The volume follows in the rich tradition of previous French atlases of mainland Southeast Asia exemplified by the Atlas of Vietnam (Christian Taillard et al., 1993) and the Atlas of Laos (Bouthavy Sisouphantong and Christian Taillard, 2000). In a manner similar to these earlier atlases, the Thailand study essentially presents a series of spatial themes enabling the spatial development of Thailand to be assessed. Thus the Atlas begins with a series of maps showing the spatial integration of Thailand into the global system and sub-global region of East Asia, using such elements as trade, tourism, and population transfers as indicators of this integration. The environmental and demographic stage upon which these dual processes of global and national formation are occurring is presented in a series of maps of population distribution and internal migrations. The maps showing the ethnic and religious distributions of Chinese Thais and Muslims are particularly helpful in assessing the current tensions of the Thai state. The next section deals with the historical development of the Thai state, with a particular focus on the construction of national space. A comparison of the national space of the Thailand of the Ayutthaya Kingdom (1460-1590) (Plate 21) and the contemporary distribution of the population, urban centres, government departments, universities, etc. shows the remarkable persistence of the highly centralized political space concentrated in Bangkok and the Central Plains for almost 600 years. In no other Southeast Asian country has this historical legacy played such an important role in the creation of national space.

The next series of plates deals with aspects of the present economy of Thailand, including agriculture, industry, and the service sectors. In the latter two, the dominance of the Bangkok Metropolitan region is very pronounced despite efforts by the state to disperse these activities in the period since 1970. The atlas intersperses a number of plates indicating the development of various infrastructures, including transportation, irrigation and telecommunications, all of which are particularly valuable in graphically showing how they are principally designed to provide greater access to the Bangkok central region from peripheral regions and vice versa (Plate 28).

This spatial exploration of the formation of this core-periphery model is analysed more closely in three case studies of the Bangkok Metropolitan region (Chapter 7) and the peripheral regions of the North-East and South. Given the importance to the Thai economy and society of the Bangkok Metropolitan region, the text and plates that describe it are rather brief and the discussion of the challenges of this rapid urbanization rather minimal. A final chapter synthesizes these spatial components into a spatial model of contemporary Thailand that combines two basic models (choremes) “to form the main components of the structuring of territory; an organization of concentric rings around a powerful center and a division into “regional” quarters. Three
more models qualify or diversify this overall framework: the organization of urban gravity, the effect of dissymmetry, and the corridor effect; and to complement this the action of barriers and synapses between Thailand and surrounding countries” (p. 186). This model is an insightful and valuable tool for understanding the Thai spatial system. There is also an excellent discussion of the statistical sources used in the compilation of the Atlas and the methodological problems of representing the data at various scales. Last but not least, there is a comprehensive bibliography.

However, the Atlas is not without its limitations. Much of the statistical data is used with a 1996 baseline and very little of the 2000 census appears to have been applied. The rationale for this choice (that the 1997 meltdown of the fiscal economy made later statistics questionable) is perfectly valid, but in the period since 2000, Thailand seems to have rebounded successfully, and some analysis of these developments would have added to the depth of the Atlas. These flaws notwithstanding, the Atlas will serve as an indispensable aid to those who wish to understand development in Thailand. It also represents the central concern of French geography, i.e. the “construction of space” and the importance of space in the development process. Finally, the Atlas is also a fitting tribute to Doryane Kermel-Torrès whose important contribution to research on Thailand was cut short by her death in 2005.

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