

Chinese Enterprise and Malay Power: Nineteenth-Century Central Malaya from a Regional Perspective

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Introduction

The year 1874, when the British first established indirect rule on the Malay Peninsula, has conventionally marked the start of “modern” Malay history.¹ For those engaged in the writing of this “modern” history, the preceding period from 1826-1874 has often been treated as an era of stagnation or decline. With the exception of a few studies, notably that of Khoo Kay Kim, analysis of the period between the signing of the 1826 Burney Treaty (when the British “withdrew” from the peninsula) and the 1874 Pangkor Treaty (when they “came back”), has been coloured by a colonial historiography that might be summed up by K. C. Tregonning’s remark that “for most of the nineteenth century A.D. the Malay Peninsula was much the same as it had been in the nineteenth century B.C., a tangled mass of jungle.”² The theme of post-1826 decline proved equally irresistible to important post-war historians like D. G. E. Hall who, despite seeking to present a more Asia-centric history of the region, could only arrest the pace of assumed nineteenth-century decline to a fragile stasis. A later generation of nationalist Malay historians likewise characterised this era as one of declining Malay political power, something that was linked to the onset of a wider cultural malaise within Malay society.

One outcome of this particular trajectory within Malay historiography has been the representation of the earlier decades of the nineteenth century as a sorry preamble to “History proper”. This paper challenges this trajectory by replacing a Penang-centric, colonial vantage point with an alternative regional perspective. My focus is the interior of the upper Malay Peninsula. This region, once regarded as the key to British commercial penetration of the Malay Peninsula and a logical hinterland for the outpost of Penang, fades from view in the wake of the 1826 Burney Treaty. Visions of dynamic growth were replaced with perceptions of decay and disorder. The strength of this perception has obscured an interesting vignette concerning a growing tin industry that would sponsor the emergence of a robust new Malay polity at the heart of the central Malay Peninsula.

New Angles on Murky Regions

The assumption that few significant events occurred in the central peninsula between 1826 and 1874 is highly problematic. The area was a rather lively one in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The English East India Company settlement of Penang hosted a bustling trade during this time. The southern Siamese ports of Nakhon Sri Thammarat and Songkhla had recovered from some ill-destined adventurism in the 1760s to emerge as vibrant trading centres by the 1780s. As Anthony Reid has noted, in general the period between 1780 and 1870 was marked by an upswing in Southeast Asian commerce.³ It is evidence of this general upswing that has led scholars like Reid and Li Tana to seek out sites and trends that have been obscured by a colonial discourse of decay and decline. As a result, Li’s research has exposed an entirely new commercial region along the lengthy shoreline of the Gulf of Siam and the South China Sea during this period. Like this Mekong-centric “Water

¹ This is an edited version of the paper presented at the second Water Frontier workshop, Phuket 18–19 February, 2006.

² K. C. Tregonning, *A History of Modern Malaya* (London: Eastern Universities Press, 1964), p. 136.

³ Anthony Reid, “A New Phase in Commercial Expansion in Southeast Asia, 1760-1840”, in *The Last Stand of Asian Autonomies*, ed. Anthony Reid (London: Macmillan Press, 1977), pp. 57–81.

Frontier”, the central Malay Peninsula is also an area that was “obscured when the region was sliced into pieces and fitted into respective national histories”.⁴

A similar region-centric history may be plotted for the central peninsula during the period of 1826-1870. The particular narrative sketched out here draws in a varied cast of regional actors: a new set of Malay rulers in the Penang hinterland, emerging local Sino-Thai elites, local and overseas Chinese commercial interests. The sum effect of their interactions in stimulating economic and political developments in the central peninsula is a useful way of demonstrating the fallacy of colonial images of decay and disorder. Their actions not only challenged Penang’s political and economic centrality at the time, but also its role as the vantage point from which peninsula history should be composed today.

The Emergence of Raman

This challenge to conventional representations of the nineteenth-century peninsula commences with the emergence of a new minor polity. The name of Raman makes its first entry in the colonial record in 1818 at a time when Penang Governor John Bannerman was endeavouring to obtain a commercial treaty with the chiefs of the Kroh district, who were subjects of a “Rajah of Raman”. John Anderson would note this Raman as part of an ill-defined “Patani Country” in 1824. Two years later Henry Burney would describe this land-locked polity in the interior of the peninsula as one of fourteen chieftainships that paid tribute to Siam via the superintending states of Nakhon Sri Thammarat and Songkhla.⁵ To the British in Penang, the history of the polity was vague. Any concern for this subject was overshadowed by the more immediate hope that this tin-rich and strategically placed Malay *negeri* would soon form part of a British sphere of influence in the northern straits region.

By piecing together various local historical sources, it is evident that Raman’s emergence was tied to the disintegration of Perak authority in the upper Perak river watershed in the late eighteenth century and corresponding political disturbances in the Patani lowlands. Precisely which of these factors was more important to the emergence of Raman is unknown. Malay sources such as the *Hikayat Patani* tend to see the emergence of the polity as a unilateral Siamese initiative, a product of Bangkok’s decision to dissolve the ancient polity of Patani in 1810 and replace it with a more manageable confederation of petty states under the supervision of Songkhla. According to this view, Raman was created by the stroke of a Siamese pen and the weight of its armies. It simply appears, a new polity with its capital located some twenty miles upstream from the mouth of the Patani River at Kota Bharu, where the first Raja of Raman, Raja Tuan Loh The, resided.⁶

The image of Siam as a colonial aggressor breaking-up the once great sultanate of Patani—however satisfying it may be to Malay nationalist historiography—is too simplistic. As early as 1780, both the Perak court and Dutch observers had noted the stirrings of an increasingly independent group of chiefs in the upper Perak valley.⁷ By the mid-1790s, the watershed region was home to an increasing number of largely

⁴ Li Tana, “The Water Frontier: An Introduction”, in *Water Frontier. Commerce and the Chinese in the Lower Mekong Region, 1750-1880*, ed. Nola Cooke and Li Tana (Boulder and Singapore: Rowman and Littlefield and Singapore University Press, 2004), p. 1.

⁵ Captain H. Burney. Report, 2 December 1826, in *The Burney Papers*. Vol. 2, Part 5, p. 144–45.

⁶ Authors using Siamese sources date the break-up of Patani from the failed rebellion of the Patani Rajah Tungku Lamidin in 1791. See for example Tej Bunnag. *The Provincial Administration of Siam, 1892-1915* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1997) p. 31. Syukri’s linking of the division of Patani to the 1808 rebellion of the Rajah Datuk Pangkalan seems more likely to me. Ibrahim Syukri, *History of the Malay Kingdom of Patani*, trans. C. Bailey and J. N. Miksic (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Centre for International Studies, 1985), pp. 47–48.

⁷ Barbara Watson Andaya, *Perak: The Abode of Grace. A Study of an Eighteenth Century Malay State* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1979), pp. 340–41.

autonomous settlements, many of which were established by refugees fleeing from disorders in the Patani lowlands.⁸ Precisely how Tuan Loh Teh climbed to the top of this scattered band of refugees is unclear. Early-twentieth-century oral histories described him as someone who “gathered together a body of fighting men and declared himself the independent Raja of the Upper Patani valley” in the first decade of the nineteenth century.⁹ Whether genealogical links to the Patani court facilitated his rise is unknown, but by 1808, when the Siamese started to break Patani into several states, Tuan Loh Teh already controlled the tin rich interior. Given that the Bangkok court was generally in no position to choose local leaders in the outer provinces, the Siamese most likely confirmed—rather than inaugurated—Tuan Loh Teh’s rule. This is an important distinction that reverses the assumed relative power imbalance between local actors and external suzerains. Rather than being a product of Patani’s demise, the emergence of Raman was probably a contributor to the declining fortunes of this once-great Malay polity.

Consolidating Control over the Kroh Plateau

By 1818 Tuan Loh Teh was growing quite wealthy from his control of the valuable tin resources of the Kroh plateau. According to figures supplied by the *Juragen* Sulaiman in 1818 (an associate of Penang’s John Anderson), the Perak side of the watershed was producing around 1,500 *bahar* of tin a year, tin which fetched up to \$54 a *bahar* in Penang. Tuan Loh Teh taxed tin miners at \$24 a *bahar* and additionally demanded 50 percent of output as tax-in-kind. This tribute was then sold at the market rate in Penang.¹⁰ While the gross profit was eroded significantly by transportation costs and the division of profits amongst local officials, the tin industry provided this upstart Raja with a handsome source of income with which to consolidate power over the strategic Patani-Perak watershed.

The profits inevitably prompted interest from neighbouring polities. The Perak court’s attempts to reassert control over the Kroh mines would disrupt the industry in the late 1820s. Opportunities to exploit valuable mineral deposits suffered further due to a number of local conflicts in the 1830s. In 1831-32 and 1838-39, supporters of the deposed ex-Raja of Kedah campaigned violently against Songkhla. The development of export routes down to the coast from the watershed had the unfortunate effect of eroding the isolation that had formerly given Raman a degree of protection from lowland disturbances. The Raja of Raman’s successful manipulation of the Muda and Patani Rivers as a means to export tin and cattle invited reverse flows in the shape of invading forces. Kedah rebels engaged in campaigns against Songkhla and Nakhon in 1831-32 and 1838-9 devastated the watershed zone.¹¹ The pillaging that was typical of local conflicts, where conscripts often measured the success of a campaign in terms of the booty won, severely disrupted mining activity. Labourers fled southwards to the relative safety of coastal Perak and the routes that conveyed tin down to the coast became the province of bandits. Newbold’s figures for Kedah tin in the year ending 1836—probably the most peaceful of this entire decade—show that a mere 200 *bahar* was exported from Kuala Muda, while next door in Perak—the beneficiary of refugee flight—2,500 *bahar* was produced during the same period.¹² Where tin mining continued, low labour

⁸ M. 1561/68, Malaysian National Archives. Hubert Berkeley, “Office Diary” (as District Officer of upper Perak, covering about 1900 to 1908).

⁹ W. E. Everitt, “The Rahman Mines at Intan”, *The Malayan Historical Journal* 2 (2), 1955: 104.

¹⁰ C. D. Cowan, “Governor Bannerman and the Penang Tin Scheme, 1818-1819”, *Journal of the Malayan Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 23 (1) 1950: 52–83. Sulaiman was a Malay trader Bannerman used in his dealings with the Kroh chiefs in 1818.

¹¹ Berkeley, “Office Diary”.

¹² This tin surely originated in the Raman interior, for Kedah did not become an important tin exporter until the 1850s. See T. J. Newbold, 1839 study, *Political and Statistical Account of the British Settlements in the Straits of Malacca*, Vol. 1 (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1971, pp. 424–25).

supply and the general insecurity of property arising from troubles in the Kedah and Patani lowlands kept production to a minimum.

In the 1840s, the conclusion of disputes over the Kedah throne ushered in a period of relative calm. The mines returned to productivity under the watchful gaze of Toh Nang Patani, sister of the second Raja of Raman, Tuan Kundur. The mines were being worked profitably by mid-century and might have expanded much faster but for the opening up of the Larut tin fields in Perak which soaked up the limited labour supplies. In the 1860s, however, an emerging alliance between the Rajas of Raman and Penang-based Chinese miners once more ensured adequate labour for the Kroh plateau mines. In this decade Tuan Timung (the third Raja of Raman) went into the tin business with Fong Kwi, alias Dato Chawan, a Chinese *towkay* from Penang. By the mid-1860s the primary mine at Klian Intan was producing 900 piculs (54,000 tonnes) per year for a profit of \$30,000.¹³ Further expansion would be linked to events taking place on the otherside of the watershed where rivals to the Penang market were also keen to exploit the wealth of the interior.

The Other Side of the Watershed

In the late eighteenth century, Penang was not the only centre vying for dominance in a lucrative regional economy. Under the Wu, a Chinese migrant family who had first assumed its governorship in 1775, Songkhla had become an important east coast port by the first decade of the nineteenth century.¹⁴ Cyril Skinner has remarked that the rise of Songkhla was closely linked to the likelihood that its governors “appear to have acted as agents for a good deal of the Siamese court’s financial ventures in the China trade”.¹⁵ As tax farmers, the ruling family controlled monopolies for birds’ nests and tobacco, prospering from connections with noble factions at court and from Chinese traders who shipped goods between various Gulf of Siam ports. In terms of their relationship with the Siamese court, Chinese merchant-governors in the peninsula played a unique role. While the rest of Siam would not replace the royal monopoly trade with a tax farming system until the mid-1820s, in the south the system was in operation by the late 1760s with prominent Chinese families like the Wu of Songkhla collecting taxes on behalf of the crown. Unlike later tax farmers, the southerners were not barred from political office by any competing local nobility, but rather used their new wealth to become rivals of traditional elites. They were, in Hong Lysa’s words, “largely autonomous administrators who relieved the Bangkok government of the need to expend resources and attention on this area, while at the same time deriving revenue from it”.¹⁶ Given growing Chinese demand for peninsula commodities such as bird’s nests and tin in the second half of the eighteenth century, the revenues derived from monopolies on such items were considerable. As Jennifer Cushman has suggested, it is highly probable that, aside from remittances to the court, much of their economic activity was conducted autonomously, within a state-less framework.¹⁷

The wealth derived from an expanding Siam-China trade in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries enabled Songkhla’s governors to expand their influence into neighbouring polities like Patani and Kedah. While the 1830s could not have been an

¹³ The flourishing state of the Kelantan tin industry in these years may have also constrained labour availability in Raman. Trails from Kelantan that connected Kroh mines to those of the Kelantan highlands were also occasionally used to break the supply monopolies of the Raman chiefs. Cyril Skinner, *The Civil War in Kelantan in 1839* (Singapore: Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society, 1966), p. 8; Khoo Kay Kim, *Malay Society: Transformation and Democratization* (Kuala Lumpur: Pelanduk, 1955), pp. 95–96.

¹⁴ Jennifer Wayne Cushman, *Fields from the Sea: Chinese Junk Trade with Siam during the Late Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth Centuries* (Ithaca: Southeast Asia Program, Cornell University, 1993), pp. 110–11.

¹⁵ C. Skinner, *The Battle for Junk Ceylon: The Syair Sultan Maulana*. (Dordrecht: Foris Publications, 1985), p. 8, n. 4.

¹⁶ Hong Lysa, *Thailand in the Nineteenth Century* (Singapore: ISEAS, 1985), p. 93.

¹⁷ Cushman, *Fields from the Sea*, pp. 110–111.

especially prosperous time for Songkhla, besieged as it was on two separate occasions by armies from Kedah and Patani, Newbold nonetheless still counted it as one of the four major east coast ports of the peninsula alongside Pahang, Trengganu and Kelantan. Interestingly, Newbold listed tin—something of which Songkhla itself produced little—as first amongst its export commodities for the ships that plied the Singapore-Bangkok route.¹⁸

The Patani *Kapitan*

The ties that would develop between the tin mines of Raman and Chinese merchant-administrators in the east coast port of Patani were intimately related to the 1838-39 attack on Songkhla led by Tengku Mohamed Sa'ad. At the time of the 1838 conflict, the governor of Songkhla was Thien Seng, a second-generation member of the Wu dynasty. During his reign, a number of Hokkien immigrants had settled in Songkhla. During the 1838 siege, one of these immigrants organised his clansmen as defence volunteers and subsequently helped to win a major engagement against besieging Kedah troops.¹⁹ As a reward for his contribution to the defence of the city, this immigrant, named Pui Sae Tan, was appointed by the governor of Songkhla as the *kapitan* of the Chinese community in neighbouring Patani. Along with hundreds of kinsmen, he moved south with a new Siamese title and established a home for himself and his followers on high ground near the river mouth.

The post of *kapitan* opened a number of doors for an enterprising merchant like Pui Sae Tan. In Patani the *kapitan* held the revenue farms on opium and gambling and responsibility for collecting the Chinese poll tax. He was also responsible for sending tax revenues back to the governor of Songkhla. Pui Sae Tan was evidently so good at the latter job that he was granted several mining concessions up the Patani River, within the states of Raman and neighbouring Yala. Like the Kroh Plateau mines, these were exceedingly rich in both tin and galena (lead sulphate). Records of the ninety-acre Laboo mining leases, taken up in 1844 and 1847, estimated it contained 2.5 million cubic yards of alluvial tin ore.²⁰

The period during which Pui Sae Tan developed his concessions was a prosperous one for Patani. By 1848, the volume of shipping passing between Singapore and east coast ports like Patani and Songkhla had risen five-fold from a low point of the mid-1830s.²¹ Pui Sae Tan's family were clearly connected to this British port, for one of his daughters had married a Singaporean. But while we know the town had grown in population with many foreign businessmen settling there, specific data on the operation of mining interests in the watershed and linkages to external markets is lacking. By Pui Sae Tan's death in 1878, however, the mines under his family's control were thriving. Tin and lead formed Patani's principal exports, the trade of which was controlled by the Chinese.²² Upon his death, Pui Sae Tan's eldest son, Ju Meng, took control of a lucrative mining business that included the rich Tham Thalu mine in Yala. In the early 1880s Cameron estimated that Tham Thalu was one of the richest mineral deposits on the entire Malayan peninsula. In 1883, as he drew a map that he hoped would prove British claims to the mines of Klian Intan in Raman, Hugh Low was similarly drawn to the other side of the watershed where he simply marked Tham Thalu as "The Great

¹⁸ Newbold, *Political and Statistical Account*, p. 73.

¹⁹ Skinner, *Chinese Society in Thailand*, p. 150. Skinner says this was the first time that an overseas Chinese regiment had ever fought in Siam. A summary history of this figure and his family is in *Jiin Thaksin: Withii lae Phalan*, ed. Suthiwong Phongphaibun, Dilok Wuthiphaanit, and Prasit Chinakaan 2544 (Bangkok: TRF, 2544 [2001]), pp. 187–190.

²⁰ L. Hunter, *Report on the Laboo Lodes of the Straits Consolidated Tin Mining Company*, 1940.

²¹ Reid, "A New Phase of Commercial Expansion", pp. 67–68.

²² See James McCarthy's 1900 account, *Surveying and Exploring in Siam: With Descriptions of Lao Dependencies and Battles against the Chinese Haws* (Bangkok: White Lotus, 1994), p. 10.

Mine”.²³

Aside from tin, Ju Meng also held the Patani opium farm, a profitable enterprise in a province where the drug was smoked to great excess. Cameron described Ju Meng as “a man of great force of character [who] exercises more power throughout the Patani provinces than any other individual”.²⁴ Both he and his brother Ju Laay, alias *Phrajjin* Khananurak, were connected by marriage to *Chao Phraya* Songkhla. Although Ju Laay held the post of *kapitan*, both he and the Raja were subordinate to Ju Meng, a clear indication that control over the riches of the interior now surpassed that of the coastal regions. The post of *kapitan* was still lucrative, however. Ju Laay was the master of shipping, collector of customs and inland duties, and magistrate of the Chinese community.²⁵ The position gave him real advantages in regard to importing labour and opium for the mines further upstream, and for exporting tin to Bangkok or Singapore. As late as 1957, the family still controlled their own *kongsi*, which managed labour importation for the various *kongsi* houses on mining concessions in the watershed.²⁶ Through their control of these two important posts, these two sons of Pui Sae Tan played an important role in the mining economy, from extraction through to export.

Adaptation to Regional Constraints

This brief overview of a Chinese family who maintained an important place in the commercial life of Patani reads much like that of numerous other Chinese migrant families who achieved varying levels of economic and political success during the nineteenth century. As with many of these rags-to-riches histories, control of tax farms provided a critical means of capital accumulation for expansion into sectors such as mining. As Hong has argued, however, labour shortages formed a particular constraint upon capital accumulation for tax farmers in the peninsula. The Siamese court granted such liberties to its nominees in the south in part because it believed that the invisible hand of labour demand in this manpower deficient region checked the potential for abuse by tax farmers.²⁷ In addition, the remote location of the richest ore bodies, and the high cost of the infrastructure required to transport minerals to the coastal ports, constrained tin mining. The rugged geography of the Patani and Perak watersheds made cart roads expensive, given the constant need for maintenance in a monsoon zone. Even the best road in the central peninsula, that connecting Kedah and Songkhla to the west of the watershed, was impassable in the wet season. While rivers were usually the most convenient means of transportation, those of the central watershed suffered low water levels in the dry season and excessive flow during the monsoon.

Efforts to overcome these constraints formed the basis of the mutually beneficial relationship that developed between the Chinese commercial elite of the Patani river mouth port and the Malay Rajas of Raman in Kota Baru, twenty miles up-river. The relationship rested on a relatively straightforward division of labour wherein coolies imported by the *kapitan* mined tin that was then transported on elephants provided by the Rajas of Raman and other local rulers. As also happened in the Kroh district (the southern district of Raman) where rough terrain made the elephant indispensable to the

²³ F. St. George Caulfield, and Sir Hugh Low KCM G, 1885. A Map to Illustrate Memorandum on the Boundary Between Perak and the Siamese Province of Rahman: Map A175/c.147 Perak, Arkib Negara Archives

²⁴ William Cameron, “On the Patani”, *Journal of the Straits Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 11, 1883: 125–26.

²⁵ An 1894 account of Patani by Prince Boromuang notes that the Malay Raja of Patani had subcontracted tax collection on opium, gambling, liquor, and palm oil to Ju Laay. As master of shipping, Ju Laay oversaw for the 40 odd Chinese and Malay coastal trading vessels that visited Patani throughout the year. Somdet Phra Chao Boromuang, “Muang Tani”, in *Thaayaat Luang Samretkitjakornjaangwaang*, ed. Prayundet Kananurak, Paaanthep Kananurak, and Phanruet Wattanaayaakorn, Bangkok, 1894, p. 25.

²⁶ Interview with Phanruet Wattanaayaakorn, 21 June, 2002.

²⁷ Hong, *Thailand in the Nineteenth Century*, p. 92.

mining economy, the Malay ruling class entered into a commercial relationship that involved far more than simply collecting land rents from Chinese mining syndicates. This relationship demonstrates how the rise of prominent Chinese syndicates and families in areas like Patani cannot be reduced to the unique business skills of these “outsiders”, for success involved a reliance on the skills possessed by indigenous actors.²⁸

The role of the elephant in fostering the growth of Chinese mining enterprises was itself a significant creative adaptation by local Malay rulers. Despite the long history of elephant trapping in the watershed zone, little indicates that these beasts had a significant role as draft animals. Historically, elephants were trapped for export to India. There is no evidence that they were employed in a local mining industry prior to its intensification in the early nineteenth century.

The diversion of Kroh Plateau tin to the Penang market in the late eighteenth century, and increased demand for minerals in the east coast port of Patani, changed this. Export to Penang from Kroh necessitated an overland trip of around twenty kilometres. In the upper Patani valley, many of the richest mines were located in rugged terrain distant from navigable rivers. For these mines to be developed to a scale that supported the import of Chinese labour and capital investments in such things as water races and *kongsi* houses, elephants were essential. Although elephants were not the only way that tin might be transported, on a cost-benefit ratio they were far superior to buffalo. The latter may have been cheap and abundant, but the elephant was much better adapted to the rugged terrain between the watershed mines and river depots.

In Malay states like Raman, ownership of elephants was a royal monopoly that counterbalanced the power of Chinese capitalists such as Pui Sae Tan and his son, Ju Meng. In many ways the monopoly existed by default, for corralling and domesticating these animals was a Herculean task that needed resources beyond those of any single individual or group. Foremost among them was manpower. The Malay corvee system (*kerah*) made possible the periodic mobilisations of hundreds of people required for an elephant hunt, an enterprise of enormous scale as an early nineteenth-century Chinese account makes clear:²⁹

The kings of all these countries like rearing elephants. When they hear that there are wild elephants in the mountains, the king's retainers order people to clear [out] the big trees in a ten-mile circle and to build a fence over this area. Over ten days they move the fence forward several times. In the gradually narrowing enclosure the elephants cannot get food and become weakened. Tame elephants are then set loose in the enclosure where they fight [the wild elephants]. When the [wild ones] are subdued, they follow the tame elephants out, and allow the elephant driver to push them on.

Captured wild elephants were then taken to the capital of the Malay ruler, who owned the massive stocks necessary to restrain the animals whilst they were being trained. In both Raman and Yala, these stocks were constructed adjacent to the ruler's dwelling place. One indication of just how important control of such infrastructure was to these rulers can be found in Skeat's 1899 description of the Raman capital of Kota Baru, which is little more than an extended illustration of the great elephant stocks and the techniques by which elephants were trained for their future in government service, in particular in the local mines.³⁰

²⁸As also argued by J. Kathirithamby-Wells in “Siak and its Changing Strategies for Survival, c. 1700–1870”, in *Last Stand of Asian Autonomies*, ed. Reid, p. 217.

²⁹J. W. Cushman and A. C. Milner, “Eighteenth and Nineteenth-Century Chinese Accounts of the Malay Peninsula”, *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 52 (1), 1979: 24.

³⁰W. W. Skeat, “Reminiscences of the Cambridge University Expedition to the North-Eastern Malay States, 1899-1900”, *Journal of the Malayan Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 26 (4) 1953: 82–83.

As the mining economy of the northern half of Raman attracted new Chinese investors from the 1850s onwards, the Rajas of Raman firmly grasped the revenue raising opportunities this growing economy could provide. As the number of coolies imported through Patani rose, and concessions in places like Tham Thalu opened up, the rulers of Raman responded by stepping-up the capture and training of elephants for the mining industry. In the early 1860s the export of elephants from Kedah and Perak had come to a halt, partially because “the demand in Siam [was] so great as to absorb all that [were] now reclaimed from the forest”.³¹ So intensive was this process that, by the 1880s, many subjects of the fourth Raja of Raman (Tuan Jagong) were reportedly migrating to Perak to escape the government’s demands on them.³² The opening of new mines in the upper Patani valley, and the exponential growth of tin mining further south in lower Perak, only fed these demands. A brother of the Raja reported in 1883 that people living under the sway of the Raman fort at Krunei (the southern-most outpost of the polity) had left in droves due to Tuan Prang’s three dollar per family head tax and excessive corvee obligations which chiefly involved work at elephant corrals.³³ Presumably this referred not merely to trapping but also the task of collecting and delivering the vast amounts of fodder a large stable of elephants required.

Numerous reports from the 1870s and 1880s describe the bustle of elephant traffic on the various paths connecting Chinese-owned mines to riverside collection depots. Cameron saw trains of elephants “constantly passing to and fro”³⁴ on the paths connecting Bannangsita (Yala) to the numerous mines in the surrounding hills. The traffic was heavy enough to require a system of road signs to warn mahouts about the softer parts of roads and trails.³⁵ Well-developed pathways connected key supply centres such as Bannangsita (on the Patani River) or Baling (on the Muda River) to the mines they serviced. These paths appeared on contemporary British maps, which often marked the location of important elephant fords. Maxwell observed in the late 1870s that the road networks in southern Raman were well maintained and supplied with numerous rest houses as they threaded their way from mines to riverside depots. The upkeep of this infrastructure by local rulers formed an important part of the partnership between a Malay ruling class in the mountains and the Chinese commercial and political elite downstream in Patani, and in Penang also.

The commercial advantages that this relationship created for both parties fashioned the Raman rulers as rather enlightened Malay chiefs in the eyes of some British observers. Cameron, for instance, described Tuan Jagong as “a man of liberal ideas and exceedingly anxious to cultivate a knowledge of European manners and customs”.³⁶ Such flattery in part reflected the efforts that Raman’s rulers had made to appear as individuals who were open to the modern European world.³⁷ But in this respect they differed little from men like Ju Meng who were at once patriarchs of migrant dynasties with strong ties to southern China, urbane *Luang* in the service of the Siamese crown, and Datos with close links to Malay rulers in the tin rich interior. Just as ethnic distinctions between Perak and Patani Malays meant little to Tuan Loh Teh when he set himself up as ruler of the upper Patani and Perak valleys in the early nineteenth century, the Chinese and Malay entrepreneurs of the interior tin economy showed a similar talent for forging connections across ethnic and cultural boundaries, including

³¹ John Cameron, *Our Tropical Possessions in Malayan India* (Kuala Lumpur, 1965, original edition, 1865), p. 346.

³² C.O. 8774, Malaysian National Archives. Hugh Low to the Colonial Secretary of the Straits Settlements, Singapore, 16 March 1883.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ Cameron, “On the Patani”: 132

³⁵ Skeat, “Reminiscences of the Cambridge University Expedition”: 83.

³⁶ Cameron, “On the Patani”: 130.

³⁷ Skeat, for instance, reported that the Raja of Raman enforced quarantine laws in 1899–1900. See “Reminiscences of the Cambridge University Expedition”: 41–42.

the supposed gulf dividing European and “native” worlds.

Conclusion

The unwillingness of colonial historians to acknowledge the possibility that peninsular economies might have been energised (even modernised) without a “civilising” European hand to guide them has seen the omission of histories of polities such as Raman. We might say that the failure of Raman to conform to a nineteenth-century narrative of decay and disorder condemned the polity to historical anonymity. In a similar way, migrant commercial elites in southern Siam such as the Pui Sae Tan family could not attract the attention or admiration of colonial observers. While the business practices of men such as Ju Laay and Ju Meng were no less monopolistic than those of prominent Straits Chinese in Penang and Singapore, the latter have typically been located within a narrative of progressive economic development. The former, by virtue of the Siamese connection have languished in a story of oriental despotism and economic irrationalism.

By taking a fresh approach to the history of the region, I have argued that it is possible to extricate local actors from the blind spots of colonial historiography. The result should not be seen as an isolated incident, but the means by which to fashion a style of history that can restore agency to local actors and expose the types of interactions that allow us to talk about regions in the first instance.