

## **Getting Malaysian history right**

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RECENTLY, a speaker at a convention spotlighted his idiosyncratic view of three major events in Peninsular Malaysia's history – the Japanese Occupation, the struggle for Independence and the Emergency.

At the Rise of the Ummah Convention on Jan 13, Ummah chairman Ismail Mina Ahmad was reported to have said only the Malay community resisted the British colonialists, Japanese occupiers and the Communists.

Ummah is a coalition of conservative Muslim groups.

Ismail's purported speech was challenged by the National Patriots Association, the Malaysian Armed Forces Chinese Veterans Association, several columnists and individuals.

One day, after Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Zahid Hamidi reiterated the battle against the communists involved various ethnic groups and that it was unfair to say only the Malays fought in the name of the nation, Ummah secretariat head Aminuddin Yahya denied newspaper reports about Ismail's remarks.

"(Ismail) never said 'only the Malays' fought and he did not deny the support made by non-Malay soldiers and police officers after Independence in fighting the Communists," Aminuddin said.

Overlooked in the controversy about Ismail's supposed remarks are two salient facts. First, how many in this country are aware the Malayan Chinese community was the targeted recipient of the greatest brutality by the Japanese?

Thousands of Malayan Chinese were killed by the Japanese – particularly through the use of sook ching (purification through suffering) screening operations – while the community was also forced to pay US\$50 million to the Japanese as penance for supporting China's war of resistance against the Land of the Rising Sun.

Information about the number of Malayan Chinese killed during the Japanese Occupation is often scanty.

In *A History of Malaysia*, Barbara Watson Andaya and Leonard Y. Andaya wrote "the numbers of those who died varied, but estimates range from 6,000 to 40,000" – the latter figure is also given by T. N. Harper in his book, *The End of Empire and the Making of Malaya*.

More hair-raising, though possibly biased, figures are provided by Elaine Tan in the *China Daily Asia*.

"In just five short months, an estimated 50,000 to 100,000 Chinese people were killed" in Singapore and Peninsular Malaysia, she wrote, adding 1,474 men, women and children were also decimated in the Yu Lang Lang massacre – only 35 individuals survived. Yu Lang Lang is an area that adjoins Selangor, Pahang and Negri Sembilan.

Unlike China, where seminal events like the Rape of Nanking are seared into the memories of its denizens today through historical accounts, films as well as a dedicated museum, the misery suffered by many during the Japanese Occupation in this country is infrequently detailed, let alone discussed.

In *A History of Modern Malaya and Singapore*, K. G. Tregonning's description of the Japanese Occupation is sparse: "But whether in the colonies or in the towns, the two characteristics of the Occupation remained: hardship and Japanese brutality ..."

Another frequently glossed-over fact – during the Emergency, many Malayan Chinese were often caught in the crosshairs of the fight between British security forces and the Malayan Communist Party.

Forcibly relocated to new villages to deny the communists a supply of food and information, many rural Chinese suffered a drop in earnings and physical hardship in their new homes while all Malaysians were pummelled by higher food prices as the acreage of cultivated land shrank drastically.

In 1951 alone, Johor's acreage under vegetables dropped by more than half, Harper noted.

Additionally, to inhibit support for the MCA, on April 10, 1949, the communists threw two hand grenades in Ipoh at its President Tun Tan Cheng Lock whom they labelled "Number One Big Dog of the British Imperialists".

Second, Malaysians' lack of knowledge about seminal events is compounded by some museums' selectivity.

For example, the Memorial Kemerdekaan in Malacca, now renamed Memorial Pengisytiharan Kemerdekaan, used to house several personal artefacts, including handwritten speeches belonging to MCA founder Tun Tan.

A few years ago, when I visited this museum, I was shocked to find all items belonging to Tun Tan and the write-up about his role in fighting for Malaya's Independence – together with Tunku Abdul Rahman and several other leaders – had been removed.

When I asked the whereabouts of Tun Tan's handwritten speeches and whether these papers and his personal belongings could be returned to the Tan family, I was informed all these items were kept by Arkib Negara; no reason was given for their removal or whether these could be returned to the Tan family.

This episode prompted two questions.

» Are there other museums in this country like the Memorial Pengisytiharan Kemerdekaan in Malacca?

» Do textbooks for schoolchildren offer a multi-ethnic view of Malaysian history?

Denigrating the speaker's lop-sided view is easy. Far more difficult is ensuring future generations of young Malaysians are inculcated with a multifaceted view of their country's history. Lacking this broad perspective, racial harmony in Malaysia could be seriously endangered.

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