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CENTERING THE PERIPHERY: NEW FORAYS IN MALAYSIAN ECONOMIC HISTORY

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A century ago, at the turn of the 20th century, history as a discipline, experienced a break with past methods. It was a turning point with a vast number of new fields, new topics and new approaches being progressively added on for its practitioners, and indirectly, for its readership. John Tosh's observation in 1991 on historical writing regarding "the immense expansion in the scope of historical inquiry which has taken place in the last 100 years" is shared by many in the academy. For instance, Peter Burke in his 1991 monograph, *New Perspectives on Historical Writing*, spoke of the universe of historians "expanding at a dizzying rate". While this dramatic explosion of history, abundantly clear on hindsight, may seem to be nothing new to historians presently engaged in the myriad sub-fields, it is in fact a development of the last few decades, admittedly of a relatively youngish vintage, particularly to historians accustomed to dealing with centuries.

This process of never-ending change has continued throughout the past century, with spurts sparked by particular circumstances at specific points in time, so that today, historians are constantly confronted with the need to incorporate recent advances in the historical discipline, and are continually mapping out new questions and new agendas. In other words, historians cannot keep still if they are to be true to the academic endeavour, to stand on the shoulders of those before, to refine, improve upon and flesh out, taking heed of the directions which have been marked out for them by those preceding. Hence, it might be useful to first briefly touch on a number of major developments and watersheds in various new fields in history as a backdrop to where we are today. Thereafter, I will address the task at hand which is to suggest what might be appropriate frameworks and foci for Malaysian economic historians to take up.

Thus, the themes for this lecture comprise of the following. Firstly, the place of economic history in the context of developments in the historical discipline. Next, the units of inquiry which economic history cannot ignore, beginning with world history. This is especially so if the nation or region

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under scrutiny is not a closed-economy, which is a rare breed, currently or in the past. For almost all communities have to look beyond the local to satisfy and supplement their needs with resources and/or materials not available in their immediate vicinity. After which, a discussion of regional history and sub-regional history as the first sub-text, before exploring some categories within economic history, the maritime history and business history of the sub-region of the Western Littoral of Southeast Asia, with Penang as its nucleus.

New and Old Histories

Economic History's emergence as a major sub-discipline of history owes its beginnings to 'New History', itself emerging in the west, undergoing momentous socio-economic transformation associated with the Industrial Revolution in the long 19th century. History as it was practiced then, is known as Rankean history, after the German historian, Leopold von Ranke (1795-1886). The focus was on national history, the state and its institutional apparatus, and rulers and leaders - essentially political history with the narrative of events as the preferred method in the writing of history. There was an obvious need for a broader approach, one which could provide an understanding of the socio-economic changes which had a powerful impact on the lives of many.

Notwithstanding earlier efforts to write alternative histories to the national narrative, New History is usually associated with the French Annales School which produced the journal, *Annales: economies, societies, civilizations* in 1929. As the title of this periodical indicates, history is more than just political history as economy, society and culture are just as worthy of attention. In fact, the Annales School advocated 'total history', a wider history encompassing all aspects of the past (political and non-political) and all groups (not just the elite). In addition, Fernand Braudel, one of its most well known exponents, bequeathed many concepts to future generations, among them the idea of *la longue duree* (the long term) in order to be able to identify trends in contrast to the previous focus on events.

Today, we see the imprint of New History on contemporary scholars, no longer insisting that "History is past politics: politics is present history". This was the assertion of Sir John Seeley, the Regius Professor of History in Cambridge – his views representing the profession during the Victorian era. And, even though there continues to be an enduring interest in studying centers of power, governmental structures and leading political personalities, we now see more than just the history of the state. Even the main specializations in history, social history, economic history and cultural history have fragmented so that there are now efforts in labour history, urban and rural history, historical demography, history from below and women's history to name but a few.

As a sampling of further enlargement of the scope of history, economic history has spawned 'new economic history' from the 1950s and 1960s, to be distinguished from the older version of economic history, beginning around the turn of the century. Another example of extensions of new fields can be seen in women's history which originated in the late 1960s giving rise to gender history in the 1980s. This underscores the tremendous growth and expansion not only in the scope of history in the past half century but also in the approaches to history writing. New economic history is a turn to quantitative history, incorporating the use of statistical techniques in historical analysis while gender history draws on sociology with its social roles accorded to men and women. Here is evidence of the move beyond disciplinary boundaries to inter-disciplinary approaches with historians using concepts and methodologies from the social sciences and from other disciplines in the humanities. They are also beginning to conduct collaborative research. In addition, the fact that gender history has not displaced women's history is testimony to the 'new approach' which seeks to provide space to different voices, a presage to post-modernism which challenges the sole national narrative as the most appropriate reflection of past realities.

Now to look at post-modernism, which has evoked heated debates since it burst on the academic scene some 20 plus years ago in the west. It should be noted that in the post-Rankean era, history has long struggled with the question of the nature of historical writing. The major challenge has been to eliminate bias which arises from the conditions of one's life and

experiences. In fact, it is part and parcel of the task of the historian to ascertain which of the current major interpretations on the particular topic under scrutiny is the most acceptable and nearest to reality. The historian has to constantly revise previous interpretations in light of new information gathered or undertake a re-reading of evidence previously assembled. In other words, historians have been assessing different interpretations as part of their writing of history. After all, E.H. Carr, in his classic *What is History?* (1961) has acknowledged that "no existing interpretation is wholly objective."

Thus, it is not as if before the advent of post-modernism, there was a lack of awareness of the social construction of knowledge. In fact, when we refer to 'social construction', society determining what is knowledge as opposed to myth, we are really referring to the process whereby the elite via the scholar determines what is knowledge, what is to know, what is to document. Indeed, the philosophical basis of New History is that reality is socially or culturally constructed. This is much like the post-modernist position that there is no one truth, if at all objective knowledge exists. In short, post-modernism poses the question "Whose truth is being imposed on society?", i.e. whose interpretation suits.

Hence, comparing the situation before and after post-modernism, the difference now is that post-modernism brings into focus the factor of agency – emphasizing the role of the individual or individuals in the construction of histories, especially the national narratives. This forces historians to examine the process by which facts become historical facts, and to establish whose facts determine historical reality in a given context, usually in the context of the nation-state. Put in another way, when post-modernism came along, the assumption was made that history as a discipline, was unaware that a given interpretation, at worst, incorporates the agenda of the writer, at best, reflects the writer's cultural background. In fact, the task of the historian has long been to uncover and present the various versions of the past.

How have these new directions in historical writing of the 20th century in the west affected Malaysian historical writing in general, and Malaysian economic history in particular? If New History only began to be more widely

adopted outside of Europe spreading to Japan, India and Latin America since the 1970s and 1980s, it would not come as a surprise that its application in Malaysia has not yet gathered the momentum evident elsewhere. Suffice it here to cite Qasim Ahmad's survey of the academic landscape in 2000, that "...Malaysian historical writing is in no danger of being submerged by the new genre. The traditional areas of political and economic history as well as the history of the elites still dominate the academic scene."

Therefore, while Qasim Ahmad's review of "The Other Histories..." in Malaysian historiography documents a number of pioneering studies in the various specializations, the flood is yet to come. On labour history, he mentions the works of S. Ramachandran (1994) and P. Ramasamy (1994) investigating plantation labour, Leong Yee Fong (1997) examining the labour movement and Zawawi Ibrahim (1998) looking into the Malay labourer. On peasant history, he cites the efforts of Lim Teck Ghee (1977) and Shahril Talib (1984). As for history from below, he credits Cheah Boon Kheng's *The peasant robbers of Kedah* (1988) for effecting "a sea change to Malaysian mainstream historiography". And on women's history, there is Lai Ah Eng's monograph, *Peasants, proletarians and prostitutes : a preliminary investigation into the work of Chinese women in colonial Malaya* (1986), which doubles as a contribution to the study of the lower classes. It is evident that the path to new terrains has been charted and we await the products of the next generations, some already appearing in the form of doctoral theses and soon to be converted into publications.

Regarding the employment of quantitative methods and the impact of post-modern perspectives on Malaysian economic history, there is little evidence of the former in the form found in the major economic history journals in the west. One would have to be both a historian and an economist to be able to comprehend the sophisticated statistical techniques employed, often times crossing into the realm of mathematicians. Nonetheless, the use of quantitative data in conjunction with qualitative assessments in Malaysian economic history is not only on an increase but is now an established practice. As for the latter, the post-modernist influence, data found in official documents are seldom questioned and are yet to be closely

scrutinized as to their likely use in support of specific policies. There is an obvious need to be more sensitive to these implications in future work.

This sketch of the New History and its adherents in Malaysia is not meant to be comprehensive; it is only to provide a flavour of the current standing of Malaysian economic history so as to enable those in this field to look into the advisability of moving in the directions to which New History and new economic history has shown us.

Beyond the Nation-State: the Globalised World and Asian History to the Fore

The importance of the external dimension for economic history stems from the very nature of the subject of economics. As the main components of the economy are production, exchange and consumption, with economic history looking at how these requisite constituent parts of the economy functioned in the past, by virtue of the need to deal with any surplus production beyond subsistence, the exchange or trade function comes into play. When surplus production is more than what the domestic economy can absorb, foreign markets are the next logical step. In other words, ever since human beings developed the technology to produce surpluses, foreign trade has been a necessary option.

This brings us to world history. Just as New History and economic history owed their beginnings to new circumstances, and was initiated by historians reacting to their experience of a historical discontinuity, namely the Industrial Revolution of the 19th century, so too the sub-field of world history is very much a creature of contemporary globalisation. A historiographical aside – from the likes of E.H. Carr to Richard Evans, who wrote the new introduction in 2001 to the reissue of Carr's *What is History?* at its fortieth anniversary, besides Carr and Evans, many others also recognize that historians are products of their times and, as Evans informs us, "consciously or unconsciously, we [historians] also want to use our knowledge of the past for our own purposes in our own times" (Evans 1997, 192). About 30 years ago, some historians started to examine cross-border and cross-cultural

phenomena, responding to the need to understand processes which transcend the nation-state.

World history specialists invariably share a common conviction, that global processes and exchanges have contributed to shape the trajectory of component parts - from continents and regions to nations. I refer you to the 1970s – the era when the world re-discovered global interdependence with a vengeance. In the wake of the oil-shocks of 1973-74 and 1979-1981, when the oil-rich nations, known by their acronym, OPEC (Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries) raised the price of oil to historical heights, reverberations were felt throughout the world. Indeed, very few countries can function without petroleum. The implication of such events is that, at particular instances, domestic factors may be dominant; however, at other points in time, external factors hold the sway to determine the future directions of individual nation-states. This reality, I am sure, is not lost on anyone on Planet Earth, living in the midst of the after-effects of the earthquake off Sumatra and the tsunami which has wrecked havoc on countless victims and regions around the Indian Ocean.

The related methodological issue to pose here is the question, "What is the appropriate unit for inquiry in economic history?" It would appear that when the temporal dimension is applied, the spatial aspect is affected. Put in another way, the nation state is not always the preferred choice as the most suitable unit on which to focus. For, as should be quite clear, the impact of external elements beyond the boundaries of a region or state can be more or less, depending on the period under study, and at certain times, requires a perspective which goes beyond the nation-state.

Going back to the past, we will find that a closer look reveals that historians studying the proto-historical or classical periods and the early modern era take a broader perspective, with a much wider canvas. Even as the focus of the historical inquiry is on specific areas, the continents of Europe, Asia and Africa, namely Afro-Eurasia, formed the backdrop. As a short-hand, one needs only to invoke the imagery of the Silk Road and Spice Route for the former periods and the Ming Voyages and the European Voyages of Discovery

for the latter early modern era to see how area studies cannot avoid taking into account the influence of things foreign on local developments.

Here you will note that the economic activity commanding attention and implied from the reference to the phenomena just mentioned is commerce at the top of the list, as the motive force and spur to East-West, Indian Ocean or that of intra-Asian exchanges. This is by no means meant to dismiss the whole range of interaction – from political, cultural and religious to even dispersion of biological species - concomitant with that of commerce, sometimes displacing the economic. For example, world history specialist, Jeremy Bentley presents an integrated world from as early as the first major civilizations, the age of early complex societies (3500 to 2000 B.C.E.) and the age of ancient civilizations (2000 to 500 B.C.E.), when Mesopotamia, Egypt, India and China "did not develop in isolation" but exchanged not only goods but also ideas, technologies and belief systems (1996). By the age of classical civilizations (500 B.C.E. to 500 C.E.), the silk roads over land and sea were firmly in place, connecting China in the east to Europe in the west. In the next millennium, Janet Abu-Lughod's depiction of eight overlapping circuits of trade in the thirteenth century guaranteed by the transregional Pax Mongolia, provides strong substantiation of the connectivity of the known world of the eastern hemisphere. These global links have continued to grow, intensifying with each subsequent period, the early modern into the modern and the current.

What we can draw from the work of these world historians is the evidence of how large-scale external processes – especially those of empire-building, mass migrations and long-distance trade - had significant repercussions on the development of local communities, individual societies and regions. In addition, world history challenges the previous Eurocentric bias in historical writing, as in the reference to the Afro-Eurasian world. In fact, the world-system approach within world history, popularized by Immanuel Wallerstein and Andre Gunder Frank, is based on the idea that nations do not exist in isolation but develop in the context of a larger system, as part of a region which has an effect on the direction and rate of change of component societies of that region.

A by-product of the interest in world history is research on the binary growth paths of east versus west. This has produced an emerging recognition that before the modern era, there has been vigorous Asian trade, with the European role not as dominant as previously thought. Other than according Asian history its due - at the minimum, examining its own internal rhythms, at the maximum, challenging the entrenched historiography which locates 'the rise of the west' from the early modern era, there are those who identify China as the dominant force in Eurasia up till the 19th century. They contend that only with the advent of industrial technology has the west surged to the front. This can be taken as a clarion call to Asian history specialists (including scholars of Southeast Asian and Malaysian history) to revisit intra-Asian dynamics as among the driving forces in shaping their own histories.

Beyond the Nation-State: The Region of Southeast Asia

This brings me to the third theme, the regional context of Southeast Asia within which Malaysian economic history must be located. It will be become clear that there is a heavy overlap between the questions which concern world history specialists and Southeast Asian historians.

To begin with, I refer you to Heather Sutherland's recent review of Southeast Asian history, published recently in 2003. Upon reading the first sentence of her article, "Many a scholar wrestling with the complexities of time, space and 'the rise of the West' has found a reassuring point of departure in the authoritative works of Fernand Braudel," I was quite delighted, anticipating an exposition of how Braudel's work can assist Southeast Asian historians in general, and Malaysian economic historians in particular, in addressing the numerous historiographical issues we have to face. To some extent, the expectation was fulfilled, where the utility of some of Braudel's key concepts are acknowledged. At the same time, they were also subjected to critical appraisal, with the applicability of the Mediterranean model for this region being evaluated by a number of leading practitioners. We are thus reminded of the need to be constantly alert and to refrain from being absolutely seduced by Braudel's intellectual stature, with our usual analytical antennas at rest.

Nonetheless, to take a positive approach, I am encouraged to take my cue from distinguished scholars who themselves have had others distilling the acceptable from the chaff in their work, and to add my small contribution to the continual regenerative process which is at the core of the historical enterprise. To achieve that end, the next step is to look closely at the questions which have preoccupied Southeast Asian historians which should be of relevance to Malaysian economic historians.

Southeast Asia as an entity is of very recent lineage compared to the sub-continents of India and China or even other Asian neighbours – no more than half a century old. Nonetheless, regardless of unresolved issues of unity, coherence, common identity and its delineation as a territory, that Southeast Asia is deemed a regional actor currently, in its organizational form of ASEAN, necessitates an understanding of its role not only in the present but also in the past.

Regarding its 'shallow genealogy', Southeast Asia's acceptance as a new entity in world politics dates from the Second World War when the region between South Asia and East Asia required separate treatment in the war against Japan, the enemy of the Western Allied forces. And, in the postwar scenario, historians sought new paradigms to take into account decolonization and the fall of the previously all-powerful west, no longer touted as the only model for the new post-colonial states, en route to nation-building and modernization.

In the 1960s, Southeast Asian historians attempted writing autonomous histories, going back to its ancient classical kingdoms to identify cultural patterns before the entry of Europeans into Asia in the early modern period. A long-term view, *la longue duree* was the analytical tool assisting in the search for indigenous identity. In the course of research, scholars have since re-discovered and documented active intra-Asian trade, courtesy of Dutch historian J.C. van Leur's notion of the significance of Asian trade and courtesy too of the efforts of Indian Ocean specialists on Sino-Indic commerce via Southeast Asia.

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These currents of change were also felt in Malaysia, which after all is part of Southeast Asia. Much like many other 'New Nations', in those heady times after attaining independence, Malaysia too began to assert its new status as a sovereign nation. The membership explosion in the United Nations in the 20 years after its establishment in 1945, from 51 original members to 117 member states in 1965, is testimony to the process of decolonization. Malaysian historians were not immune to such developments, and began to question the dominant paradigm privileging the west.

Cheah Boon Kheng's survey of the "Writing of Indigenous History" in 1996 where he equates 'indigenous' with 'autonomous' and 'national' history, provides a blow-by-blow account of earlier debates. The list of participants is a veritable "Who's Who" of the history profession of the 1950s and 1960s, practitioners in the History Departments of the University of Malaya at the Singapore and Malayan campuses.

Discussions of Malayan-centric or Asian-centric history was kicked off in 1958 by K.G. Tregonning in Singapore, followed by John Bastin in Kuala Lumpur. Thereafter, many others joined in, the Malaysian names including Zainal Abidin b. A. Wahid in 1963 and Khoo Kay Kim in 1968. By the mid-1960s, Malayan-centric products began to appear, now on the reading lists of courses on Malaysian history.

Autonomous history was aimed at recovering the local viewpoint via the use of previously ignored indigenous sources. Indeed, no historian today would attempt a historical study which neglects available material of any genre. Here, I remind you of the earlier discussion regarding New History's call for 'total history' which recommends taking into consideration all groups and all aspects of a country's past and also the post-modernist query as to whose objectives are being served in national narratives, by the same token whose objectives are being diminished. This drive towards writing autonomous history in the first flush after winning independence had its myopic aspects. For instance, in 1986, Australian historian Anthony Milner, argued for an analysis "from the vantage-point of the Malay courts (i.e. the Sultans)." This version, as so defined, would miss the view from below, which most current scholars would readily acknowledge to be a less than

complete and hence, inadequate portrayal of the past. Where possible, perspectives of all component groups in a society, colonizer and the colonized, ruler and ruled, male and female, dominant and marginal, should have their place in a reconstruction of past histories. And, as noted by Qasim Ahmad, 'the other histories' are still overshadowed by traditional studies.

Nonetheless, if the tide has clearly turned against Eurocentric historical writing, what remains to be done? Here, the way forward may lie in deeper mining of available sources, to be constantly on the lookout for new sources and in the refining of existing approaches to historical inquiries so as to build upon earlier efforts. The discussion following this will address this matter in more detail.

The Sub-region of Southeast Asia: Its Western Littoral

A good indication of the significance of a writer's work can be gleaned from the number and types of reviews received and the interest that it generates for further investigation by others. Anthony Reid's two-volumed *Southeast Asia in the Age of Commerce* certainly falls into this category. As Barbara Andaya's lengthy commentary notes, "It is already clear that Reid's work will be an important stimulant to future research, whether to question his conclusions or explore their implications further" (1997). One such question arises from Reid's consideration of Southeast Asia, where he attributes similar patterns of change for mainland and insular areas. But, in so doing, local variations and differences between sub-regions can be missed, a danger that all endeavours seeking to capture broader processes can fall into. To Reid's credit, he does also acknowledge diversity, which he proposes as one of Southeast Asia's defining characteristics. So too, world historian, Jeremy Bentley warns that on the quest "to analyze human experiences from broad and comparative perspectives", world history approaches must also be sensitive to the nuances of local experiences, to take into account local patterns of continuity and change.

Following from the observation of Reid's treatment of Southeast Asia as a 'relatively unified region' which may not give sufficient attention to its different

sub-regions and Bentley's caveat regarding the imperative of not letting the focus of one's interest blind one to other possibilities, I am proposing a broader local history, in the context of the sub-region and viewed against external forces. If the local history of Penang is to be fully understood, its hinterland cannot be disregarded; nor can larger global, hemispheric or continental processes be ignored. This then is the thrust of my argument, that a consideration of both internal and external dynamics, the local and micro scenario joined to the larger macro, sub-regional, regional and global perspectives, will yield a more balanced picture of the past.

This position is nothing new and is very much a synthesis of the various strands of recommendations culled from world history and Southeast Asian history, not forgetting my debt to New History. My input consists of modification of issues and questions from the main themes outlined before this, substantiated by the research conducted in the past few years on the maritime history and business history of the sub-region of the Western Littoral of Southeast Asia, centered on Penang.

Selecting the Straits port of Penang as the focus for a study of the maritime history of Malaysia during the colonial era is a logical choice. This is due to the fact that, even though Penang enjoyed a brief spell as the main British outpost in Southeast Asia as its first foothold from 1786, it was soon eclipsed by Singapore in the 1820s as the pre-eminent British port in the region. Singapore was thus the first to warrant the attention of economic historians, leaving Penang to be the subject of more serious investigation till later. Chuleeporn Pongsupath's 1990 doctoral thesis on "The Mercantile Community of Penang and the Changing Pattern of Trade, 1890-1941," followed on Wong Lin Ken's classic monograph on "The Trade of Singapore, 1819-69" which appeared in 1960. But this is only a minor reason. What would be a stronger rationale for a study of Penang?

First, among some of the more enduring questions of interest to historians are the factors of historical causation, the historical dynamics contributing to processes of continuity or change. This objective which lies at the heart of many historical inquiries can be joined to the main postwar concern of many post-colonial societies, Southeast Asia and Malaysia included, to re-

examine previous Eurocentric perspectives and to write 'autonomous histories'. These intentions would thus be the basis for more local studies. For, in addition to recapturing history from the vantage point of local communities, local histories can not only identify internal sources for development but also explore the interplay of internal and external factors responsible for the socio-economic transformation usually attributed to the colonial project.

Another motivation for local history is in response to New History's call for 'total history'. Admittedly, in the case of Malaysian history, notwithstanding John Drabble's *An Economic History of Malaysia, c. 1800-1990* just out in 2000, a 'total history' may have to await later attempts at an overview a la Braudel which would be based on a range of local studies, as parts of the larger whole as well as a treatment of "deep-seated structures" over the long-term. Total history here is a reference to providing space to all groups and all aspects of a country's past. Thus, both centers of power and peripheral regions merit consideration.

Before proceeding to the maritime history of Penang, a brief discussion on the concepts of center and periphery may be in order. As Wang Gungwu noted in his keynote address to the latest International Association of Historians of Asia gathering last month, the center or core-periphery paradigm has been widely used since ancient times. The older forms contrasted centers with peripheries in terms of unequal power relations while the modern connotation sees an interdependence between the two. The first has wider recognition as it is part of the terminology of the Dependency School of Development Studies in their reference to the metropolitan center of colonial authority as the site of power versus the periphery of the colonial territory, the subordinate 'other'. Scholars in this tradition also incorporate the idea of interdependence, with the center or core drawing on the periphery for a range of required primary commodities.

In its more recent treatment, there is now recognition of the complexities which attend to this concept. Amelia Kuhrt's 1995 review entitled, *Center and Periphery in the Hellenistic World*, of a volume produced by Danish ancient historians, supplies us with the following questions: "who defines

the center? the center of what? is there more than one? do those on the periphery...regard themselves as peripheral?" Indeed, applied to British Malaya, the administrative center may well be different from the economic or even the cultural center. My take on this concept is to accord prominence to what may be deemed a peripheral region to power holders. However, since Penang is viewed as the center and commercial hub to peoples of the sub-region, therein lies the raison d'être for centering the periphery. In other words, what is marginal to some may in fact be the center to others. A one-dimensional perspective which does not accord the periphery its due can result in an incomplete picture.

From the trade statistics in the table below, the importance of Penang to the sub-region is undeniable. Imports from Southeast Asian locations reflect the use of Penang as the outlet for produce of the sub-region while Penang's exports to the sub-region reveals its role as the funnel for both consumer and producer goods to sub-regional destinations. The two-way flows of traffic developed between Penang and the ports of the Western Littoral, from Akyab (present-day Sittwe), Yangoon, Moulmein, Mergui and Tenasserim in the north to Ranong, Takuapa, Phuket, Aceh and Medan in the south, including ports in the northern peninsula states of Kedah and Perak is solid testimony to the intra-Asian dimension of trade and shipping in this sub-region.

Table 1. Geographical Distribution of the Trade of Penang, 1841-1914 (in percentage)

Year	Southeast Asia		S. & E. Asia		West		Others	
	Imports	Exports	Imports	Exports	Imports	Exports	Imports	Exports
1841	41.22	38.66	45.0	34.75	13.79	17.25	0.00	2.33
1851	54.13	50.15	24.40	24.0	19.99	25.47	1.48	0.38
1868	63.17	54.74	17.27	13.49	8.57	26.87	11.00	4.90
1878	47.61	66.38	21.44	7.52	30.60	26.07	0.34	0.03
1888	51.91	55.53	30.54	17.26	17.07	27.06	0.48	0.15
1898	52.51	51.23	30.42	18.06	16.17	30.67	0.90	0.04
1908	72.70	58.53	15.76	14.28	11.02	27.02	0.52	0.17
1914	69.62	36.92	17.55	9.77	11.82	52.58	1.01	0.73

Sources: Straits Settlements Blue Books, selected years.

Next, to delve into business history. An examination of the trajectory of the leading merchant and shipping company, Koe Guan from the 1870s, to its make-over into the Eastern Shipping Company, 1909-1922, reveals its domination of regional shipping in the northern portion of the Straits of Melaka for almost half a century. Koe Guan and later, the Eastern Shipping Company, provided regular services to Burma, Siam, Sumatra, Singapore and China. This was at a time when European international ocean lines' preferred strategy was to capture the long-distance and worldwide trade, leaving space for local shipping to service coastal routes. Thus, while European firms were oriented toward Penang's trade with western markets, the Asian firms of the port played an active and indispensable role in dynamic regional and intra-Asian commerce for much of the 19th century into the early 20th century.

Now to apply Amelia Kuhrt's questions to Penang to see what might be the likely answers. To the first and second questions, Who defines the center? The center of what? From the perspective of decision-makers located in the capital, they would expect to have the 'say' as the elected voice of the people. And indeed, their answer would be the conventional and political definition, i.e. the capital is the center. However, to the inhabitants of the sub-region, Penang is the center of their 'world'. They send their goods to Penang for transshipment to destinations beyond and they buy a whole range of products from Penang, for example, Burmese rice via Penang to Phuket consumers. Many from South Thailand send their children to schools in Penang. Muslims from Aceh, bound for Mecca, head for Penang. In fact, Penang was much more to them if Snouck Hurgronje's comment of 1892 is found to be accurate, viz., "For the Atjehnese Penang is truly the gateway to the world; yes the world itself..."

Further research can provide more conclusive evidence in support of a positive response to the third question, Is there more than one [center]? My on-going project on the business networks of selected local firms is expected to shed light on their connections and linkages with entrepreneurs of the sub-region, the density of which can go some way to ascertain the extent of coherence of this zone along the western littoral of Southeast Asia. As for the reply to the fourth question, it is very likely to be that, despite being the

periphery from the nation-state's viewpoint, those on the periphery do not regard themselves as peripheral.

To conclude, this lecture looked at developments within the historical discipline in the past century, beginning with the emergence of New History; thereafter, what was to be one of the main specializations in history, namely economic history. Continuous change saw further expansion of the discipline with fragmentation within specializations as in economic history to new economic history in the 1950s and 1960s. Around this time, the Southeast Asian region as an entity in world politics became a reality with its own constituency of historians producing histories of Southeast Asia since the first effort by D.G.E. Hall in 1955. Then, some 20 years or so later, another globally significant development, the quadrupling of petroleum prices, set the stage for the take-off of world history in the 1970s.

The advent of each of the new strands of history bears the imprint of particular sets of circumstances reflecting the observation that each generation of scholars seeks to address present needs and that priorities of historical inquiry inevitably change over time. And, even as many acknowledge the implication concerning the relative nature of truth, history practitioners stand firm in carrying on the tradition of careful, painstaking attention to the sources, documentary and non-documentary evidence, in order to recapture the past, as fully and as accurately as possible.

This outline of major developments in some branches of history was undertaken with the objective of identifying questions and approaches of relevance to Malaysian economic history. Recent advances have served as the basis for determining what might be appropriate new forays in Malaysian economic history. From New History, the concept of 'total history', alerting us to the many stories yet to be told. From new economic history, we see the value of borrowing from other disciplines. As for the relevance of world history, it is all too clear that there is an urgent need for heightened awareness of and sensitivity to the global scenario. For, without an informed perspective, any nation state may very quickly loose its competitive edge, and may be unable to cope with natural phenomena oblivious to man-made boundaries.

What deserves emphasis is the similar message drawn from both world history and Southeast Asian history - a picture of dynamic intra-Asian trade as one worthy of further exploration by Malaysian economic historians. Economist Kaoru Sugihara offers us his findings of intra-Asian trade in the 30 years before the First World War, 1880-1913. That its average rate of growth was 5.4 per cent, surpassing that of world trade at 3.2% and roughly similar to the rate for Asia's exports to the west in a period of rapid growth post Suez, speaks volumes.

Finally, the main argument of this lecture, centering the periphery, giving space to the local but not neglecting the external dimension. For, unlike the wave of 'autonomous histories' of the 1960s and 1970s, which sought to focus on the non-European peoples, to redress previous writing privileging the west, but almost myopic in its turn inwards, today's globalised world requires a less narrow approach. The last section tried to illustrate how studies of the periphery can provide a different lens to view the larger canvas within which it is located. This is not meant to neglect nor to by-pass the micro picture, which is an integral part of the broader local history proposed. Rather, by situating the local within the context of sub-regional, regional and global systems, we may better capture the nuances, complexities and dynamism which go into the making of the shared past of the peoples of the Western Littoral of Southeast Asia.

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