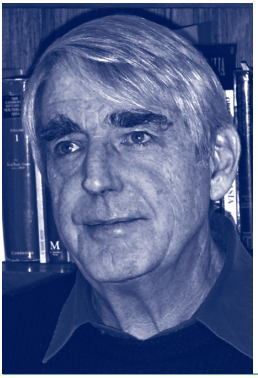

WE ARE ALL PERIPHERAL, OR ALL CENTRAL

ANTHONY J. S. REID

Born (in 1939) and educated in New Zealand, I left for a Ph.D. in Southeast Asian history at Cambridge (1965). I remained in that field for the next 50 years, though mobile in theme, period, and location. I began my academic career in Malaysia (1965–70) and ended it in Singapore (2002–09), with most of the time in between at the Australian National University in Canberra. Having begun like most of my generation with decolonizing political history (*The Contest for North Sumatra*, 1969; *The Indonesian National Revolution*, 1974; *The Blood of the People: Revolution and the End of Traditional Rule in Northern Sumatra*, 1979), I moved to a Braudelian understanding of Early Modern History (*Southeast Asia in the Age of Commerce*, 1988–93). There were many related explorations of slavery, freedom, the Chinese minority, economic history, names, death cults, Islam, etc. along the way, mostly taking the form of conferences and collective books. More recently I have sought to understand the career of nationalism in Asia (*Imperial Alchemy*, 2009) and at Wiko undertook the completion of a general history of Southeast Asia that seeks to explain historical change, identity, and culture without exaggerating the state as principal narrative device. – Address: Department of Political and Social Change, Australian National University, Hedley Bull Building 130, 0200 Canberra, Australia.
E-mail: anthony.reid@anu.edu.au

My generation of Antipodeans still overemphasized what Geoffrey Blainey called *The Tyranny of Distance* (1966) – meaning in the first place the frightening distance from Europe. Up until the 1970s, we suffered a typically colonial "cultural cringe" towards the ideas and aesthetics of Europe; nothing was culturally valid until endorsed on the other

side of the world. I was still expected to go to Cambridge, even if it was to study the history of a country (Indonesia) barely known there. Was I repeating this quaint displacement at the opposite end of a career a half-century later by coming to Berlin to finish a history of Southeast Asia?

Indeed, I have never been or felt as far from my comfortable "tribe" of Southeast Asians and Southeast Asianists as during this past year in Wiko. I had often come to Europe, indeed, as a guest of that tribe's distant members or to plunder its archive and library resources. But never had I been so intimately and delightfully embedded with people profoundly knowledgeable about Europe, its history, thought, art, music, and science. I was privileged and excited to learn some new insight about these matters every day. At earlier stages of a career, it might have seemed a luxury I should not afford or an acknowledgement of European centrality I did not wish to make. Yet I regret nothing of this experience and more confidently than ever believe all histories and destinies to be so entangled that all insights must be globally relevant, all experience part of the universal picture.

Dipesh Chakrabarty spent his year at Wiko worrying how to succeed in "provincializing Europe" when, like so many Bengali intellectuals, he was schooled in Marx, Weber, Foucault, and Habermas. More empirically inclined, I believe I have become more relaxed on this tormented issue by accepting that Eurasia before 1500, and the world thereafter, were inherently interconnected, and that any and all sources are welcome that bear on this past. Chinese officials, and after 1500 European ones, admittedly wrote more about Southeast Asia than did its own inhabitants, especially in the rational-bureaucratic mode our world appreciates. This of course needs to be consciously corrected for by the historian, but this is a somewhat less daunting challenge than correcting for the universal phenomenon of elites writing and recording more than ordinary folks, winners more than losers, men more than women. Learning from historians everywhere, notably in Europe as a denser historical field, how these biases may be overcome has helped me along the path of discovery.

My Southeast Asian history is designed to demonstrate how we have distorted human history by making the rise (and fall) of states its main theme. Since the majority of Southeast Asians had little use for legal-bureaucratic states before the 20th century, this seemed a good place to demonstrate the point. One of the fascinations of being in Central Europe was to be constantly reminded of the achievements of autonomous cities seemingly without or despite a superordinate state enforcing the rules of interaction. Visiting Erfurt,

Weimar, Naumburg, Magdeburg, Prague, Krakow, Leipzig, Göttingen, Quedlinburg, Freiburg, Frankfurt, and Bamberg was inspiring. Those wonderful civic spaces were built at the behest not of kings (mostly), but of bourgeois and aristocratic men and a surprising number of women. The kind of European history I (and I suspect most others outside Europe) had been taught was essentially England, France, and a little Renaissance Italy, until Germany came crashing into the 20th century. The state was the story.

One of the unexpected delights of our year was a day excursion to the Gartenreich Dessau-Wörlitz, with its wonderful combination of erudite guidance from Carl and Gustav, good company, beautiful gardens, and the surprising overlap of landscape and politics. Since a secondary obsession with which I had bothered Wiko colleagues was the danger of Indonesia's volcanoes, I was delighted to learn that Prince Franz had built an artificial volcano into his political garden as "a symbol of the power of natural forces to create regularity without external control". This put him on the side of the decentered "volcanists" in the Enlightenment debate about the origins of the universe and matched his liberal politics of minimizing central control.

The other great lesson of a year in Germany was accountability for the past. The dark side of the romantic prettiness of German towns was starkly brought home in gorgeous Quedlinburg, whose Romanesque *Stiftskirche* showed an exhibition of how it was taken over by Himmler in 1935 as a Nazi cult center for the 1000-year Reich. Wagner in his 200th year was never performed without explicit reminders of his anti-Semitic ranting. I became persuaded that even more epochal and unprecedented than the horror of the Holocaust itself was the astonishing completeness of German official and popular penitence for it. It is difficult to recall, or even to imagine, a remotely comparable rejection of any of the other horrors that man has inflicted on man over past centuries. Although the world has turned against slavery and certain types of non-contiguous colonialism, few have stepped forward to publicly regret the actions of their ancestors or predecessors. The new, post-revolutionary countries have been particularly slow to exchange self-righteous nationalism for acknowledgement of officially sponsored atrocities. I saw in Berlin the important film about the Indonesian massacres of the Left in 1965–66, "The Art of Killing". Its German audiences were extremely appreciative that this horror was finally being brought out of the shadows and accorded it the audience prize of the Berlin Film Festival. Its Indonesian audiences were ambivalent that it was the American Director, Joshua Oppenheimer, who had beguiled Indonesian mass killers into telling a story still suppressed in Indonesia. Post-war Germany has set the standard

for accountability very high, and it may be a long time before the rest of the world comes close.

Finally, let me give due thanks and appreciation to Wiko, one of the most successful of the research institutes with which I have been associated. I believe the Wiko model owes much of this success to its library service. It devotes its resources not to buy, catalogue, and store material in a host of fields, but rather to deliver the material to the clients – us. In a city as rich but diverse in libraries as Berlin, that works brilliantly, even for somebody as marginal as a Southeast Asianist. Thank you Sonja and your team, and thank you all at Wiko.