

Chinese sources also taught us that Fu Nan appeared on the Southeast Asian scene during the first century A.D., and that it was economically and politically developed enough about the second-third century to send a fleet to take control of some smaller polities of the Thai-Malay peninsula, and therefore, no doubt, to control the maritime routes that linked their harbors to its own across the Gulf of Siam. Legends were also told in Chinese texts about foreigners coming from the Indian Ocean, marrying local princesses, and helping them establish the new polity of Fu Nan, sometime around the first century A.D. The latter were often taken at face value by historians; they are, however, only a reminder of the all-pervading Southeast Asian myths that outline the distinctive relationship these coastal polities maintained and encouraged between overseas cultural and economic factors and local political powers.

During the first half of the twentieth century, under the supervision of the *École française d'Extrême-Orient*, Indochinese museum collections were randomly enriched with sizable numbers of archaeological artifacts found during the rare archaeological surveys that took place in the Mekong delta, more often than not when local colonial officers sent news of notable finds: these consisted, for the most part, of inscriptions and statues, which were thus gathered in Sai Gon, then the capital of French Cochinchina, and in Phnom Penh. They now form a large part of the collections of the Museum of Vietnamese History in Ho Chi Minh City and of the National Museum of Phnom Penh.² Since a vast majority of such finds did not come from sites with outstanding monumental remains comparable to those of Champa or Cambodia, little attention was paid to their archaeological context, and no excavations were carried out. They confirmed, nevertheless, that the Mekong delta, like much of Southeast Asia, had undergone the process of "Hinduization" or "Indianization" sometime after the fourth or fifth century A.D. The local rulers and their people had then borrowed from India a vast cultural array comprising religious doctrines (Buddhism and Hinduism) and related art forms that came to influence temple statuary and architecture, script, the Sanskrit language for official and religious matters, and modes of government.

The half-dozen Sanskrit inscriptions that were then found in the Mekong delta dated back to the fifth to early seventh centuries A.D., and therefore credited to Fu Nan, were studied and published by French epigraphers. Their content, however, remained difficult to interpret. Among the earliest inscriptions of Southeast Asia, and absent a clear historical context, they never revealed the local language spoken by the population. Until very recently, art historians somehow neglected the statuary that found its way into museums, as it was more often than not considered aesthetically uninteresting as compared to the major art forms of the later Chams or Khmers. This was especially true for much of the Brahmanic statuary, which became classified as a degenerate form of art, far removed from Indian standards. Buddhist statues somehow escaped this curse, their early evolution being better understood. Architects had no monuments to deal with; the dilapidated brick remains, regularly mentioned as being near the place finds of statues and other artifacts, had never been deemed worth studying.

This neglect by archaeologists of anything not monumental or corresponding aesthetically to the artistic standards from "grand civilizations" was not then restricted to studies on Indochina. However, as implied by the name of the region itself, caught between the two worlds of India and China, they found themselves reproducing stereotypes developed in