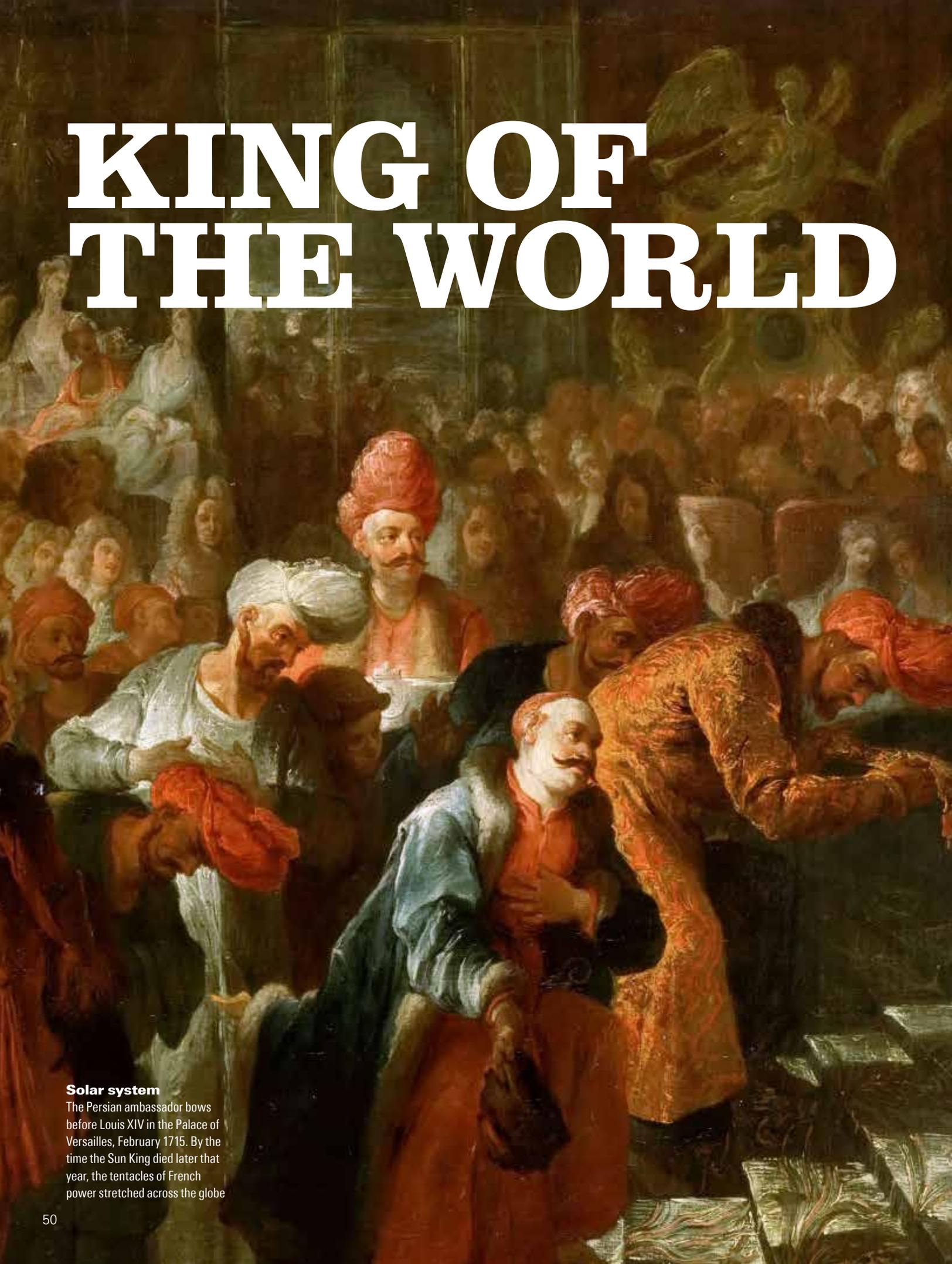


KING OF THE WORLD



Solar system

The Persian ambassador bows before Louis XIV in the Palace of Versailles, February 1715. By the time the Sun King died later that year, the tentacles of French power stretched across the globe



Using a combination of warfare, trade and diplomacy, Louis XIV – the Sun King – sought to expand both his own power and French influence in the wider world. He was, argues **Philip Mansel**, a truly global monarch with global ambitions

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If there is one day that illustrates how Louis XIV influenced the world far beyond the borders of France, it was 16 November 1700. That day, at 11am, the doors of the Grand Cabinet du Roi, or council chamber, at Versailles, opened to reveal Louis and his 17-year-old grandson, Philippe, duc d'Anjou. Silence fell in the room.

Aged 62 and at the absolute zenith of his power, Louis had an announcement to make. "Messieurs, here is the king of Spain," he said of Philippe. "His birth called him to this crown, the late king also by his will. The whole nation desired it and begged me for it pressingly. It was the decree of heaven. I have accorded it with pleasure."

Turning to his grandson, he added: "Be a good Spaniard; it is now your first duty; but remember that you were born French; in order to maintain the union between the two nations. It is the way to keep them happy and to maintain the peace of Europe."

Next, Louis addressed the Spanish ambassador: "Monsieur, salute your king." In tears, the ambassador knelt to kiss the hands and feet of his new monarch, Philip V, and exclaimed: "What joy! There are no more Pyrenees, they are destroyed and henceforth we are one."

You can read this as diplomatic flummery of the highest order. You can note that Philip, through his grandfather Louis' first wife, the Infanta Maria Teresa, had the strongest hereditary claim to the Spanish throne. Nevertheless, it is still a remarkable thing for the ambassador to have said, evidence that Louis was a man who bestrode the world stage – a truly global monarch.

Louis was forever seeking openings on the world stage. It's telling that his hero was Alexander the Great

Paradoxically, Louis is best remembered today for his domestic achievements. He earned his place among the pantheon of French monarchs through his actions on the home front – ruthlessly consolidating his control of an increasingly centralised France; weakening the influence of the Paris *parlement* and the military might of great nobles to give himself a secure power base.

And he was a master at projecting that power – most notably through the enormous palace of Versailles, which he completed between 1666 and 1688. Versailles was a showpiece for French luxury products. It was also a government and military headquarters, where the king constantly drilled and reviewed his troops; and a park, museum and art gallery designed to attract and impress French and foreign visitors. In short, the world came to Versailles.

But Louis also went to the world. This autocrat who dominated domestic affairs for seven decades was forever hunting for opportunities to increase French power and influence on a global scale. It's telling that his hero was Alexander the Great, a man who

built an empire that extended from Egypt to India.

Where Alexander led from the front, Louis lived in more complicated times. While he saw victory on the battlefield as a way to enhance his personal status (France fought three major wars – the Franco-Dutch War, the Nine Years' War and the War of the Spanish Succession – during his long reign), he also understood the importance of trade and dynastic politics as ways to extend his influence.

To strengthen his position in Europe, he maintained a French alliance with Sweden; repeatedly tried to make a French prince king of Poland; supported Hungarian rebels in their struggle to free themselves from Austrian rule; allied himself with the Ottoman empire, the supreme power in the Balkans and the Middle East, and the elector of Bavaria against Austria; and he financed Jacobite attempts to free Ireland and Scotland from English control.

A game of monopolies

Louis' alliances with Spain and the Ottoman empire were rooted in his desire to make France a global economic power. In 1701, the year after his grandson became king of Spain, French companies won the monopoly to supply Spanish colonies in South America with African slaves. "This commerce is very advantageous," wrote the French ambassador in Spain in 1701, the Marquis d'Harcourt.

To help French global trade, Louis also founded overseas trading companies such as the Compagnie des Indes, in 1664, and forced French princes and nobles to invest in them.

Louis improved existing French ports

From musketeers to Macron: 10 remarkable facts about the Sun King

1 When Louis was born in 1638, he was compared to the infant Jesus. His tutor Cardinal Mazarin wrote that God had given him "all the qualities" to become the greatest king the world had ever seen.



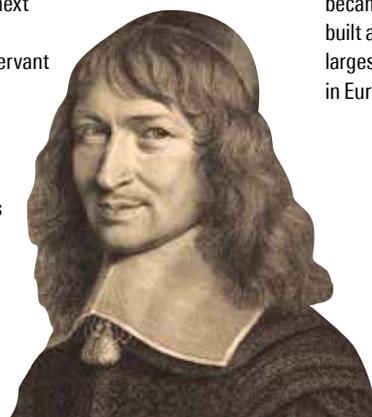
A portrait of Louis as a baby, when he was compared to Jesus

2 Louis witnessed five years of rebellion during his reign, from 1648–52. At one point, Parisian dissidents invaded his palace to check he was in bed, and not about to escape. Two of his predecessors, Henri III, and his grandfather Henri IV, had been murdered, in 1589 and 1610 respectively.

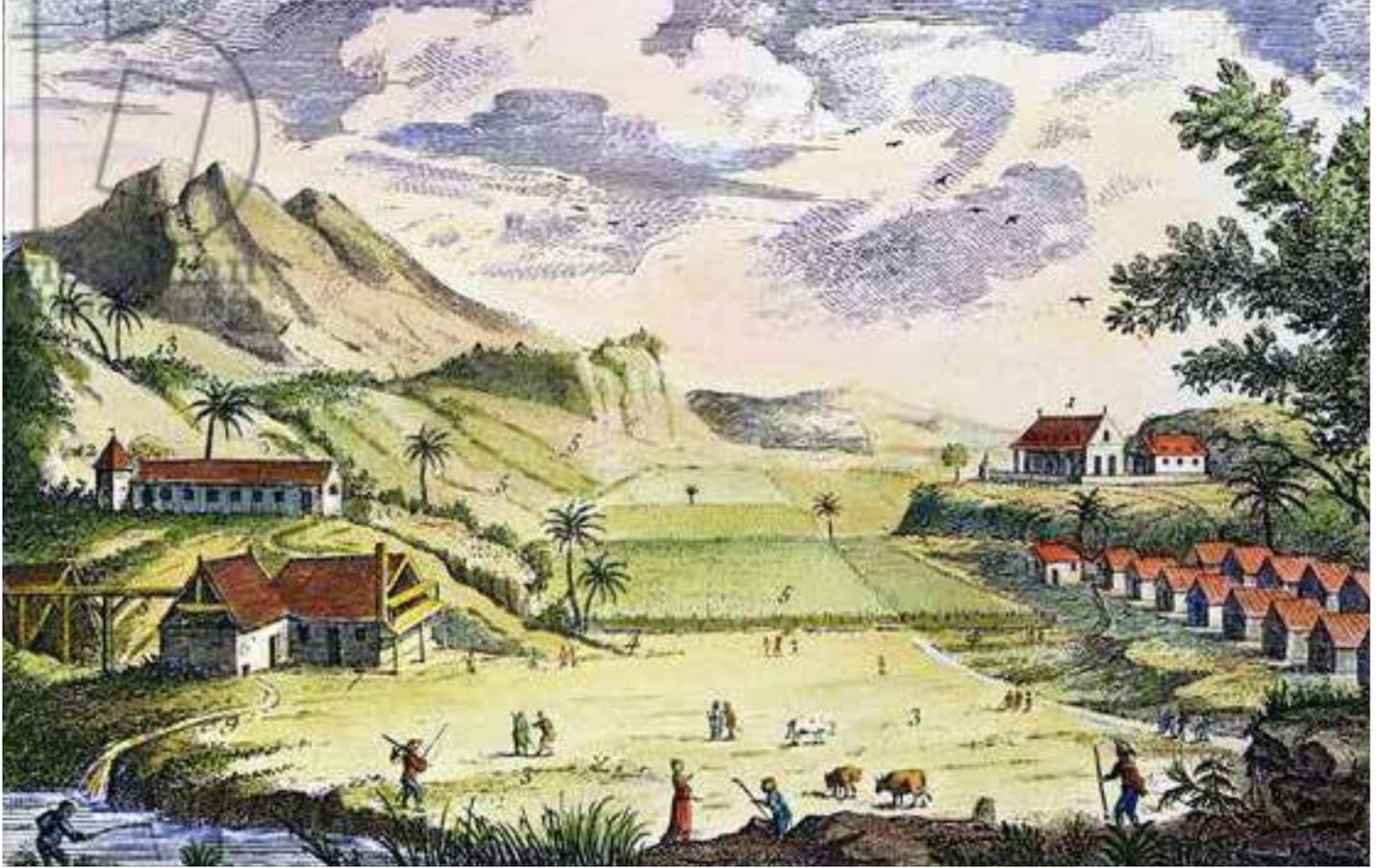
3 Louis went on campaign in northern or eastern France every summer in wartime. Some of the 80 frontier fortresses he built were still being used during the Second World War.

4 Louis had his finance minister Nicolas Fouquet arrested by musketeers under D'Artagnan (the hero of *The Three Musketeers*). Fouquet spent the next 20 years in solitary confinement. The servant he was allowed, Eustache Dauger, wore a mask – the original man in the iron mask, who has inspired numerous novels and films.

Nicolas Fouquet spent 20 years in solitary confinement on Louis' orders



5 From 1671 to his death in 1715, Louis never slept in Paris. No other king has shunned his capital so completely. His main residence became the palace he built at Versailles, the largest and most luxurious in Europe.



Money-spinning operation Slaves work on a sugar plantation on what is thought to be the French colony of Saint Domingue (present-day Haiti) in the 18th century. Such enterprises generated enormous wealth for Louis' France, funding grandiose buildings that can still be seen across the nation today

such as Marseille on the Mediterranean and Dunkirk on the North Sea. Despite its distance from Paris, he visited Dunkirk five times. It became a base for French privateers to raid British shipping and for French expeditions to support Jacobite risings in the British Isles. He also expanded the French navy into a formidable force of 200 ships. The English, however, laughed at the gilded crowns and L's and sea nymphs trumpeting the Sun King's glory, carved on his grandest ships, which made them easy targets for destruction.

France founded trading colonies in India, at Surat and Pondichery; and in the Caribbean, in the island of Saint Domingue (present-day Haiti). Profitable French sugar and coffee plantations, run by slave labour, helped pay for the grandiose 18th-century buildings that can be seen today in Nantes and Bordeaux. Meanwhile, Louisiana – named after the Sun King – in theory included the entire valley of the Mississippi, making it one of the largest land grabs in the history of European imperialism.

Versailles, portrayed in the recent TV

series of the same name as a place where Louis, psychologically at least, sometimes isolated himself, was a global power hub, equivalent to the White House today. The Escalier des Ambassadeurs or Ambassadors' Staircase, built between 1672 and 1679 and lined with pink and green marble, had frescoes showing the nations of the four continents (Asians, Africans, Americans and Europeans) admiring a bust of the king as a Roman emperor. In keeping with the message of the staircase, conversation at Versailles was about Aleppo, Siam and

6 More than 150,000 Protestants fled France following Louis' revocation of the Edict of Nantes, which had given Protestants the right to worship. France impoverished itself and enriched its rivals. Helped by an influx of French Protestants, London became larger than Paris.

7 Louis inadvertently helped his great enemy William of Orange invade England in 1688. By launching an invasion of the Holy Roman Empire across the Rhine, the French king left the coast clear for William to seize the English crown from Louis' ally James VII & II.



8 Following defeat to the British general the Duke of Marlborough in the war of the Spanish Succession (1702–14), Louis' France was only saved by its forts, its resilience and a change of government in England.

William of Orange seized England while Louis' attentions lay elsewhere

9 Louis had many mistresses and fathered more than 10 illegitimate children. After the death of his first wife in 1683, he remarried in secret, for love, Madame de Maintenon. Together they founded the best girls' school of the age, at Saint-Cyr in 1686.

Madame de Maintenon, whom Louis married (in secret) for love



10 He was both loved and hated by his people. Watching Louis' funeral procession in 1715, some Parisians rejoiced and played music. Presidents of the Fifth Republic from De Gaulle to Macron, however, regard him as a role model.



French overreach Officials welcome French Jesuit ambassadors to Siam (now Thailand), as depicted in a 17th-century woodcut. Louis saw in Siam the opportunity for colonial expansion, yet relations between the two nations soured and, when Louis sent troops to the south-east Asian kingdom, they were ultimately expelled

China, as well as France and Europe.

Travellers, merchants and missionaries alike encouraged Louis XIV's dreams of a global empire. Jean-Baptiste Tavernier, in his dedication to Louis XIV of his account of his travels across Asia in search of jewels (for which Louis XIV was his best customer), wrote: "It seems to me that all the kings of Asia, and Africa will one day be your tributaries and that you are destined to command the entire universe." The dedication of a description of the kingdom of Siam (as Thailand was then called) by the Jesuit missionary Guy Tachard assured the king that: "Posterity will count among the conquests of Louis XIV the kings of Siam and China, submitted to the cross of Jesus Christ."

On 1 September 1686, ambassadors from Phra Narai, the king of Siam, climbed the Escalier des Ambassadeurs at Versailles "to the sound of drums and trumpets". As they advanced in the most luxurious

room in the palace, the mirror-lined Galerie des Glaces, packed with curious courtiers, they repeatedly prostrated themselves – kowtowed – almost to the floor. After gazing at Louis for several minutes, one made a speech in Siamese, praising "the very great

king who had conquered all his enemies".

In 1688, the king sent a thousand troops to Siam. Phra Narai hoped to use them in order to control his kingdom. Louis XIV advised him to convert to Catholicism as it was the religion most likely to instil obedience in his subjects. But Louis XIV's troops overreached themselves by trying to take over Bangkok. There was a revolt. Phra Narai died in prison. French bibles and portraits of Louis XIV were burned, French troops expelled. An Asian power had defeated a European empire.

For the next 180 years Siam remained a 'hermit kingdom', closed to the outside world.

Expensive tastes

The Chinese convert to Christianity Michel Shen Fuzong was presented to Louis at Versailles, where he ate with chopsticks on a golden plate



Chinese embassy

Louis XIV's relations with China were more successful. On 15 September 1684, the year that he received the first embassy from Siam, Louis XIV also received in Versailles a Flemish Jesuit, Philippe Couplet, who was accompanied by a Chinese convert wearing a green silk tunic with a blue brocade vest,



When Louis died, he was commemorated in memorial services across the world, from Mexico City to Aleppo

– and obedience. More French missions were sent in 1699, 1700, 1702 and 1703. Portraits of the king and his family, and of Philip V, were displayed in the Jesuit mission in Peking (now Beijing) “in order to reveal to the entire universe the magnificence of the court of France”.

Louis XIV’s interest in establishing French colonies in Asia, Africa and America, his campaign to spread Catholicism throughout the world – not to mention his relations with the Ottoman empire, Siam and China – show that, like his great-great-grandfather Philip II of Spain, he was a truly global monarch. Indeed, the last embassy he received in the Galerie des Glaces of Versailles, in February 1715, the year of his death, came from Persia to sign a commercial treaty with France and request naval help against Arab rulers in the Gulf. When Louis XIV died on 1 September 1715, he was commemorated in memorial services across the world, from Mexico City to Aleppo, as well as in France and in his grandson’s kingdom of Spain.

This idea of France being an outward-looking, international player has endured up to the present Fifth Republic era. In the past half century, the nation has increasingly come to resemble a kind of republican monarchy, perhaps in part because General de Gaulle was such an ardent admirer of Louis. French leaders may no longer dream of global conquest, but Louis XIV’s sense of – to use President Macron’s description – “Jupiterian” grandeur persists to this day. **II**

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Philip Mansel is a historian, and the author of numerous books about the history of France and the Ottoman empire. His latest book, *King of the World: The Life of Louis XIV*, was published by Allen Lane in July

LISTEN AGAIN

For more on Louis XIV, listen to the BBC Radio 4 series **Shadow of the Sun**. You’ll find it at bbc.co.uk/programmes/b05xgkwb



World player A portrait of Louis XIV in 1701. During his 72-year reign, France founded colonies in India, North America and the Caribbean, and traded knowledge – and armaments – with China

Michel Shen Fuzong. Couplet presented the king with Chinese books and a request for more missionaries.

The royal family watched Shen Fuzong eating with chop sticks on a golden plate especially brought for him. Shen Fuzong and Couplet then visited the gardens of Versailles, where the fountains were turned on in their honour. The first European book on Confucius, a translation by Couplet of the Chinese philosopher’s works into Latin, was published in Paris and dedicated to Louis XIV.

True to his global ambitions, Louis XIV personally financed the dispatch of six French Jesuits, mathematics teachers, to the Chinese court. They left Brest on the Brittany coast in March 1685 with a stock of mathematical and astronomical instruments, arriving in China in July 1687 and in Beijing in February 1688. They captivated – and were captivated by – the Manchu ruler of China, the Kangxi emperor, teaching him mathematics and astronomy, drawing him celestial and terrestrial maps and translating French

books on mathematics and medicine into Chinese. In 1692 an Edict of Toleration confirmed permission for them to preach Christianity and to make converts.

Another landmark moment in Sino-French relations arrived on 2 November 1698, when the first French boat to sail directly to China left La Rochelle. The ship returned to Lorient (a port founded by Louis XIV on the Brittany coast) on 1 August 1700 with a cargo of blue and white Chinese porcelain. Versailles had a taste for Chinese objects and Louis XIV’s children were keen collectors. Soon more French priests were dispatched, bringing more knowledge of astronomy, cartography and mathematics – and French cannon for the emperor.

Under Louis XIV a dialogue between the French and Chinese courts – one monarchy speaking to the other across 4,000 miles – had been established, 100 years before the dispatch of the first British embassy to China in 1793. Both courts shared a taste for magnificence, hunting, literature, science

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