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(Southeast Asia) [Unpublished Manuscript Sailing Directions from Europe to China by a French Navigational Officer]

Stock#: 90507
Map Maker: Anonymous
Date: 1785 circa
Place: n.p.
Color: Pen & Ink
Condition: See Description
Size: 15.5 x 10.5 inches each sheet
Price: \$ 8,500.00



Description:

With A Description of the Straits of Singapore Shortly Before Raffle's Arrival.

Fascinating late-18th-century manuscript collection of unpublished sailing directions from Southeast Asia likely written by an officer in the French *Compagnie des Indes*.

The great trading companies of the 18th century were often keen to produce and protect their own navigational information. As such, their sailing instructions for specific regions were often passed within the institution in the form of highly detailed manuscripts that supplemented the information available from printed cartographic sources. These manuscripts would focus on specific regions of importance and situations of difficulty. The present work details areas of great geopolitical importance (both in the 18th century and the present day), including the Straits of Malacca, the Strait of Singapore, and the South China Sea.

The author of these directions was evidently someone highly capable at the *Compagnie*. On page 57 of the manuscript, they discuss having reviewed a large number of journals in trying to determine the best way to cross the South China Sea during a monsoon. This speaks to the author being someone with both large responsibilities at the *Compagnie* as they were trusted with reviewing this sensitive information.

The first fifty pages of the manuscript separates itself into eight numbered sections, which translate as follows:



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1. Description of winds and currents. Instructions for entering and exiting the Strait of Malacca (partially lacking)
2. Description of the coast of Pedir, directions for going from Diamond Point to Arroan by following the coast of Sumatra
3. Description of the coast of Malaysia along the Strait from Innksey Coy to Prince of Wales Island (Penang)
4. Instructions for going from Prince of Wales Island to Arroan and from there to Mount Parcelar
5. Instruction for navigating from Sambilanga to Salangore and for crossing the Strait of Callam
6. Instruction for going from the Mount Parcelar to the Cape Machado and from there to Malacca
7. Instruction for going from Malacca to the Strait of Singapore and a description of the dangers and islands that one finds there
8. Description of the Strait of Singapore. Instructions for crossing it and going into the Sea of China.

The second part of the work provides great detail about the South China Sea. It starts with a six-page general description including the changing monsoons and the cyclones the region experiences. The geographical boundaries of cyclones are given, but it is noted that it is impossible to know when these cyclones are coming and that not even the hint of red in a sunset is a certain sign. Specific conditions are given for each sub-region of the South China Sea. The rest of the text details specific navigational routes within the Sea. This section finishes with a list of islands that one might encounter in the South China Sea.

The manuscript is undated but is written on late-18th-century paper in a contemporary hand. We have not been able to trace the watermark of an open 5-pointed star with the initials "LJ" in Bernstein, but it appears contemporary to this time. The *Compagnie française des Indes orientales*, which was the organization most likely to produce this work and have access to the many journals needed for such an exercise, was most active between its 1786 re-incorporation and the French Revolution, when it was disbanded. This provides a likely end date of creation of 1790, when the company's monopoly was broken by the Assemblée nationale, although it could have been made earlier than 1786.

Description of Singapore

The description of the approaches and crossing of the Straits of Singapore from east to west, across to the Straits of Malacca, shows just how detailed these descriptions can be. They outline the different conditions that can be experienced along the journey in terms of winds and tides and delve into descriptions of the individual islands.

Over the course of some six detailed pages, the description starts by instructing the reader to anchor off of Pulau Aur, just northwest of Singapore, so as not to reach the Strait until the break of day. Then, sailing



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south, in clear time both Pulau Aur and Bintan can be seen at the same time, easing the journey, although in poor weather, the reef must first be passed, and Pulau Aur lost in order to see Bintan. Once Bintan is approached, careful depth soundings and tracking of the reef allow one to sail safely past Pedra Branca. Depending on the winds, ships would either turn westwards closer to Bintan or closer to Pedra Branca. From there to the east coast of St. John's it is easier sailing, but after rounding the southern tip of that island many bearings need to be taken to continue safely on the journey. The tiny shoal of Karang Banteng (Buffalo Rocks) to the south must be avoided at all costs. Further west, the ship would need to thread its way between "Pulau Cocol" and "Pulau Pisang," which we have not been able to identify. The journey then appears to be more straightforward, and northern directions are given towards Pulau Jarak and Prince of Wales Island (Penang).

The Straits of Singapore at the end of the 18th century were widely recognized as one of the key maritime passages of the world even before Raffles would establish his colony there. One of the most prominent events of the time to occur near the Straits was the Battle of Pulau Aur. This 1803 battle was a significant naval engagement that involved the British East India Company and the Sultanate of Johor, who were allied with French privateers. The battle took place near Pulau Aur, an island strategically located off the east coast of the Malay Peninsula. The British victory in this battle was crucial for several reasons: it thwarted French attempts to gain a foothold in the region, reinforced British naval supremacy in Southeast Asian waters, and secured vital trade routes for the British East India Company. The outcome of the battle had long-term implications, contributing to the establishment of British influence in the region, which would later pave the way for the founding of modern Singapore by Sir Stamford Raffles in 1819.

Compagnie française des Indes orientales

The Compagnie française des Indes orientales, commonly known as the French East India Company, was a commercial enterprise established in 1664 to compete with the British and Dutch East India companies in colonial trade in the Indian Ocean and Southeast Asia. Founded by Jean-Baptiste Colbert, the finance minister to King Louis XIV, the company was granted a 50-year monopoly on French trade in the Indian and Pacific Oceans. Its primary objectives were to establish trade relations with India and China and to export goods such as spices, textiles, and precious metals back to France. The company established several trading posts, including those in Pondicherry, Chandernagore, and Mahe in India, and played a significant role in shaping French colonial policy in the region.

However, the French East India Company faced numerous challenges, including conflicts with rival European powers and financial difficulties. Despite initial successes, the company struggled to maintain profitability and was plagued by mismanagement and corruption. It was liquidated and restructured



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several times, with the French government often intervening directly to salvage it. A reincorporation in 1786 with the granting of a seven year monopoly gave the *Compagnie* new life, but its monopoly was broken during the French Revolution, thus ending its long history.

Detailed Condition:

Highly legible pen and ink manuscript on 18th-century watermarked laid paper. 77 pages, numbered 5-81, lacking pages 1-4 (regarding entering the Straits of Malacca). Pages 5-10 slightly loose; all bound with cord as common with official French documents from this period. Some fraying and dampstaining around edges on some leaves, but overall very clean and very legible.