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## From periphery to centre: shaping the history of the central peninsula

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# **FROM PERIPHERY TO CENTRE**

## **Shaping the History of the Central Peninsula**

A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the award of the degree

Doctor of Philosophy

From

University of Wollongong

By

Philip King

B.A. (Hons), University of Wollongong

History and Politics Program

March 2006

## **DECLARATION**

I, Philip King, declare that this thesis, submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the award of Doctor of Philosophy in the History and Politics Program , Faculty of Arts, University of Wollongong, is wholly my own work unless otherwise referenced or acknowledged. The document has not been submitted for qualifications at any other institution.

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Philip King  
28th March, 2006.

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## LIST SPECIAL TERMS

\*All words are Malay unless marked (T) for Thai terms

<i>Bahar</i>	375 lbs/187.5 kg
<i>Bendang</i>	Wet rice field
<i>Dulang</i>	Washing/panning (for tin)
<i>Hikayat</i>	Chronicle
<i>Iilir</i>	Downstream
<i>Kemajuan</i>	Advancement, development
<i>Kerah</i>	Corvee
<i>Ketinggalan</i>	Backwardness
<i>Luang (T)</i>	Royal title
<i>Pawang</i>	Spirit medium
<i>Penghulu</i>	Local chief
<i>Pattanaa(T)</i>	Development
<i>Pikul</i>	62 kg
<i>Rai (T)</i>	1.15 acres
<i>Sivilai (T)</i>	Civilised
<i>Sungai</i>	River
<i>Syed</i>	Descendent of the Prophet Muhammed
<i>Tamadun</i>	Civilisation
<i>Ulu</i>	Upstream

## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

ADB	Asian Development Bank
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
BMA	British Military Administration
IMT-GT	Indonesia-Malaysia-Thailand Growth Triangle
JDA	Joint Development Area
MCP	Malayan Communist Party
MPAJA	Malayan Peoples' Anti-Japanese Army
NESDB	National Economic and Social Development Board
Petronas	Petroleum Nasional (Malaysia)
PTT (T)	Thailand's State-Owned Petroleum Company
OCAJP	Overseas Chinese Anti-Japanese Army
TTM	Trans-Thai Malaysia

## NOTES ON SPELLING AND NAMES

All Malay terms follow the rules set out by the 1973 standardized *Ejaan Yang Disepurnakan* excepting where spelling is historically contextual (for example *Kesah* rather than *Kisah*).

Given the lack of an agreed transliteration system for the Thai language, I have transliterated Thai words phonetically. The use of the names Siam and Thailand are determined by the historical context of the passage in question.

## ABSTRACT

Southeast Asia as a regional category of analysis has long been a contested one. Debates over the nature of the cultural matrix or the ecological factors that have produced a regional identity have driven some of the most innovative research in the field of Southeast Asian studies since the Second World War.

These debates have not been limited to the types of external boundaries that may help to distinguish the region sandwiched between India to the west and China to the northeast. As the latter have more or less stabilised, attention has increasingly been directed towards the internal composition of the Southeast Asian region and the conventions employed to organise a highly diverse collection of states and peoples. Historians have grown increasingly wary of the dangers in writing history as a means of justifying current political geographies and continue to seek out ways of countering the inherent biases of colonial sources that serve as such an essential window into the past. Once conventional spatial models of a distinct mainland Southeast Asia complimented by a sprawling insular landscape are today splintering as new research points towards the trade networks and patterns of mobility that paid scant attention to any such imaginary divides. In the process new spaces that have formerly existed at the margins of scholarship on the region are emerging as valid subjects of inquiry. Areas and subjects long regarded as peripheries on conventional maps of the region are moving back to the centre.

This thesis examines one such ‘periphery’ that I refer to as the central peninsula region. This central peninsula is not an essentialised space with distinct territorial and cultural boundaries, but a category of analysis from which we may begin to destabilise conventional representations of that area that today comprises the southern border provinces of Thailand and the northern state of Malaysia. Rather than persist with conventional representations of a vertical civilisational fault line that represents a transitional zone between the mainland and island worlds, what I seek to present in this thesis is an extended critique of conventional colonial and nationalist narratives that have taken a distinctly vertical and centralist view of this region. My study commences from a set of basic inquiries such as whether there are there ways of writing the history of this region beyond that of civilisational/nationalist narratives that appear designed to justify patterns of conflict in the borderlands? To surmount such representations we need to ask in what ways have modern political boundaries and nationalist/civilisational identities been projected into the past to obscure interactions between non-bounded communities and narratives of peace and indigenous forms of modernity? In answering these questions, I seek to demonstrate how the critique opens up new spaces of research—new histories. In the case of this thesis, much of my interest is directed towards the

interior of the central peninsula, an area that has been doubly disadvantaged by the coastal bias exhibited in many histories of the peninsula in general.

In asking these types of questions, a major linking theme in this study is the question of progress and development. Given my desire to shift our attention from centre to periphery as a means of recovering a non-state history, examining the link between conventional historical narratives and western theories of progress that have privileged the role of the 'civilised' centre is a logical step. Modernity—that great eighteenth and nineteenth expression of technological progress and civilisational sophistication—critically shaped the way in which colonial and later nationalist observers saw the world around them and speculated its past. But as we are frequently reminded when reading contemporary revisions of Southeast Asian history, modernity was not a condition that was incubated in the centre. Modernity a condition that was fashioned through a constant engagement with external (read indigenous) regions and actors. Likewise, peripheries were not areas that had experienced but a partial experience of modernity, but a discursive Other that was required to give the supposed advancement of the centre definition and meaning. To critically deconstruct narratives of progress and modernity by showing them as a product of interaction therefore serves the dual purpose of deconstructing representations of the peripheral Other. From here we can begin to fashion alternative histories.

Such a critical reflection on the role of western narratives of progress and civilisational advancement are highly timely given that many governments in Southeast Asia are currently promoting the development of various state peripheries in accordance with economic theories not unlike those that underpinned a century of colonial exploitation. The Malaysia-Thailand borderlands are one such region that has been identified as subregional development zone or growth triangle that will supposedly act as a catalyst for the re-discovery of a vibrant non-state regional identity. Whether this will be the case or not is the question that represents the end-point of this study.

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For all of the contributions that have been made to this study over the years, it remains that any shortcomings or errors are the responsibility of the author alone.