is a theoretical work that attempts to lay out the foundations of how Chinese society functions and describe its social structures. He was acutely aware of the state of disintegration of society at that time and therefore sought ways to address it. He was a reformer, but not a revolutionary.

After the "Liberation" of 1949, he chose to remain in China while others went into exile. Like many intellectuals of his time, he was integrated into work units reorganized and run by the Party. Then, in the 1950s, the humanities were deemed "bourgeois" and banned from universities. Many specialists were assigned to study the situation of minority peoples in the far regions of China. Fei Xiaotong was not a communist.

During the "Hundred Flowers Movement" in 1957, he publicly expressed strong criticism of the government's early years in power. As a result, he was labeled a "rightist," stripped of all positions, and regularly criticized and attacked in public. He was rehabilitated only during the Reform era, after late 1978.

If you go to the Department of Sociology at Beijing University, you will find a commemorative stele in his name. He is regarded in China as one of the earliest and greatest anthropologists of the country. Indeed, he is one of the most famous, and his works have had a truly significant impact on understanding the structure of Chinese society.

He also worked extensively with the government on implementing rural reforms, such as dismantling the people's communes and improving living conditions for the rural population in the 1980s.

In your research on this scholar, you recount the difficulties you personally faced in publishing in French the work of someone who had once been a renowned social activist in his country. These difficulties stemmed, as I understand it, from a degree of censorship exercised from China over the introduction you wished to write for the French translation.

I realized that to publish this book in French, a preface was absolutely necessary to introduce the author, his biography, the context, etc. Without it, I thought it would be difficult for non-sinologist readers to understand his deeper thought. I encountered resistance in writing this preface from Chinese collaborators on the project, notably from the Chinese publishing house that held the copyright, who deemed certain passages I had written inappropriate.

The book had already been translated in 1992 by American colleagues, but they had not accurately rendered in English the two main concepts of his work, making them incomprehensible. It was indeed read in that version, but only by a small circle of specialists. That is why I wanted to translate it into French, explaining these notions clearly in order to make

them known to a broader audience beyond sinologists.

This Chinese thinker explains in his work that Chinese society is a society of relations, of statuses, where equality does not exist—where no person can ever be the equal of another. There is the weight of family, of custom, etc. I believe the West would have made fewer misjudgments had its political and commercial actors better understood how Chinese society functions; and they might have had fewer illusions about its likelihood of evolving quickly toward democratization driven by economic development.

What are these concepts that Fei Xiaotong explains in his work?

He essentially contrasts the "individualistic" West with the Chinese structure based on "the distinction of statuses"—a structure that is therefore highly hierarchical.

In Aux racines de la société chinoise, Fei Xiaotong draws, if I understood you correctly, a comparison between Western and Chinese models. To the Western "collective" model, he contrasts a Chinese model of "the order of status distinctions." He also contrasts a form of egocentrism existing in China, on the individual and group levels (family, state), with Western individualism, which promotes the values of equality, autonomy, and the principle of universality embodied in Christianity and the judiciary as the guarantor of rights. Does this analysis remain relevant in both Chinese and Western societies given their subsequent evolution?

Yes, in China, status remains absolutely essential. That said, its content has shifted: today, wealth and economic or financial standing have become paramount.

This contradicts, for example, the old scholar-officials who devoted themselves to study in pursuit of knowledge and for whom attaining a high level of wealth was not the primary goal. Chinese social structure is founded on this hierarchy of status, but there have always been alternative voices as well.

These can be found in certain Taoist or Buddhist practices. There are also practices that some sinologists have described as "egalitarian," such as rotating leadership roles within associations, where each member takes a turn in directing.

Thus, the social structure is more or less rigid and can be softened depending on circumstances. The communist revolution sought to change this, but it came up against the weight of traditions, values, and ideas. Social classes still exist differently, of course, than before. Being a cadre of the Communist Party is to exercise a form of power over others.

We are still dealing with a highly hierarchical society. All societies, fundamentally, require some degree of hierarchy, the question is what degree of flexibility exists within it.In my view, contemporary Chinese society is even more hierarchical than before, because there is no possible path outside the one proposed by the Party if one wants to participate in social life.

Thus the only solution, for some, is to "lie flat," tangping, that is, to have no public activity. It is a withdrawal from the world, somewhat like the Taoist hermits of earlier times.

In a way, it is not possible, whether for China or for any society, to completely break with its past, especially one founded on such an ancient and deeply literate tradition, is it?

Of course there are changes. One issue I am currently studying is whether the weight of ancestors remains present. Ancestor worship used to be a key aspect of social structure before 1949, not only in kinship systems but also in religious systems.

Today, however, ancestor worship does not exist in the same way. When you enter an apartment in a Chinese city, you no longer find an ancestral altar. There may be a photo of a deceased grandparent, but is that the same as the old ancestor cult? In addition, the great collective rituals of former times, large kinship gatherings, have largely disappeared in cities and in many rural areas as well.

Like the recording of family members in a genealogical register (jiapu) kept in the ancestral temple of the paternal lineage's native village?

Yes, exactly. Likewise with regard to the succession order (chuanzibei) or generational name once indicated by a specific character placed immediately after the family name. This generational name signaled how one should behave toward elders and juniors ; kinship hierarchy was largely based on this element.

I read that renowned Western anthropologists, particularly French ones such as Maurice Godelier or Joël Thoraval, expressed disagreements with Fei

Xiaotong's analyses. What were these disagreements about, and in your view, were they justified?

It is natural for anthropologists to disagree. As I mentioned, Fei Xiaotong was a student of Malinowski. In the 1930s, Malinowski was one of the most prominent anthropologists and considered the founder of a school known as "functionalism." Later, as China closed in on itself, structuralism emerged in France, particularly in anthropology.

Our current anthropological tradition comes from structuralism, which explicitly sought to go beyond functionalism. Fei Xiaotong remained in China, and for 20 to 30 years he was cut off from Western academic circles and therefore could not develop his early theoretical propositions. Then in the 1980s, when he was able to meet anthropologists—including those you mentioned—he was labeled a functionalist, which is reductive in my view, because if you read his work closely, Fei Xiaotong also uses the word "structure." His book describes Chinese social structure.

Indeed, structuralism did not yet exist when At the Roots of Chinese Society was published in China (1948), but the notion of structure was already in the air. In the work of French ethnologists just before World War II, anthropology was conceived as a discipline whose aim was to understand the organization of social structures beyond simplistic notions of social function. Social functions alone do not suffice to explain all forms of action; social reality is always a complex system. I think Fei Xiaotong belonged to this way of thinking, but he never had the opportunity to develop his insights further because the adoption of communism in China brought all research in the humanities to a halt.
He returned to public life in the early 1980s, but it was not easy to meet him, to discuss with him, or to access his books, as most were written in Chinese.

Did he know Claude Lévi-Strauss?

I have no information suggesting that they knew or met each other. Lévi-Strauss cites some of his articles in The Elementary Structures of Kinship, but he very likely did not read Fei Xiaotong's post-Reform work. Fei Xiaotong did, however, reconnect with some Anglo-Saxon anthropologists, especially Americans, whom he had known before the communist revolution.

Perhaps we can conclude this interview with a simple question: what are your current research projects—what topics are you working on? You mentioned ancestor worship.

Yes, I am currently writing a book—a village monograph—in which I attempt to describe its social structure.

May we know which village it is?

Yes, it is the village of Shiyou, located in Jiangxi Province.

And what is particular about this village?

This village is located in a district where the practice of nuo still exists—that is, masked dances with an exorcistic function, performed in people's homes, organized on the basis of local kinship relations.

Thank you very much!

Catherine Capdeville-Zeng

Catherine Capdeville-Zeng is an anthropologist and sinologist, professor in the Chinese Studies department at INALCO, and member of the IFRAE research team. Her doctoral thesis on rock music in China was published in 2001 under the title Rites et Rock à Pékin – Traditions et modernité de la musique rock dans la société chinoise (Rites and Rock in Beijing: Traditions and Modernity in Rock Music in Chinese Society). She then turned her attention to rural life and popular theater, publishing Le théâtre dans l'espace du peuple – une enquête de terrain en Chine (Theater in the People's Space: A Field Study in China) in 2012. She is also the author of numerous articles in French, English, and Chinese on contemporary Chinese society, covering a variety of topics such as different forms of rituals (music and theater, religious rites, family and village celebrations), social relations (kinship, love, friendship, neighborhood), and social structures (morphology, exchanges, institutions, education). List of her online publications: https://ifrae.cnrs.fr/ifrae/membres/membres-permanents/catherine-capdeville/ and https://www.inalco.fr/annuaire-enseignement-recherche/capdeville-zeng-catherine.

Yves Carmona
Former diplomat

Analysis Nouveaux Regards

Takaichi Sanae, Prime Minister of Japan: the new political landscape.

By Yves Carmona

The reader can rest assured: the author of these lines will continue to write about countries other than Japan. But now that the first woman to head the government of the archipelago is taking up this role, it is necessary to try to discern which direction she is heading in.

President Mitterrand, at the end of his second term, famously declared: "Nationalism means war" although he himself had, at other times, not hesitated to adopt a bellicose stance. It is unlikely that Ms. Takaichi has drawn her political inspiration from the ideas of the former French president, but this comparison at least reminds us of a truism: politicians, men and women alike, change. As is well known, Ms. Takaichi has had to take into account a constrained political context: the end of the alliance with Kōmeitō (a decision made by the latter) led her to form a partnership with the Japan Innovation Party (Nippon Ishin no Kai), which is even further to the right than she is within the LDP, a catch-all party since its creation in 1955. She herself is firmly situated within the nationalist camp.

Barely elected Prime Minister, Ms. Takaichi has made a striking start, marked by her concern for the standard of living of her fellow citizens.

Bill Clinton, in his victorious 1992 campaign, made the phrase "It's the economy, stupid!" the central slogan of his presidential race. Ms. Takaichi has clearly understood this:

- In her general policy speech of 24 October, she denounced first and foremost the rising cost of living, promising that her government would adopt a responsible fiscal policy in the service of a "strong and prosperous Japanese archipelago," thereby satisfying the conservative electorate. To please her ally, she announced a reform of the social security system and the creation of a framework for establishing a "second national capital" — though it is doubtful that this project, intended for Osaka, is very realistic...
- Negotiations with the Ishin party resulted in the abolition, as of 31 December this year, of the "temporary gasoline tax," expressly demanded by her new partner.

- At the same time, Ms. Takaichi has expressed support for a mechanism very close to a negative income tax ("credit d'impôt à versement"), combining tax cuts and cash payments to assist low- and middle-income earners.
- Finally, we learned on 19 November that, with the support of the government, the governor of Niigata is "on the verge" of approving the restart of the Kashiwazaki–Kariwa nuclear power plant, for the first time since the Fukushima disaster of March 2011 led to the shutdown of the entire nuclear fleet of the TEPCO company, driving up electricity bills.

However, it is her diplomatic and security policy that has attracted most attention, especially outside Japan. Ms. Takaichi has pledged to raise defense spending to 2% of GDP in the next fiscal year (March 2026), two years earlier than her predecessor had planned, thereby indicating that the concept of a "free and open Indo-Pacific," launched ten years ago by her mentor Shinzō Abe, will be a pillar of her diplomacy.

Her participation, two days later, in the ASEAN summit (now comprising eleven Southeast Asian member countries), which traditionally expands to include the regional powers and where Japan's influence is strong, gave her the opportunity to conclude with them a declaration on security, cyberspace, and advanced technologies, particularly artificial intelligence.

President Trump, upon his arrival in Tokyo on 27 October for his first visit since his election, seized the opportunity to sign with the new Prime Minister a memorandum on cooperation in shipbuilding, as well as in seven scientific and technological fields: artificial intelligence, research security, telecommunication standards beyond the fifth and sixth generations, pharmaceuticals and biotechnology, quantum technology, nuclear fusion, and space.

Ms. Takaichi has also committed Japan to investing 400 billion dollars in 21 projects benefiting the American economy, including next-generation nuclear power plants, infrastructure to supply energy to data centers, and upgrades to maritime routes. The Prime Minister and the American president at the same time confirmed the bilateral agreement on tariffs already negotiated by her predecessor, Mr. Ishiba.

Accompanied by Ms. Takaichi and Secretary of State Marco Rubio, Mr. Trump also met with the families of Japanese citizens abducted by North Korea between 1977 and 1983, a case that had contributed to the popularity of the former Prime Minister, since assassinated, Shinzō Abe. Trump assured them: "We will do everything within our power" (to obtain their release and repatriation to Japan).

Another policy that is popular, if not populist, and apparently aligned with the stance of her ally, the Japan Innovation Party, whose slogan is "Japanese First" (Nihon Daiichi), is Ms. Takaichi's declared support for strong measures against illegal immigrants. The number of foreign residents in Japan has reached about 3.95 million people (end of June), or 3 % of the population. This immigration is, in fact, a consequence of Japan's aging population. At her first ministerial meeting on the subject, the Prime Minister examined measures aimed at revising the rules on property purchases by foreigners (particularly Chinese buyers). In addition, the Ministry of Health is planning to crack down on foreign residents who fail to pay their medical expenses.

Ms. Takaichi has also launched a new panel of experts for a "national growth strategy for Japan," built around 17 critical sectors, each of which would be assigned a minister responsible: semiconductors, shipbuilding, quantum technology, aerospace, digital, cybersecurity, defense industries, and fusion energy. On the economic front, she will also strive to reduce inflation.

The results speak for themselves: a high approval rating, far higher than that of her immediate predecessors at the start of their term, and the return to the LDP of conservative voters—particularly young people, including young men, who had deserted the party. This strong popularity, which has not faltered since, is far from being due solely to the (mixed, as we shall see below) successes of her diplomacy.

Even her senior, Yuriko Koike, the governor of Tokyo, is pleased with her appointment, even though feminism is not her primary motivation, because she is "the first woman to serve as Prime Minister in 104 generations. I think that in itself already sends a strong message."

It is in relations with China, however, that the new Prime Minister's diplomatic actions are most contrasting.

She met Chinese President Xi Jinping for the first time on 31 October in Gyeongju, South Korea, where the APEC (Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation) summit was being held. The Chinese president saw this as a positive sign, but a few days later the tone changed.

During a budget session in Parliament held on 7 November, Ms. Takaichi declared that if an "emergency situation in Taiwan" were to involve "the deployment of warships and the use of force," this could constitute a "situation threatening the survival of Japan," thereby making it possible to activate the right to collective self-defense. As French researcher Jean-Pierre Cabestan puts it, "If China attacks Taiwan, it will be impossible for Japan to stay out of the conflict."

Let us recall that the notion of an "existential crisis" was introduced in the "Law on National Security and Collective Self-Defense" promulgated by the Shinzō Abe administration in 2015.

That law states that if "another country having close relations with Japan comes under armed attack, thereby threatening Japan's existence, and if there is an obvious danger that the lives, freedom, and right of the people to pursue happiness might be fundamentally overturned," then Japan may, in order to end such an "existential crisis," resort to the use of force and act in cooperation with other countries. Prior to taking office, Ms. Takaichi had often mentioned the possibility that an emergency situation in Taiwan could fall under the category of an "existential crisis."

Her candor (her predecessors preferred not to answer) triggered a mini-crisis with Beijing: the Chinese Consul General in Osaka posted on X, "This filthy head who meddled in our affairs uninvited must be chopped off without the slightest hesitation. Are you ready?" (a post since deleted), prompting protests from the Japanese government's Chief Cabinet Secretary, who described these remarks as "extremely inappropriate" and "threatening."

For her part, the Prime Minister declared that she had no intention of "backing down," but that in future she would avoid specifying precise scenarios for an "existential crisis."

For the moment, Ms. Takaichi enjoys great popularity, notably because she does not come from a political dynasty like so many of her male predecessors: she has built herself up on her own. However, it is said that Ms. Takaichi is drawing inspiration from the methods of former Prime Minister Shinzō Abe, to whom she was close, going so far as to surround herself with Vice-Ministers from his faction.

Yet Mr. Abe had consolidated his electoral base, which came from the largest parliamentary group of the time; nor was his a minority government. The political context in which Ms. Takaichi finds herself is therefore much more difficult, and she risks appearing to be under the influence of others. It will be interesting to see how she manages to strike the right balance between her conservative positions and more centrist ones.

Her statements on Taiwan have, unsurprisingly, been exploited by Beijing, which harkens back to the atrocities committed in China from 1931 onward by Japanese troops and takes offense as well at her having bestowed a decoration on the former Representative of the Taipei Representative Office in Tokyo. On 17 November, Beijing announced that there would be no meeting between her and her Chinese counterpart at the upcoming G20, and even went so far as to advise its nationals not to travel to Japan or to leave the country, on the grounds that they would be at risk there.

This crisis has naturally weakened Ms. Takaichi at a time when the traditional protection of the American "umbrella" is less certain, something that worries even members of her own government.

Suspicions of embezzlement of public funds and illegal financing continue to weigh on the Innovation Party Ishin, which, by ricochet, could destabilize Ms. Takaichi's coalition government.

In a worrying sign, the Prime Minister has appointed Keiichi Ichikawa, former Director-General of the North American Affairs Bureau at the Gaimushō (Ministry of Foreign Affairs), who played an important role in shaping Abe's diplomacy, as Secretary-General of the National Security Secretariat (and Special Adviser to the Cabinet), marking a return to the more authoritarian methods of the Abe era: Mr. Ichikawa's appointment in place of Masataka Okano—who had just been named to the position after serving as Vice-Minister for Foreign

Affairs—has been described by the media as "extremely unusual." Some analysts see it as an attempt to strengthen a "hardline security" pole in response to threats perceived by the Japanese archipelago as increasing (China, intelligence, espionage, foreign interference...).

Within the Gaimushō, some fear that the new leadership reflects a shift in power toward a "hard security" line, at the expense of a more traditional diplomacy.

Yves Carmona

A former student of the École Nationale d'Administration (ENA) and a career diplomat, Yves CARMONA spent most of his career in Asia: twice posted as Counsellor for Foreign Affairs in Japan, then as Deputy Chief of Mission in Singapore, and later as Ambassador to Laos and Nepal (2012–2018). In these positions, as well as in those he held in Paris, he focused—drawing also on his background as a student of Japanese—on the rapid transformations of Asian countries and their relations with France and Europe. Now retired, he is committed to sharing his experience with those who may benefit from it.

Crossed perspectives

Manon Fleury & Kazuyuki Tanaka: two visions for a new gastronomy.

Interviewed by Thomas Mulhaupt & Agathe Gravière.

Fondation France-Asie: Manon Fleury and Kazuyuki Tanaka, you are Young Leaders of the first France–Japan 2025 cohort, and also Michelin-starred chefs. Kazuyuki, in 2015 you opened your restaurant Racine in Reims, which received its first star in 2017 and a second in 2020. Manon Fleury, your restaurant Datil earned a star just a few months after opening in 2023. Could you tell us about your background? What was the trigger that made you want to turn cooking into your profession?

Manon Fleury: For my part, I first followed a general academic path: I got a literature baccalauréat in Orléans and then entered a preparatory class in Paris. I imagined myself going on to traditional university studies, perhaps in journalism or political science. However, during my hypokhâgne year, I felt a strong dissonance.

In high school, I practiced fencing at a high level, in a talent program, with ten hours of sport per week in addition to a normal school schedule. After the baccalauréat, I chose to stop in order to focus on my studies, but I found it difficult to contain my energy. That year in classe préparatoire was quite complex for me, and a reorientation towards cooking gradually started to take shape in my mind. I was reading many articles and blogs, and I was experimenting at home with my family. My mother, who is very aware of nutrition and organic food, passed on to me this essential idea of "eating well."

So, at the end of hypokhâgne, I decided to enroll in a culinary school, with a one-year foundation course to really confirm my choice. I did an apprenticeship at Ze Kitchen Galerie, the restaurant of William Ledeuil, which held one Michelin star. There, I discovered a fusion cuisine mixing Asian, Thai, and French influences. I actually learned cooking through that approach before even mastering the classical basics of French cuisine.

I then attended the Ferrandi school, where I obtained a bachelor's degree. Each year I alternated between classes and six months of experience in prestigious restaurants alongside chefs with very distinctive, author-driven cuisines. I notably worked at La Marine (three stars) in Noirmoutier, the restaurant of Alexandre and Céline Couillon, and at L'Astrance with Pascal Barbot (three stars). His sensitive, product-focused cuisine deeply marked me: I consider him a true mentor.

I also had the opportunity to work in the United States at Blue Hill at Stone Barns, Dan Barber's

restaurant near New York. There I discovered an intellectual chef, committed to ecological and agricultural issues. The "farm to table" restaurant stood next to a farm that supplied 70% of the products we used in the kitchen. Every morning we had team meetings, something completely new to me, because in France, kitchen management was practically non-existent. We tasted the products, reflected together on pairings and ideas. That's where I understood the political and conceptual dimension of cuisine, its ability to convey messages.

Back in France, several opportunities arose, including becoming sous-chef to Éric Trochon at Semilla in Paris. Then I was offered my first position as head chef, to oversee the opening of Mermoz (Paris 8). The project offered me complete freedom: to create a quality canteen in a neighborhood full of businesses but with very few restaurants. I served a market-driven cuisine, simple but exacting; success came quickly, partly because I could rely on a strong network of exceptional producers with whom I was already starting to work directly. For two years, I ran this restaurant with a lot of responsibility, and that laid the foundations for my status as a woman chef and for what we are doing today at Datil.

I wanted to mature my restaurant project and find the ideal framework. I did several residencies in Monaco and in Paris, where I learned to work with constraints and to test the economic model of my project.

Thanks to those experiences, and the team we had already built up over the course of the residencies, the opening of Datil in September 2023 was relatively serene. Only six months later, we received a Michelin star.

Kazuyuki Tanaka: I'm from Fukuoka, where my grandfather ran a restaurant with my grandmother. In my family, almost everyone is a cook, so I initially started in cooking more out of family tradition than passion. In Japan, I worked at a very intense pace: from 5 a.m. to 2 a.m., and my weekends were devoted to learning about products and techniques. At first, I thought I would become a professional footballer, but I quit—probably too early. My family encouraged me to become a cook like them. I felt pushed to follow in their footsteps.

Having chosen cooking rather than football, I threw myself into it completely so that I wouldn't regret it and so that I could succeed in this path. Of course, I did have regrets about leaving football too quickly, when it could have led to another life. Because of that, I wanted to commit fully to cooking so that, this time, my choice would be the right one, and so that I would give myself the means to succeed in this field.

In 2006, I left for France. My father, a cook himself, had worked in a French restaurant in Japan, but had never had the chance to come to France. Since childhood, I had this idea in mind: to come to France and discover its gastronomy.

I then worked incredibly hard to make this project possible: I slept three hours a night and saved as much as I could to come to France. Once in France, I was able to work in the kitchens of three-star restaurants where I learned a tremendous amount. Finally, in 2015, I opened my own restaurant, Racine, in Reims, which today holds two Michelin stars.

In your respective journeys, one senses a kind of sacrifice that was necessary to achieve your goals. To become a chef and succeed in this field, is determination a fundamental element?

Manon Fleury: Yes, determination is essential, and I think our generations are fully aware of that. I sense, among many young cooks, a desire to see things through and a strong reluctance to compromise on their values. Our profession is so demanding that if you're not working at the level you aspire to, disappointment will always set in eventually. For me, determination is above all the will to live up to your own standards in a profession that requires a great deal from you.

Kazuyuki Tanaka: For me as well, determination has been crucial, with a real dose of sacrifice. When I decided to become a chef, I worked in two restaurants at the same time in Japan, slept nine hours a week, and saved everything I could to pursue my dream. But to give your utmost, you have to find balance in your mind and in your body. When you're young, you have little experience but lots of energy; at forty, it's the opposite: less strength, but a lot of experience. What remains constant, however, is learning. Racine is built on that: continuing to learn with determination, in order to spark emotion.

On a daily basis, you have to reconcile a menu, a set course, seasonality, and on top of that the fashions and trends that can influence you. How do you manage to maintain your creativity within this framework? And what are your main sources of inspiration?

Kazuyuki Tanaka: I don't really go looking for inspiration; I mostly work on instinct. For me, learning is, before anything else, the foundation of my craft.

Today, I'm forty, and my restaurant is celebrating its tenth anniversary. Before opening Racine, I learned new techniques every day, new ways of working with products. But once you're running your own restaurant, it's very different. For ten years, without fully realizing it, I gradually stopped learning.

Recently, I asked myself how I could avoid boredom, and I tried some new things that my clients enjoyed, but that still wasn't enough for me. So I decided to try drawing. Today, my menus include drawings to convey my ideas and my vision to the guests. It allows me to offer them a complete way of looking at the product.

For me, in a restaurant, everyone should be learning: the chef, the cooks, the guests. Learning is essential to creating meaning and avoiding stagnation. Two months ago, I found this path: constant learning! Inspiration is not necessary in my view; learning is the key.

Manon Fleury: To find inspiration, I write absolutely everything down, in very detailed fashion. I explore, I study products, I try to understand them. When I work on a new dish, I discuss a lot with my teams: it's a back-and-forth process where we start from a product or a classic idea from French cuisine, and then we add our own touch, linked either to our personal stories or to the story of the product itself.

We recently created a dessert based on corn. To achieve that, we studied the subject: the cob, the leaves, what is edible or not, how to use corn silk, etc. This research feeds our thinking and gives rise to inspiration. In this creative process, group discussion is essential. Everyone brings their experience, their know-how, their references. The exchange goes both ways, and it allows me, as a chef, to keep learning.

In general, after a week of work, we arrive at a dish that satisfies us. We make it several times before writing the recipe. That way, we keep a record of what we've done and can revisit old recipes to make them evolve. Just as a painter reworks a painting, I rework my recipes to simplify or alter them.

You are both France–Japan Young Leaders, and you lead brigades, but you are also entrepreneurs. The role of a leader rests on the ability to bring people together. How do you manage to mobilize your teams and get them to embrace your vision?

Manon Fleury: In my restaurant, we give a lot of importance to internal communication, especially through regular meetings. We've set up a management team made up of the head chef, the sous-chef, the front-of-house manager, and the sommelier.

A weekly meeting brings us together to define the restaurant's main directions and to pass on the house's philosophy.

With professional support, we also worked on ways to give the teams more autonomy. It was something we wanted from the beginning but had trouble implementing at the time of opening.

We gradually put processes in place: organizing storage, cleaning protocols, a code of conduct to prevent certain behaviors, and, when necessary, corrective meetings to re-explain and reinforce the values that are essential to us. Communication, meeting times, and creating an environment where everyone feels safe are, in my view, the foundations of leadership. It's about protecting the team, reducing stress as much as possible, and allowing everyone to flourish so that we move forward together.

Kazuyuki Tanaka: Leadership in a brigade remains something complex. I like creating dishes from my feelings and my ideas. Having a sous-chef might seem simpler, but for me it's difficult, because cuisine is built on emotions. I can write a recipe, but behind each dish there is a personal impression. If I only pass along the recipe to my sous-chef, they can't feel exactly the same emotions that guided me during the dish's creation. The result will never be quite identical. So the question becomes: how do you transmit?

I learned cooking in a very traditional way. There, I learned technique, but also the importance of transmission. To progress, you have to move forward, sometimes without overly intellectualizing. There are always obstacles, but I think that, as a leader, it's important to show the strength needed to overcome them.

In my eyes, cooking requires constant change: you have to move forward, confront yourself, and persevere despite difficulties.

For me, leadership consists above all in embodying that progression, in moving forward, and in tracing a path that the team can follow.

Being a chef also means embodying values and a mission. Which values do you seek to defend day to day in your restaurants? For you, what mission guides your work when you welcome guests, and what would you like them to take away with them when they leave?

Manon Fleury: My guiding principle is to maintain a sense of pleasure, even when we're seeking to offer a particular experience or to convey certain messages. We work with committed producers, and we defend specific values. You can simply come to Datil to have a good time without asking yourself too many questions—that's perfectly possible. If you want to learn more about the ecosystem behind the plate, that's possible too: our front-of-house team adapts to each person's curiosity and wishes.

Kazuyuki Tanaka: My vision is a little different. Above all, I aim to give my utmost. I don't know my guests personally, but what matters is to cook as if every dish were the last meal I would ever prepare. That idea helps me tap into all my energy and give as much as possible.

I also imagine that I'm cooking for people dear to me; that helps me concentrate fully on my work. I don't just want to satisfy: I want to create an unforgettable moment, for which I give myself entirely, with no regrets. I would like it to be, for each person, the best meal of their life. I try to convey as many feelings and emotions as I can.

You face intense pressure and different forms of criticism: personal, professional, and from your clients. In this context, could you imagine giving up your stars?

Manon Fleury: In my view, a star is a real vector. It matters for what it brings to the restaurant and to the team. I try to be proud of my work and that of my collaborators, but that alone isn't enough to make a restaurant live: professional criticism therefore has its place.

That said, I stand by my choices. I accept that a dish may be criticized because I'm convinced of its relevance. I embrace singularity, and sometimes even a slightly unsettling aspect, as part of an artistic approach. Some dishes can be polarizing and provoke strong reactions, positive or negative; that's also a kind of richness. However, I do at times tone down certain overly radical choices, "smooth out" elements that might provoke too much rejection, in order to find a balance.
Kazuyuki Tanaka: The star is not the foundation of my work. My own standards and the personal satisfaction I get from what I do go beyond professional criticism. Of course, a star is a form of recognition, but my priority remains the quality of my work.

If what I do stops pleasing people, then I will stop cooking. When I cook, I don't taste; I work on instinct. I aim to create something good in an instinctive way. If my guests tell me my cooking is no longer good, I will consider that my talent has gone and I will quit. Every day, I give myself completely because I believe in my cuisine. But if that energy disappears, if the talent fades, then it no longer makes sense to continue.

Today, I am extending my approach to drawing, which now complements my vision. But at the center, there remains this idea: as long as the talent is there, I continue; if it goes out, I stop.

You took part in your first seminar within the France–Japan Young Leaders program, in Paris and Strasbourg. The second part of the program will take place in Japan in spring 2026. What did this experience of dialogue with peers your own age but from very different sectors bring you? Were there any moments that particularly stood out for you?

Manon Fleury: It was a very enriching experience. Talking with people from such different fields, each an expert in their own domain, was particularly stimulating. Even when you master your own field, opening up to other worlds is crucial. It pushed me to invest even more deeply in my own expertise so that I could share it.

The diversity of profiles, their curiosity and dynamism created a genuine sense of emulation. I keep very vivid memories of those encounters, with people with whom I would like to continue a mutual learning process beyond the program.

Kazuyuki Tanaka: I was only able to attend the first two days, during which we notably visited several museums and discussed art. Those moments inspired me and reinforced my desire to learn drawing, a form of expression that I am beginning to incorporate into my work at the restaurant.

The fact that everyone comes from a completely different sector is a real opportunity. Talking with people who have other professions and other kinds of expertise opens up new perspectives. It feeds inspiration and enriches the way I approach my own work.

Manon Fleury

After working in the kitchens of Alexandre Couillon, Pascal Barbot, and Dan Barber in New York, Manon Fleury's choices reflect both her commitment to ethical practices and her ambition for excellence. In 2018, at the age of just 27, she took over the reins at Le Mermoz and delighted critics with her principled cuisine: responsible, seasonal and inspired by plants. After a series of residencies in Monte Carlo and Paris, she opened her first restaurant, Datil, in the heart of Paris' Marais district in September 2023. Just six months after opening, Manon Fleury was awarded one Michelin star at the age of 32. A former fencing champion, Manon Fleury was one of six ambassadors for the Paris 2024 volunteer program. There, she championed her vision of contemporary cuisine based on the values of good eating and team spirit. Manon has published a book entitled Céréales with Editions Flammarion.

Kazuyuki Tanaka

Kazuyuki TANAKA began by honing his skills in magnificent Japanese restaurants for five years. He worked tirelessly to save money and, with a Michelin Guide in hand, flew to France in 2006 to further his knowledge. This thirst for learning led him to undertake internships in Michelin-starred establishments with chefs Gilles Tournadre, 2 stars at Gill in Rouen, Emmanuel Renaut, 3 stars at Flocon de Sel in Megève, and then David Zuddas, 1 star at Auberge de la Charme in Prenois, where he was chef de partie and met his wife Marine, who also worked in the kitchen as a commis chef. In 2015, Kazuyuki and his wife Marine decided to open their own restaurant in France. In 2017, the Japanese chef earned his first Michelin star, followed by a second in 2020 at the age of 35. In 2018, he was also named “Grand de Demain” (Great of Tomorrow) by the Gault&Millau Guide.

The Fondation France-Asie’s Young Leaders program brings together around 30 prominent figures from France and the Asian country represented by each of the Foundation's “chapter countries” every year. Aged under 45, these individuals are set to play an important role in their countries and in Franco-Asian and international relations. The program includes discussion sessions on current events in both countries, meetings with leading figures, and visits to industrial sites or places of political and cultural importance in the country.

François Bibonne
Author, director and documentary producer

Interview Nouveaux Regards

Discovering contemporary Vietnam through the art of documentary filmmaking.

Interviewed by Thomas Mulhaupt & Agathe Gravière.

Fondation France-Asie: François Bibonne, you are a writer, director and producer of documentaries, and you are now based in Hanoi. You have just completed your second documentary, Once Upon a Bridge in Vietnam II [1], which continues the previous film. How have your studies, your relationship with music, and your family history shaped this need to tell the story of Vietnam through sometimes unexpected subjects? How did you become a documentary filmmaker?

François Bibonne: At first, I was intending to become a pianist. After a preparatory class and a master's degree in contemporary history, I turned towards music, working intensely on my instrument, the piano, taking lessons and trying to embark on a professional career.

My internship at the American Conservatory in Fontainebleau was a turning point: by filming and interviewing musicians, I discovered the camera. With no audiovisual training, I began learning on my own; it was my first real school of images.
The true trigger came in 2018, when my Vietnamese grandmother passed away. I went to Vietnam for the first time to pay tribute to her. That trip was a deeply moving, almost transcendent experience. When I returned to Paris, a stint at a classical music label led me to question the presence—or rather the absence—of classical music in Vietnam: few articles, little data, a national orchestra with very limited visibility. I then went back to Vietnam to understand the place of classical music in the country.

I left just before the Covid pandemic, and suddenly the borders closed, and I found myself settled there. I was able to learn to film empirically, day after day. I experienced the lockdown as an opportunity, because it gave me a real media platform.

Thanks to this first film, Once Upon a Bridge in Vietnam I, I established myself as a director. After a year and a half in Vietnam, I came back to France, where I met Vietnamese associations and organized screenings for the diaspora.
A year ago, I returned to Vietnam to finish the second installment, which I had begun two years earlier. This new film extends my

exploration of the country, still carried by music, memory, and that intimate link with my origins.

How is the classical music scene structured in Vietnam today? What is its recent history and who are its key artists or institutions?

Classical music in Vietnam actually covers two different realities. On the one hand, there is music described as "classical" in the European sense, played with Western instruments, structured around orchestras, conservatories, a repertoire and international exchanges. On the other hand, there is Vietnamese classical music—that is, traditional music, supported by instruments and forms specific to the country.

For the "Western" side, Vietnam is organized around two main poles: Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City, each with its own orchestra and music academy. This network is obviously far smaller than in France, but precisely because of that, it is easier to meet the main musicians, teachers or composers, and to understand how the scene functions. You find a strong French legacy in the repertoire and teaching methods, as well as a Russian legacy. Even today, many Vietnamese musicians have trained in Russia, and others go to the United States or Canada.

The most emblematic pianist on the Vietnamese scene is Đặng Thái Sơn, who has become an international figure, winner of the prestigious Chopin Competition in 1980, a professor in Canada, and a true national hero. In Paris, the Nguyen Thiên Đạo Foundation also plays an important role in preserving and promoting the work of the composer after whom it is named, a major figure in the musical relationship between France and Vietnam.

But as I worked on my first film, the investigation naturally led me towards traditional music, which is in fact Vietnam's "classical music." I discovered a world of great richness, and this exploration became one-third of the first documentary.

In other words, in trying to tell the story of classical music in Vietnam, I ended up telling the story of two traditions that coexist, respond to one another, influence each other, and together trace a musical history that is much more complex and fascinating than it appears at first glance.

How does traditional Vietnamese music fit into the broader musical landscape of Southeast Asia? In what way is it distinct, and what is its own specific identity?

First of all, there is a strong connection with China. Certain Vietnamese instruments, such as the tỳ bà, a kind of lute, come directly from this influence. In the northern mountains, ethnic minorities also share repertoires, accents and rhythms close to those of southern China, which can be explained by their presence on both sides of the border.

Alongside these inheritances, there are deeply Vietnamese instruments such as the đàn bầu or the đàn nhị, whose sounds are immediately recognizable, as well as unique vocal forms like ca trù, a form of court singing once performed in imperial circles.

My work has mainly focused on the North of the country, for practical reasons since I live in Hanoi. As in France with its terroirs, musical diversity is very marked from one region to another, and the geographic length of Vietnam accentuates this variety. That is one of the reasons why it is impossible to present an exhaustive vision of Vietnamese music—or even of Vietnamese football. My approach is in no way encyclopedic; it is based rather on an assumed subjectivity and on themes that serve as points of entry for telling the story of the country.

From a sociological point of view, what does the practice and listening of these different repertoires reveal about Vietnam? How are these practices evolving today?

The reality is fairly straightforward: Western classical music remains largely practiced by the upper classes. Salaries in academies and conservatories are very low, as are concert fees. Only musicians who do not depend entirely on their musical practice to live can devote ten hours a day to their instrument. This social dimension creates a kind of closed circle, comparable to what we still see in France despite major efforts at democratization.

Traditional music, on the other hand, is much more accessible. It relies on oral transmission, which sets it apart from Western classical music, grounded in notation, music theory, and the written score. It circulates in a variety of environments, including rural areas, where

musicians perpetuate know-how outside of institutional frameworks.

There are, however, bridges. The conservatories in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City also teach traditional music, but with methods inherited from Europe: harmony, solfège, transcription. This creates a form of hybridization between Vietnamese and European musical cultures. But if you leave the institutions and go into the countryside, you find practices that are very far removed from this influence. It is this diversity that makes the whole so hard to confine to a single social or aesthetic category.

Why did you choose music as your first field of exploration in Vietnam rather than another subject?

Music is present for many reasons. First, music is a source of inspiration. From a technical point of view, I cannot edit a film without its music. It is the music that illuminates everything, that gives the rhythm and breathing of the narrative.

Next, music was an essential support. When I arrived in Vietnam, I needed a point of anchorage that would connect me back to France. Music played that role: it accompanied me. Even when I turned to football, a field in which I initially had no real knowledge, the music remained. It continued to help me move forward, to structure my research, to conduct my interviews. It influences the way I look at the world, and perhaps gives me a slightly different point of view—more sensitive, more rhythmic.

For all these reasons, music imposed itself as the first subject. It is never very far away, no matter what film I am making.

Before talking about your second film, what obstacles did you encounter while making the first one? Did your personal story make some things easier, or on the contrary, create a sort of distance with your interviewees?

In fact, what made things easiest was the Vietnamese heritage passed down by my grandmother. As soon as I mention this link to the people I am interviewing, the relationship changes. They immediately understand where I come from and why I am interested in their culture. It is almost a shared self-evidence, a kind of natural legitimacy.

As for the language, that is not really an obstacle either. The world of classical music is highly internationalized: many musicians speak English, some speak French, and when they do not, there are always bilingual people I can bring into the shoots. I did notice a few regional differences, but the country is overall very open. Beyond that, of course, there were obstacles of all kinds, but not related to my identity. They have more to do with realities on the ground, institutional functioning, the unforeseen events that punctuate any documentary project, or simply a lack of funding [2].

You began with music, and your second film led you into a completely different world, that of football. How did that shift take place?

The move towards football happened by chance. After completing my first film, I wanted to keep working in Vietnam, but I had no clear idea of a subject. Football appeared almost naturally, because it is a theme present everywhere in the world, almost banal. And at the same time, there was an interesting paradox: in Europe, Vietnam is very little known through this lens. That was already a first criterion which reminded me of the situation of Vietnamese classical music, about which we know almost nothing in France.

Then a few anecdotes piqued my curiosity. A woman told me that thirty years ago, during a trip to Vietnam, she joked that she was part of Zidane's family; hundreds of people immediately gathered around her. Scenes like that say something fascinating about the place of football in the country, and they planted a few seeds in my mind.

And then there was a trigger: I learned that the coach of the national team was French, Philippe Troussier, who had previously coached Japan. That was an ideal opportunity to enter into the world of Vietnamese football. I met him fairly early on, which allowed me to get access to the federation and start my research. But a few months later, he was dismissed after a series of poor results. The public rejection was extremely strong. I therefore changed my angle of approach for the second documentary on football, to look not only at him but more broadly at the subject as a whole.

In the end, this second film was quicker to shoot than the first, because I was filming and editing in parallel. On the other hand, it was much more complex from an artistic point of view. At the beginning, I was lost.

In documentary filmmaking, the research process is an integral part of the finished film. Filming is like thinking out loud, and I knew that many sequences would never be used, but I had to go through them. I realized I could not

make this film by multiplying back-and-forth trips. I had to live there, to re-adopt a Vietnamese rhythm, a way of seeing things that you only acquire by being there day after day.

That experience, built up over time, does not necessarily show on screen, but it can be felt in the film. It was by immersing myself again in Vietnamese life, over the long term, that I found the coherence of the narrative and the film was able to take shape.

In many countries, football is closely tied to political life. What about in Vietnam? How has this sport accompanied, reflected, or at times disrupted the country's history?

Historians have shown that as early as the French colonial period, football served as a space of politicization. Pitches became places where new, sometimes revolutionary ideas circulated. It is quite fascinating to see how an imported sport can become a tool of identity affirmation. One highly symbolic moment illustrates this dimension very clearly: in 1946, Ho Chi Minh organized a match between a Vietnamese team and a French team. That gesture was anything but trivial: it signaled that football could become a diplomatic instrument, a common language enabling Vietnam to assert itself on the international stage.

In the 1990s, with economic liberalization, football took on another role. It became a vector for brands entering the country and accompanied the first international competitions hosted by Vietnam. It was a period during which the country was opening up, and the football scene helped tell the story of this transformation.

Today, the national league, V-League 1, structures the landscape of Vietnamese football. The dominant clubs are often in the North, especially in Hanoi, which concentrates a large share of the talent. A club like Hanoi Police, recently relaunched, is a good example of this dynamic. However, exports of players remain rare. Only one very well-known player, Nguyễn Quang Hải, has attempted an adventure in France, at Pau. On the women's side, a player like Huỳnh Như plays in Portugal, in a very strong league, but such trajectories are still exceptional. It is a sporting and political history woven together, ultimately very revealing of contemporary Vietnam.

What place does football occupy in Vietnamese society today, would you say it is the most watched sport?

Football is the number one sport in Vietnam. The recent qualification of the women's team for the World Cup generated immense national pride, almost a form of collective euphoria. That said, attention still largely remains focused on men's football. For the national team, the fervor is very real. At the slightest success, the streets erupt. When Vietnam recently won the ASEAN Cup, the scale of the celebrations was striking. Football then becomes a collective moment when the whole country seems to beat to the same rhythm.

However, for both of my films, whether about classical music or football, the goal was never to assess level, performance, or international renown. I do not pass judgment on the quality of the orchestras or the teams. These fields serve above all as prisms through which to tell something about Vietnam. They are entry points into a cultural, historical, and social reality, much more than topics treated for their own sake.

If we look beyond your films and move past classical music and football, why did you choose documentary rather than fiction? What attracts you to this way of telling the real through investigation and research?

I always like to start by drawing a clear distinction between documentary and fiction. For me, a truly accomplished documentary always ends up brushing against fiction, and conversely, some very successful works of fiction take on the appearance of documentaries, so deeply are they rooted in reality. When I'm in Vietnam, even though I work in the very heart of the real, I often feel as if I am in a fiction.

There is a kind of natural narration that sets itself in motion: characters, twists, situations that look almost like scripted scenes. And that is why, in the way I film, documentary becomes a way of telling a story as much as a way of observing.

I have never sought to make encyclopedic films. That is not at all the form that attracts me. What I do lies perhaps somewhere between autofiction, travel diary, and investigative documentary. Since I do not have a conventional audiovisual background, I often step outside the academic codes of documentary filmmaking.

I know them, but I move away from them.

Yet these works are indeed documentaries: they are based on interviews, on research, on structured fieldwork. Moreover, the first and the second were both selected for the Vesoul International Film Festival of Asian Cinemas, which shows that this format also has its place in the documentary ecosystem.

Documentary is a way of digging into reality. And then there is a very concrete aspect: fiction requires resources, teams, significant budgets. Perhaps one day I'll move in that direction—I would love to.

For now, documentary allows me to do exactly what I want to do: tell true stories, but with the narrative freedom of fiction.

In your first documentary, the seeds of the second were already visible. Now that this second part is coming to an end, is a new idea beginning to emerge? Is a third project taking shape in your mind?

Nothing has imposed itself with absolute clarity. However, the screenings of the first film, then of the second—especially the most recent one at Harvard on 19 November—have brought out a subject that makes me think: the Vietnamese diaspora, not only in France but also in the rest of the world. I am interested in the way this diaspora remains tightly knit, regardless of generation or country.

That could become the basis of a film built around a more intimate theme, perhaps a particular family or individual path. This cohesion has always struck me, all the more so because, by contrast, as a Frenchman in Vietnam, I never really felt the existence of a French diaspora or comparable mechanisms of solidarity. At every event I've attended, in Belgium, in France, in England or in the United States, I have found the same Vietnamese spirit, very lively and very present. And what is even more striking is seeing French people with no family links to Vietnam also identifying with this diaspora.

François Bibonne

François Bibonne is a French documentary author, director, and producer based in Hanoi. After studying literature and pursuing a deep passion for piano, he left for Vietnam to understand his grandmother's country and produced a documentary series, Il était un pont au Vietnam (Once Upon a Bridge in Vietnam). His work, marked by his passion for classical music, tirelessly explores the question of origins and the connection between cultures.

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