

Riverscapes, Estuaries, and State Formation in Traditional Southeast Asia¹

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Abstract

Riverscapes have recently gained renewed scholarly attention in historical, environmental, and cultural studies on man and the natural environment. This paper explores the extent to which the main rivers of the Southeast Asian subcontinent have given shape to the rice growing human societies that emerged in their basins and, further, how those rivers may have influenced distinct historical state formation processes. In Southeast Asian islands, riverscapes became the cradles of a completely different kind of state formation process: the estuary-based Malay port polity.

Keywords: riverscapes, state formation processes, settlement patterns



In a figurative sense, civilization marches up and down the valley-section: all the great historic cultures, with the partial exception of those secluded maritime cultures in which the seas sometimes served instead of a river [like the Malay archipelago], have thriven through the movement of men and institutions and inventions and goods along the natural highway of a great river. (Mumford, [1934/1963](#), pp. 60–61)

River systems constitute an important segment of the water cycle that feeds life on earth—from the evaporation of water above the ocean, to the drifting of clouds that drop their rain on the continents, the precipitation turns again into little streams that combine in the countless rivers that empty into the sea. *Da hai na bai chuan* (大海纳百川), the ocean absorbs the hundred rivers, as the Chinese say.

Biologists studying *lotic* or flowing water ecosystems increasingly focus on watersheds as a whole. That is, they conceive of the river as one system from its source all the way to the sea. Out of this synthetic view, the overarching *River Continuum Concept* (RCC) has emerged, which views streams/rivers holistically as ecosystems and riverscapes as whole basins or multiple basins (Cushing et al., [2006](#)). Within the RCC various communities of organisms live in discrete patches along the general longitudinal gradient of the riverscape. Furthermore, biologists have ascertained that the junctions of the main rivers with their tributary rivers also contribute to the organization of specific biological communities.

This biological approach of riverscapes may help historians gain a better understanding of the mutual interaction between man and river in temporal and spatial contexts. For one, it makes sense to look at rivers from a wide perspective instead of simply focusing on subjects like irrigation, fishing, flood works, and so on. Analogies may be drawn with riparian communities if we study them as more or less discrete congregations of people who are living at different locations along the length of a river and interacting with it.

Waterways have been shaped in the course of time by the varying interests, values, and goals of their riparians: the people living on the riverbanks. Think for instance of the canalization of meandering rivers and the deepening or blocking off by barrages for irrigation or hydro-electric purposes. Yet in turn, the lifestyles of the riparian societies that have depended on these fluvial systems have also been configured to the waterways. Historical river towns and the deltas in which they are situated should be discussed in terms of a dialectical interaction between the dynamics of human agency and the natural environment.

Geographical narratives about rivers generally tend to be rather romantic stories about explorers and adventurers who sail upstream and downstream. There exists, admittedly, a large corpus of semi-fictional writings about the rivers of the globe, varying from Mark Twain's *Life on the Mississippi* to Joseph Conrad's *Into the Heart of Darkness*, the famous horror tale of his voyage up and down the Congo River in Africa. Like high mountains, long rivers attract and challenge adventure seekers. Among the more entertaining recent examples of travel literature about Southeast Asia's rivers are Edward Gargan's (2003) *The River's Tale: A Year on the Mekong*, Milton Osborne's (2000) *The Mekong: Turbulent Past, Uncertain Future*, and Steve van Beek's (2002) 58-day voyage along the Chao Phraya, *Slithering South*.

1 Historical Approaches

In the 1950s, Karl Wittfogel's controversial, Marxism-inspired magnum opus, *Oriental Despotism*, created a considerable uproar among historians. This monograph argues that the hydraulic-bureaucratic states of the past formed the fundamental template of the Asiatic Mode of Production and, thus, implies that there were historical connections between specific types of state formation and riverscapes (Wittfogel, 1957, 1969). Quite recently, rivers have gained renewed scholarly attention in historical, environmental, and cultural studies on man and the natural environment, such as *Something New under the Sun* by J. R. McNeill (2000), or more specifically David Blackburn's (2006) *The Conquest of Nature: Water, Landscape and the Making of Modern Germany*, a superb history of the spatial ordering processes that have occurred over the past three centuries in Germany. In his superb monograph, *Unruly Waters*, the Harvard historian Sunil Amrith (2018) analyzed how the Himalayan rivers play a major role in South Asian politics. From studies like these, it becomes clear that more than any other ecosystems on earth, riverscapes have provided much energy to the human societies that seek to harness them. Jared Diamond (2005), in his well-known study *Collapse*, wrote of geographic factors which have played a role in the disintegration of societies and, thus, showed the impact of the natural environment on the collapse of human communities. Conversely, we may actually be able to turn the argument around and show that rivers actually have contributed to integration and growth of structured societies.

In the past, I have compared two major river systems, those of Western Europe's Rhine River and its tributaries and the Yangzi watershed of eastern China, and singled out some of the geographic factors that help explain why these river basins have been hotbeds of economic development over the past 700 hundred years. I suggested that in spite of totally different bureaucratic



traditions, administrative constellations, and infrastructural arrangements, both riverscapes, thanks to the early emergence of interconnected urban clusters combined with the regional and supra-regional market networks that developed around them, have played prominent roles in the development of these two key economic areas in pre-industrial and industrial times (Chi, 1936; Blussé, 2019).

Although in Southeast Asia the geographic and climate conditions of Southeast Asia's rivers are very different from those of the Rhine and Lower Yangzi, one does not have to be a geographical determinist to acknowledge that in the past the region's formidable rivers have played an instrumental, if not primordial, role in the state formation processes in that tropical zone of monsoon Asia. Like the Nile, the Euphrates, and the Tigris, the cradles of ancient civilizations of Egypt and Mesopotamia, the Irrawaddy, Menam Chao Phraya, Mekong, and Red River, the main rivers of the Southeast Asian peninsula, have given shape to the rice growing human societies that emerged in their basins.

The aim of the present essay is to explore the extent to which the particular environmental circumstances of Southeast Asia's riverscapes may have influenced historical state formation processes. I suggest that rivers may serve as a paradigm, as a *root* paradigm, for understanding specific socio-political aspects of traditional Southeast Asian society. Special attention is given to the environmental factors and political economic strategies that on the mainland and in the archipelago during the age of "archaic globalization" gave birth to a succession of the large "Indic" kingdoms along the major river corridors of the mainland and, on the other hand, to a host of Malay port principalities in the estuaries of the islands of the partially submerged Sunda plateau.¹ Arguing that four river basins on the mainland and various rivers' estuaries of the archipelago played a pivotal role in the formation of two discrete typologies of Southeast Asian polities, I sketch how these state formation processes developed over time until about 1800, when all of Southeast Asia, with the exception of the Kingdom of Siam, progressively came under European colonial rule.

Given the format of this essay, it is impossible to deal with the organization of these state formations in great detail. I gladly refer to the writings of area specialists like Victor Lieberman, Anthony Reid, Barbara Andaya, and René Hagesteijn, each of whom, from different perspectives, have written on state formation in Southeast Asia. Instead, I will sketch how particular environmental situations have contributed to two characteristic state formation processes: (a) the large river basin-based kingdoms of mainland Southeast Asia, and (b) the estuary-based port polities of the archipelago.

¹ In the ice age some 15,000 years ago, when the surface of the sea was about 200 feet lower, these islands still were part of the mainland.

2 The River World of Southeast Asia

The geographical position of the Southeast Asian subcontinent is unique. Half peninsular and half insular, it sits astride the equator and derives from this situation a tropical climate. Because the area is situated on the edge of the Eurasian continent to the northwest and borders on the Australian continent to the southeast, it is subjected the circulation of dry and wet seasonal spells of the monsoon. With the exception of the savannah climate in the interior, the monsoon regime with its wet and dry seasons reigns over the area. The Southeast Asian subcontinent is a so-called *shatter belt*, a strategically positioned and oriented region, because it is wedged between the mountain chains of China in the north and India in the northwest. It plays host to a veritable mosaic of ethnicities and linguistic groups spread over the forested highlands and the river basins of the peninsular mainland, and it has a vast archipelago—a handful of islands very large and a multitude very small.

The majority of the ethnicities living nowadays along the rivers in the subcontinent have moved “top down” from mountain regions elsewhere. Over the past two millennia, the Irrawaddy and the Chao Phraya have served as conduits along which the Burmese and the Thais have descended southwards wiping out or dislocating the original populations of the river basins. In our time, the bulk of the Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia, and Vietnam populations live clustered in the alluvial basins and deltas of the Irrawaddy, the Menam Chao Phraya, the Mekong, and the Red River, all of which stream from a river knot on the Tibetan plateau in a southern direction. Throughout history, the high north-south pointing mountain ridges in the subcontinent have blocked cultural and economic contacts between these river valleys, and as a result, the flood plains and deltas turned into distinct ethnic, political, and economic units, with the populations of the river basins living in discrete patches, clusters, or nuclei in the high, middle, and lower reaches of the rivers rather than in contiguous concentrations. The Irrawaddy and the Salween cross in an almost parallel way Burma proper, but while the Irrawaddy is joined by various tributaries and serves as the cradle of Burmese civilization, the Salween is only navigable close to its mouth and, therefore, has not served as a transportation corridor or a focus of settlement (Penn, [2001](#), p. 240). On their eastern flanks, both rivers are shielded off by a high, forested mountain ridge from the Chao Phraya river, which in an almost parallel direction traverses Thailand from the north to the south and plays host to the Thai civilization. The third and largest river, the Mekong, also originates in the Tibetan highlands and marks the borders of Thailand and Laos before it cuts across Cambodia and empties into the South China Sea via the southern tip of Vietnam. During the rainy season, the Mekong stores much of its water in the Tonle Sap,



an enormous lake reservoir, which reduces the flood crests in the delta. In the dry season, the flow reverses and the water returns to the Mekong. The plain surrounding the lake—twice the size of the Mekong delta—used to constitute the central region of the Angkor Empire (Cressey, 1963, p. 296). Another mountain ridge to the east of the Mekong basin forms the watershed with a narrowing strip of land formed by coastal Vietnam. The Red River, which flows out of China into North Vietnam where it issues in the Gulf of Tonkin, is much shorter than the Irrawaddy, Chao Phraya, and Mekong. Yet, its basin is probably the most densely settled area in Southeast Asia.²

The Irrawaddy flows through a very extended lowland, some 800 miles in length, and together with the Sittang River creates a delta of some 40,000 square miles. The lowland of the Sungai Chao Phraya in Thailand is 300 miles in length with a delta of about 26,000 square miles. The Mekong has an irregular lowland which together with its delta covers about 100,000 square miles, while the Red River in North Vietnam flows in a structural trench and only widens out toward its mouth in a delta of some 5,400 square miles in circumference. These four river systems continue to play host to the major population clusters of the Southeast Asian mainland.

The settlement patterns of the populations of the insular world of the Philippines, Malaysia, and Indonesia are spread in a remarkably different manner than those on the mainland. Traditionally speaking, the highlands and the extended tropical forests areas of the lowlands of Sumatra and Borneo with their large rivers are relatively poorly inhabited, with the exception of the port areas in the estuaries. In the Ring of Fire, the chain of volcanic mountains that curve from Luzon in the north to Java in the south, dense rural populations are only to be found on the rich volcanic plains. The volcanic plains of central Java with their fertile soil and well-developed irrigation systems have been able to feed large population clusters and have provided a perfect location for state formation, just as the river basins of the mainland have done, as the legendary empire of Majapahit attests.

3 Continental Southeast Asia

In his *Strange Parallels*, Victor Lieberman (2003, p. 210) has sketched how over a period of a thousand years alternately in the upper, middle, and lower reaches of the four mainland rivers processes of territorial consolidation, administrative centralization, and cultural integration occurred in which the realms of the alluvial plains expanded over time and progressively subjugated the

² The dense population pattern of the Red River is more reminiscent of the culture sphere of China's large rivers than those of the other great rivers in Southeast Asia.

surrounding tribal populations of the highlands. He discerns the consecutive phases in which these “river-based normative and inevitable unification processes” occurred. He starts out with what he calls the “theocratic charter polities” of Pagan, Angkor, Champa, and Dai Viet that flourished in the river basins between 850 and 1300. All these kingdoms were involved in water control and irrigation projects, the extensive use of labor services, and the expansion of agricultural land. Owing to climatic factors as well as incursions between 1300 and 1450 by the Mongols and Thai bands, disorder and war ensued all over the region leading to the collapse of central authority and the sacking of the capitals (Lieberman, [2009](#), p. 17). Yet by the middle of the fifteenth century, new centralizing polities came into being: the Toungoo dynasty vanquished the Mon kingdom based at Pegu in the lower reaches of the Irrawaddy and ended up ruling over the whole river basin, the adjoining highlands, as well as part of the Malay peninsula. The Kingdom of Ayudhya gained domination of the Chao Phraya basin, the Lao kingdom of Lansang obtained control of the middle region of the Mekong, and the Khmer kings of Cambodia abandoned Angkor and moved their capital to Phnom Penh in the lower Mekong basin. Dai Viet in the north of Vietnam extended its territorial sway into Champa in central Vietnam and pushed remnants of that kingdom toward the Mekong estuary where it survived for another century.

The middle of the 16th century witnessed another period of unrest: the establishment of the Restored Toungoo in Burma and the Ayudhya kingdom in Siam. Both ruled until their demise in exhaustive internecine wars during the 1750s and 1760s. Yet within a very short time, dynastic rule was restored once more under the Kon-baung kings of Burma and the Chakri rulers of Siam. These dynasties moved their capitals, respectively, to Amarapura (close to today’s Mandalay) on the left bank of the Irrawaddy in central Burma and from Ayudhya downstream to Bangkok. By 1824, these two empires had extended their authority to the entire peninsula: Burma enveloped Arakan and Assam, Siam stretched out its influence over Cambodia, Laos spread to the east, and the Malay kingdoms spread to the south (Lieberman, [2009](#), pp. 19–21). This last effloresce of the great kingdoms of the Southeast Asian subcontinent at the end of the eighteenth century, when the Nguyen dynasty concluded its “march to the south” and Burma and Siam reached their largest dimensions, has been termed by Anthony Reid ([1997](#)) “The Last Stand of Asian Autonomies”.



4 The Shape of River-Based Societies

A question now may be posed: What did early river-based polities look like and how were they organized? Here I will not describe in detail the Indianized state models that were adopted all over continental Southeast Asia and on the volcanic plains of central Java; instead, I focus on the template of the organization and settlement patterns of Southeast Asian society. In search of a “cultural matrix” for Southeast Asia’s ethnic mosaic, Oliver Wolters has proposed the metaphor of the patchwork of “Mandalas”, circles of power, concentrated around rivaling strong men surrounded by tributary vassals. S.J. Tambiah has elaborated these ideas in the concept of “galactic policy” by showing how satellites (the tributaries) moved around a center of gravity. At the center of one Mandala, in times of diminishing power the satellites might move over to the power circle of a stronger ruler. Under these conditions, alliances often did not last longer than the reign of one powerful ruler.³ The early Mandala states were clustered around the rivers, as Renée Hagesteijn (1989, pp. 9–21) has shown in her *Circles of Kings*. In fact, she speaks of an almost constant process of clustering, declustering, and reclustered of political units in the early stage of state formation. Rather than being based on clearly demarcated territories, the galactic states of Southeast Asia were based on the numbers of followers that a ruler could assemble around himself.

5 River-Based Settlement Patterns

What then were the factors that contributed to settlement patterns and political centralization? Ironically, the presence of rivers in this region is so much taken for granted that few people have tried to generalize about the historical significance and function of these arteries. Two recent collections of essays on Southeast Asian geography and water use fail to devote a single chapter to the rivers (Boomgaard, 2007; Kratoska et al., 2005). Anybody involved in the study of Southeast Asian society or history is aware of the existence of the very different types of rice cultivation that have been practiced in the river basins and on the watersheds of mountain ridges situated in between. On the poor soils of the sparsely inhabited, forest covered mountain ridges, only shifting cultivation (so-called *ladang* or swidden agriculture) is possible. In the river basins, rice cultivation is practiced either by broadcasting seed on the flood plain or by transplanting seeds in well-prepared and irrigated fields.

3 Consequently, the galactic polity, which Lieberman prefers to term *solar polity*, consisted of a realm based on hierarchical patron-client relationships: the king ruled the central capital, his relatives ruled the territory outer shell, and the hereditary tributaries ruled the farther satellites.

It has been suggested by (Wittfogel, [1957](#), [1969](#)) that the management of river-based societies with their irrigation schemes for agricultural purposes irrevocably led to a specific kind of state formation because of the bureaucratic structure that was needed. He suggested that irrigation was a “unique cause of state formation.” On first sight, this would seem to apply well to Southeast Asian society where periods of insufficient rain and excessive flooding, annually, made some kind of water management necessary.

On closer observation it turns out, however, that the river basin populations were quite able to shoulder themselves with such tasks at the communal village level. The large-scale supervision of irrigation projects only played a role in the theocratic project of a strong ruler, such as the legendary Suryavarman II (1113–1145) of Angkor, who supervised the construction of the temples of Angkor Wat. Royal involvement in construction and irrigation works may have determined their large scale, but the maintenance of these infrastructural works remained in the hands of the local institutions. According to Stargardt and Tanabe, both cited by Hagesteijn, farmers and court nobles had separate interests: the farmers devoted themselves to agriculture, whereas the nobles focused on transportation and the construction of large-scale theocratic projects that were aimed at the legitimization of their supreme power.

Irrigation for the cultivation of rice (i.e., channeling water to the zone of the intended rice crop) was carried out in various ways. The most natural method was to make use of the annual flooding of the plains by the swollen river during the rainy season. Farmers applying this method, the so-called *seceding flood* agriculture, were active everywhere in the lower-basin region. The Chinese author Zhou Daguan ([2001](#)) who visited Angkor in 1296 wrote:

From the fourth to the ninth moon, it rains every day in the afternoons. The level of the water in the Great Lake (Tonle Sap) can then even rise seven to eight fathoms... The people who live beside the water all withdraw into the higher ground... Then from the tenth to the third moon not a drop of water falls. The [receding] Great Lake is then only navigable by small craft. In the deepest parts, there is only between three and five feet of water. The people then return. When the rice is ripe the farmers note the places where the floods can reach at a particular time, and plant according to locality. (p. 55)



This description dovetails with the observations of Justus Schouten who, in his *Description of Siam* of 1636, noticed that the Chao Phraya “was flowing once a year so high that it covered most part of the Country, making it incredibly fruitful [of rice] and destroying by this inundation (which lasts four or five months) all obnoxious vermin and creatures” (Boxer, [1935/1971](#), p. 96).

In most cases, however, man-designed irrigation systems were necessary in order to regulate a steady supply of water for the rice paddies:

a) The central bureaucracy managed the hydraulic agriculture method which took care of protective (flood) works as well as productive (irrigation)—here we think of Wittfogel’s model.

b) The community-based hydro-agriculture type of irrigation only focused on irrigation (Hunt, [2007](#)).

There can be no doubt that for labor-intensive rice agriculture and labor linked to irrigation, the mobilization of large labor forces was needed, and this demand for labor was a major cause of concern for pre-modern rulers in Southeast Asia. On the other hand, the abundant harvests of rice cultivation provided the potential to feed large numbers of people. Once regional political structures turned into supra-regional systems, such as in Ayudhya and Pagan, warfare was often turned into a tool to increase production power with bonded labor: “Thousands of captives were marched back home by the victorious armies of Burma and Siam” (Reid, [1988](#), p. 17; Hagesteijn, [1989](#), pp. 57–60).

If raiding for manpower has been referred to as a traditional *casus belli* in pre-modern Southeast Asia, the development of external trade has been cited as another factor in the centralization process. This certainly was the case for the port principalities of the archipelago that we shall soon turn to. After all, interregional trade constituted the *raison vivre* of these polities.⁴ Yet, in the case of the river-based continental realms, I would suggest that the internal exchange in the river basins (and the surrounding highlands) was the trigger that set off centralizing tendencies rather than overseas trade. The fertile river basins not only provided the opportunity to engage in rice cultivation but also offered a unique means of transportation to extend and establish political rule over large distances on a more permanent basis. What started out as short-term polities ended up as consolidating, centralizing, and integrating statehoods.⁵

⁴ It also was the case of the Kingdom of Ayudhya, where the ruler of the extended river-based agricultural region monopolized the revenue from trading activity in the capital near the sea.

⁵ This essay aims to show how Southeast Asia’s large river basins provided the ideal habitat for traditional state formation, so it makes little sense here to embark on a further exposé about the Indianized models of organizational structure that characterized the Pagan, Ayudhya, or Angkor kingdoms.

6 Island Southeast Asia

Let us now turn to the archipelago and see to what extent rivers and estuaries played a role in the formation of the Malay polities of the island world. Here we are not concerned with the Hindu-Buddhist agrarian kingdom of Majapahit (1293–1520), nor its Islamic successor state Mataram (1613–1756), nor the concentric Mandalas of the plains of central Java, which derived their existence from the rich volcanic soil they germinated. Short rivers did play a useful role in those kingdoms for transport to and from the coast, but they did not explain the settlement pattern and the power structure of those kingdoms.

First of all, a word of caution about the term *Malay* when one talks about Malay state formation processes. Here Malay will not be used as a discrete term for the Malay people as such, but in the sense of the loosely configured Malay world of the Austro-Malay speaking people. There is now a broad consensus based on archeological and linguistic evidence that, just as the Burmese and Thais migrated into the Southeast Asian mainland from China, the proto-Malays started trickling down from Taiwan into the Indonesian archipelago starting from 2,000 BC and that the homeland of Malayic speakers should be sought in Borneo.

A distinct Melayu culture began to emerge in the estuaries of the great rivers of southeast Sumatra around the beginning of the Christian era. From there, the Malays have fanned out all over the archipelago over the past two millennia. The name *Melayu* first appears in Chinese sources in connection with the legendary Buddhist Kingdom of Srivijaya, which by the end of the seventh century had grown into a full blown maritime power that controlled the strategic area around the Strait of Melaka in the Sea of Melayu, which acted as a corridor for all the shipping between the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea. There is still some debate about the actual geographical position of Srivijaya, but it is now generally agreed that this polity must have been situated in the neighborhood of today's Palembang in the estuary of the Musi River of South Sumatra.

The Malay *kerajaan* or principalities, which sprang up all over the Indonesian archipelago, were for the large part established in the estuaries of rivers which gave access to the hinterlands, to the production sites of forest products, and to cultivated spices like pepper. The emergence of these port polities throughout the Indonesian archipelago was closely connected with the collection of products from the tropical forests for export to China and later the world at large. The trade in precious spices took an eminent position in this network. For reasons of clarity let us mainly focus on two types of polity:

- a) Ports situated at a very strategic location where they acted as staple markets for long distance shipping passing through sea straits. Think of the sultanates of Melaka and Banten.



- b) Port settlements situated in the estuary of a large river controlling all the incoming and outgoing traffic of that river. Jambi and Palembang being situated in the estuaries of the Batang Hari and Musi rivers are fine examples of this type.

The typical Malay harbor principality was usually situated in a river estuary, providing an entrepôt for traders coming from elsewhere to purchase commodities brought from the up-river regions. Care was taken to situate the settlement not too close to the sea in order to avoid surprise raids by pirates or rival rulers. The upstream and downstream river traffic connecting the coast with the settlements of the tribal people of the hinterland was closely controlled by the *Raja*, who specifically had the monopoly on the sale of salt, an item that those living inland could not do without. State formation was in this case closely connected with the handling and taxation of import and export products. In the patriarchic “riverine” state, or *kerajaan*, all power was in the hands of a Muslim ruler, ideally a “big man” with attributes of supernatural power (Wolters, 1999). The *Raja* was assisted by a number of ministers and harbor masters to administrate his reign, to conduct external relations, and to provide leadership in wars. A fine description of the administration of these Malay polities has been provided by the Portuguese author Tomé Pires (1944) in his *Suma Oriental*. Pires participated in the conquest of the sultanate of Melaka in 1511 and, thus, could personally observe how affairs were conducted in the Malacca Sultanate. Elaborate Maritime Codes were drawn up, and the many “Golden Letters” (*Surat Emas*) kept in the British Library bear testimony of the high degree of diplomacy that was practiced among the Malay port polities (Winstedt & de Josselin de Jong, 1956; Gallop & Arps, 1991). Yet in these Malay societies in which large segments of followers often walked out on one ruler to join another, wealth was also accumulated through raiding, *merampas*. Like Homer's ancient Achaeans, traditionally the Malays rarely distinguished between trade and loot. As a result, the main concerns of the ruler were trade as well as wealth in political terms. Wealth enabled the *Raja* to gather more attendants around himself with the enlargement of his personal following as a result. Such occasional war-like-raids or outings were not without personal risk for the rulers who were supposed to show their personal bravery as men with “soul stuff” in the campaigns. In 1595, when Dutch merchants arrived in the Javanese *kerajaan* of Banten, an important staple port on West Java where traders from the India and China used to gather, they were told that only a few days earlier the young sultan of Banten had been killed during a raid in nearby Sumatra.

Barbara Andaya ([1993](#)) in her captivating study of the rivaling sultanates of Jambi and Palembang has elucidated the relationship between the *hilir* (downstream) and *ke hulu* (upstream) reaches of the rivers. Interestingly, she shows that in one particular case those living upstream, the pepper-cultivating people of the Minangkabau, were not at the mercy of the downstream coastal sultanates.⁶ Although closely culturally related to the Malay world, and individually adventuring (*merantau*) all over it, the Minangkabau hill people deliberately clung to their own identity. Whenever they were under the impression that the prices offered by the Malay merchants down river in Jambi or Palembang on the eastern side of the island were too low, they simply shipped the pepper via another river to the other, western side of the island where they could obtain a better price in the port of Padang. Other examples of successful peasant resistance and in particular up-river hinterland people, who successfully sought to evade the exploitation of the maritime-oriented Malay policies in the estuaries, are given by James Scott ([1985](#), [2009](#)).

The demographic character of the traditional Malay polity was of a fleeting and unsteady nature, as unsatisfied followers of a Raja might vote with their feet: they could run away and join a rival Raja if they no longer agreed or felt comfortable with their ruler's behavior or policies. The Raja's main concerns were therefore how to attract a large following of retainers and how to keep these in line. This was not just a theoretical proposition, as A. C. Milner ([1982](#), p. 7) shows citing the case of the highly frustrated Sultan of Perak on the Malay Peninsula who in 1816 complained that 80% of his people had fled to a neighboring ruler. Observing that by the end of the seventeenth century Dutch hegemony in the archipelago had clipped the wings of the erstwhile powerful polities of Makassar and Banten, Anthony Reid in his magnum opus *Southeast Asia in the Age of Commerce* dates the high time of the Malay kerajaan in the long sixteenth century of 1450–1680. But according to Milner, Trocki ([1979](#)), and Warren ([2007](#)), this may have been too pessimistic a view. Malay polities continued to show much survival power right into the nineteenth century. Without doubt the Sulu kingdom, situated in between the Philippines and the Dutch East Indies, remained with its far-reaching raiding expeditions throughout the archipelago the most extreme representative of the power wielding port principality.

6 See her magnificent study on the riverine sultanates Jambi and Palembang and how the upper and lower stretches of the rivers of East Sumatra interacted and continue to do so until the present day.



7 In Conclusion

The purpose of this essay was to show how distinct traditional state formation processes in mainland and island Southeast Asia were inextricably connected with their river habitat. Without wishing to sound like a geographic determinist, I would like to suggest that rivers as organisms acted like catalyzers for those riparians who were willing to use and interact with the opportunities that were offered by river basins and estuaries, respectively, in mainland and island Southeast Asia. In the great alluvial plains surrounded by highlands, the Irrawaddy, the Chao Phraya, the Mekong, and their tributaries provided the necessary irrigation facilities for rice cultivation and acted as the main avenues of transportation. They thus enabled the formation of strong inland states. In the maritime regions of the archipelago, where supra-regional trade reigned paramount, it was up to those who gained control of the estuaries to impose their will on those residing in the less commercially privileged interior zones of the tropical islands. In short, both on the mainland and in the archipelago, rivers served as providers of energy and resources. They may indeed be characterized as the driving forces in the history of Southeast Asia.

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