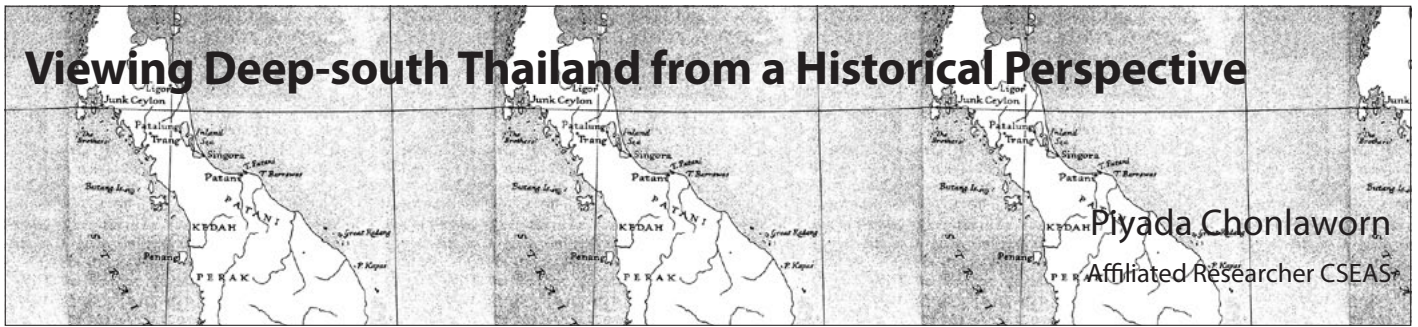


Viewing Deep-south Thailand from a Historical Perspective



What is 'Deep-south'?

In recent years, 'Deep-south' Thailand is a term that has come to be commonly used to refer to an area in Southern Thailand which has been affected by violence since late 2003. The area covers four southernmost provinces of Thailand; Songkhla, Pattani, Yala and Narathiwat, bordering northern Malaysia. The majority of the population of this region are Malay-speaking Muslims, yet the area has long been ethnically and religiously diverse, with Thai Buddhist, Chinese and indigenous people living together for hundreds of years. Pattani, Yala and Narathiwat were once known as an integrated Malay kingdom called *Patani*, having a long history of trade and cultural contact with powers in the North in the Thai basin and to the South in the Indonesian archipelago. As an autonomous polity, Patani had a loose tributary relation with Thailand (then Siam) since the 16th century, but when the political climate of the two polities changed in 1810s, Thailand attempted to assert control over her southern periphery by separating Patani into seven small states, each ruled by a hereditary sultan. During the last decade of the 1800s and the turn of the 20th century, Patani saw a tremendous change in its political sphere as a Thai royal commissioner was appointed to strengthen control over local rulers. In 1906 the position of the sultan was abolished and seven Malay states were reorganized again as *Monthon Pattani* under the direct jurisdiction of the central government in Bangkok, marking the end of Patani as a sultanate state. A traditional tributary sent to Bangkok in the form of ornamental tree made of gold and silver, and other local products were abolished. Needless to say, this process provoked discontentment among Malay elites which fostered and led to a separatist movement in 1950s and in the following years, a militant insurgency by radical Muslims in the southernmost part of Thailand that has continued into the present (Aphornsuvan 2007).

When talking about the 'deep-south' conflict, the debate often revolves around the political struggles of Malay people against the Thai authorities; how they were treated through discrimination by the Thais; and how their Malay identity was suppressed by national identity. On the other hand, Thai elites and aristocrats have viewed the conflict differently. They have often claimed that Patani had always been a part of Thailand, so any attempt to resist central government is regarded as 'rebellion.' This ideological conflict has deep roots in different perceptions of history that exist between the Thais and the Malays, making the history of Patani itself hard to fit into Thai national history (Montesano et al. 2008). For example, Haji Sulong Abdul Kadir al-Fatani (1875-1954?), a Patanian religion-nationalist demanded Patani's cultural and legal autonomy in

1950s and was seen by the Thai authorities to be a threat (Ockey 2011). But for many Malay people, he was regarded as their hero. Collective memories among Patanians also include their rulers such as the first female ruler Raja Hijau and the last sultan Tunku Abdulqadir Kamarruddin who has been remembered as a victim of Thai colonialism. Stories about the queen of Patani are often depicted in Thai movies, novels, and in recent years, as a heroine who struggles to keep her kingdom from a stronger influence. The fantasy and adventurous movie "the Queen of Langasuka" in Picture 1, for example, originates from the life of Raja Hijau (Piyada 2011). For Buddhist-Thai people in general, Malay Muslims in the southernmost region possess a different religious, ethnic, and cultural background, not to mention a unique geographical situation which is far removed from central Thailand. The word 'deep-south' thus inevitably reflects the remoteness and peripheral status of this area.



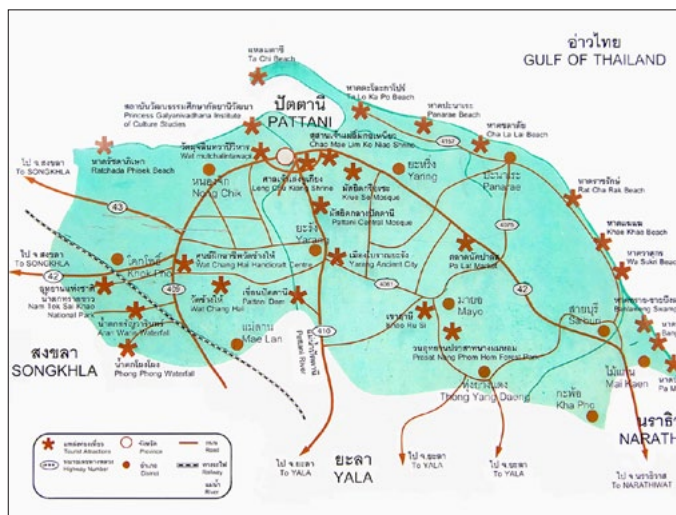
Picture 1: The movie *Punyai Chomsalad* (In Thai, Cannon and Pirates or the Queen of Langasuka) 2008

Background map in header: Patani and the Malay Peninsula (In Moreland 2002, 30)

Revisiting Patani's Past

The Thai-Malay historical background mentioned above makes any attempt to map and reconstruct Patani's past a difficult task. This is especially so when it comes to the political transitional period of the 1890s when the Central Thai regime and colonial powers like the British were becoming more involved in the region. Study of the region is made more difficult by the lack of local source materials (which are rare) as most existing documents were written by Thai officials and aristocrats, who were dispatched to oversee administration of the lower south at that time. These official records and reports were very Thai-centric, often self-serving and biased, yet these data sometimes provide valuable information on the social and economic activities of people in this region which are not easily found in local sources. However, it is not easy to obtain this source of information. Thai official archives concerning Patani and adjacent provinces during King Chulalongkorn (1868–1910) and King Vajiravudh (1910–1925), are kept in the Bangkok National Archive, and have been treated as confidential over the past ten years despite the fact that some contents are non-political. One of the reasons given is that materials remain confidential so as to avoid escalating the conflict between the Malay and Thai authorities in the 'deep south'. The fact that these sources are not publically accessible, undermines any attempt to enhance knowledge and understanding regarding Patani history especially from social and economic perspectives.

Apart from written sources, another kind of information that can help unravel the history of Patani is archaeological findings. Patani has several ancient sites such as Yarang and the famous Krue Sae mosque. Some sites date back to the 16th and the 17th century when trade with China, Japan and Dutch was active. It is said that a large amount of fragmented China ware, Chinese coins used in Ming period, and Dutch porcelain were found scattered in paddy fields and along the seashore in Pattani province.¹ Unfortunately the ongoing insurgency makes it difficult for scholars to conduct serious studies and excavations (Pict. 2).



Pict. 2: Map of tourist attractions in Patani. Red stars indicate natural and historical attractions which include Yarang Ancient City and Krue Sae Mosque.

Recently however, there has been a push by some archaeologists of Prince of Songkla University Pattani campus to start an excavation, giving us hope to obtain alternative information that could shed light on Patani's past. Such an attempt to unravel the little-known history of Patani will require the collaboration of experts from different fields working together.

Archaeological findings, together with existing written sources, can give us potential clues that this region was once an international entrepôt and ethnically and culturally diverse society, not a 'Malay' or 'Thai' dominated area often claimed by nationalists. The historical study of Patani might not be able to solve ongoing problems in southern Thailand, but new information and the reappraisal of old sources can enhance our knowledge and understanding of this region; an important step to help reduce ethnic and religious cleavage among the Buddhists and the Muslims in the region.

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Note

- ¹ Personal interview with Prof. Krongchai Hatta at Prince of Songkla University, Patani campus. 20 December, 2012.