



REVISITING MALAYA

Uncovering Historical and Political Thoughts
in Nusantara

Edited by Show Ying Xin Ngoi Guat Peng

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PUSTAKA PERDANA



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Forward¹

Jomo Kwame Sundaram

The very term “Malaya” implies several things. First, that it is a colonial construct, i.e., it began with British Malaya, understood as including: the Straits Settlements of Penang, Melaka and Singapore, the Federated Malay States (FMS) of Perak, Selangor, Negri Sembilan and Pahang, and the Unfederated Malay States (UFMS) of Kedah, Kelantan, Terengganu as well as the British-created states of Perlis² and, quite distinctly, Johor.

It is also important to recognise that the current federated states of Malaysia initially sought to bring together the Federation of Malaya (now known as Peninsular Malaysia), Singapore, Sarawak, Sabah (formerly British North Borneo leased from the Sultan of Sulu, not Maguindanao) and Brunei, whose sultan opted out before Malaysia was formed in September 1963 (Poulgrain 1998).

During the Western interwar period, the British Colonial Office increasingly administered British Malaya collectively – albeit differently – mindful of the historically agreed arrangements, e.g., through Residents in the FMS and Advisers in the UFMS, between the former Siamese-ruled UFMS in the north, and Johor, largely ruled through Singapore.

Sadly, the denial of the nation’s colonial history by some public intellectuals in recent years has set back and obscured a better understanding of the imperial origins of so many aspects of contemporary Malaysian governance, society, culture and economy.

Indeed, the very term “Malaya” embraces the word “Malay”, which has come to mean different things over time in various historical and cultural contexts. In Malaysia, “Malay” now refers to all who trace their cultural origins to the Nusantara (maritime Southeast Asia) and profess Islam. Historically, of course, the Malays were the Malay-speaking peoples largely from the Riau-Lingga region that was once controlled by the Dutch, present-

day Indonesia, as well as what is now Singapore, and Johor, which during the Johor Lama era was ruled by a dynasty which traced its origins to the ruling family of Melaka during the long 15th century CE. The Sarawak Malays can, of course, trace their origins to the Brunei sultanate.³

For various historical reasons, the Malay dialect of the Riau sultanate became the language of Nusantara commerce, as Oliver Wolters (1967) described in *Early Indonesian Commerce*. It was affirmed as the national language of the nationalist movement in Indonesia in the 1920s. Earlier, Sun Yat Sen, the Cantonese Guomindang (KMT) leader, had reputedly voted in favour of Mandarin, over his own “dialect”, to be the national language of China. Ethnic Malays were less than two per cent of Indonesia’s population, but Malay was chosen over the language of the Javanese majority despite the considerable influence of various Javanese cultural movements such as Budi Oetomo (Nagazu 1989). As Ahmat Adam (1995) has shown, the movement towards Malay as the Bahasa Indonesia was not monolithic: ethnic Chinese publishers played a pivotal role in national promotion of the Indonesian language through their publications.

Malay as the *lingua franca* of trade in the region has a long history. According to his chronicler Pigafetta (1995), when Magellan reached the Philippines half a millennium ago, his slave, anRyq [*sic*], probably named after Prince Henrique the Navigator – obtained in Melaka, but suspected to be from Sumatera – was able to communicate with the locals, suggesting the extensive use of Malay in the northern part of the archipelago as well. Late in the 19th century, the Philippine national hero, Dr Jose Rizal identified himself and his nascent nation – then still ruled by Spain – as Malay (Curaming 2017).

One question which arises is why Ming Admiral Cheng Ho bypassed Singapore and the Srivijayan port of Palembang in south-eastern Sumatera to favour Parameswara’s then-new port of Melaka. It is also unclear how and why Parameswara converted to Islam, and the Melaka sultanate’s pragmatic interpretation and elaboration of Muslim navigation and commercial rules, e.g., in the evolving *Undang-undang Melaka* and *Undang-undang Laut*. The sultan had not one, but four Shahbandar managing trade: a Javanese in charge of the Southeast Asian region; a Chinese handling the rest of East Asia; a Tamil covering the Bay of Bengal, especially the Indian side; and a Gujerati managing points further west, around the Arabian Sea. Such

pragmatism enabled Melaka to emerge rapidly to become the greatest port in the world within a century, motivating the Portuguese conquest of 1511 which was led by Afonso Albuquerque.

In the ethnic classifications of demographic information before the Japanese Occupation, the British distinguished among different ethnic groups from the Nusantara (Javanese, Bugis *et al.*) as with those from China (Teochew, Hokkien *et al.*) and India (Tamil, Malayalee, Telugu *et al.*). This continued until the imperial discourse of “divide and rule” ethnic governance changed in response to growing anti-colonial agitation, especially with the Great Depression (Hirschman 1987). It is therefore important to recognise the historical, cultural and political origins of the ethnic or cultural discourses of Malayness in various parts of the Nusantara, including contemporary Malaysia. This is most obvious in the changing discourse of Bumiputeraness, but also manifest in other discourses, e.g., in discourse of “*bangsa Johor*”, or being Kelantanese or a Sarawak Malay.

The association of Malayness with Islam is almost uniquely Malaysian, and legally entrenched in the new Malaysian Constitution of 1957. Thus, for example, the Kristang (the word is believed to be a Malay version of Kristao, or Christian) of Melaka, sometimes called Portuguese Eurasians, converted to Catholicism after the 1511 Portuguese conquest, are not considered Malay, while it is socially, culturally, and even legally possible to become Malay (“*masuk Melayu*”) through conversion to Islam.

Various recent developments compel us to ask questions which challenge some seemingly “settled” issues in scholarship on the nation and the region. First, the marine archaeological recovery of the so-called Tang shipwreck suggests that the Omani-built ship had taken cargo from Persia to a north-eastern Chinese port during Tang dynasty rule. After discharging its cargo, it took on new cargo for its return journey back to the Persian Gulf. Probably sailing to Sailendra, the Java-based kingdom east of Srivijaya, the ship sank off the Indonesian island of Bilitong, east off lower Sumatera (Murphy *et al.* 2017).

This suggests Muslim voyages in and through the region from at least the 10th century CE. However, mass conversions to Islam possibly only began four centuries later, before the founder of Melaka, Parameswara converted to Islam to become Iskandar Shah⁴ in the early 15th century CE (Ahmat 2020). By then, various other parts of the region, such as north Sumatera, had

already embraced Islam from the end of the 13th century CE. The Terengganu Stone, which dates back to the beginning of the 14th century CE, regardless of the actual year of its sculpting (al-Attas 1969; Ahmat 2017), suggests Islam was already embraced in Terengganu at least a century before Melaka, probably by way of China (Fatimi 1963). Instead of the recent debate as to whether Islam came to the peninsula via Arab traders or Muslim Indian merchants, Islam's spread to parts of the archipelago and the peninsula may have been primarily due to Muslim Chinese voyagers, as in the case of the *Wali Songo* (nine saints) in Java (Fatimi 1963).

The shifting politics among the British, the Dutch, Riau Sultanate and Bugis involving colonial Singapore reflects the complex and changing diversity of Nusantara ethnic relations. In 2019, Singapore celebrated the bicentenary of the treaty between the English East India Company (EIC) represented by Stamford Raffles and the Riau Sultan, based in Singapore after the Dutch United East Indies Company (VOC) had wrested the Riau islands and Lingga in southern Sumatera from his sultanate. The quasi-official Singapore narrative during the Lee Kuan Yew era was that Raffles established the basis for modern Singapore's success, transforming a sleepy fishing village into a bustling entrepot. Syed Hussein Alatas (1971) challenged this narrative by rhetorically asking whether Raffles was either a genius or a schemer. Both sides seemed oblivious that the treaty merely allowed the EIC to set up a factory to process spices and to trade with any other party, now interpreted as a commitment to "free trade". Raffles was in Singapore only briefly, antagonising many in the process, while William Farquhar, the former Resident of Melaka, deserves much of the credit for whatever was achieved during the early years (Wright 2017).

Five years later, the 1824 Anglo-Dutch treaty paved the way for eventual British ascendance in a region where the VOC had been dominant for most of its existence in the 17th and 18th centuries CE before the Napoleonic invasion of the Netherlands hastened its demise. During earlier Anglo-Dutch rivalry, the Dutch apparently favoured using the Bugis *inter alia* to undermine the Riau Malay sultanate. Finding the Malay sultans of Singapore recalcitrant, the British gradually shifted their support to the Bugis Temenggong (Trocki 1979), eventually elevating Daing Abu Bakar to become Maharaja, and later Sultan of Johor, using the British naval officer's uniform as the basis for his official regalia.

By the time of the bicentenary, however, the new quasi-official narrative would start Singapore's history around 1299, with Singapore emerging as a major trading port in the 14th century CE before Melaka's golden 15th century CE. Gone are the ever-shifting alliances and dalliances between the Bugis and the Riau Malays on the one hand, and between the Dutch and the British, which changed remarkably over the course of the 19th century CE.⁵ Instead, there is an ethno-populist history which ignores the changing diversity of pre-Second World War Malay, Chinese, Indian and Other identities.

The recent growth and spread of ethno-populism, including ethno-nationalism, prompts revisiting William Roff's (1967) identification of three strands of what he calls Malay nationalism before the Japanese Occupation during the Second World War. Muslim opposition to colonialism and Western imperialism is well-known although attitudes towards the emergence of Arab, Turkish and Zionist nationalisms with the demise of the Ottoman empire were more varied.

Before the states in the northern part of the peninsula were ceded by the Siamese empire under British pressure, the *madrrasah* schooling tradition was strong. In Indonesia, Sarekat Islam not only laid the basis for the Indonesian national movement (Djaelani 2017), in contrast, say, to the Javanese cultural revivalist Budi Oetomo movement, with one wing even becoming the rump of Indonesia's communist party (PKI).

Meanwhile, from the 1920s, the Malay elite began organising themselves in state Persatuan Melayu associations. Although the Malay College in Kuala Kangsar had already been established for their scions' English language education, there did not seem to be a collective consciousness of themselves as a national, let alone nationalist elite (Amoroso 2014).

Instead, it was left to another Perak-based boarding school instructing in the Malay language to train Malay schoolteachers at the Sultan Idris Teachers College (SITC). While undoubtedly privileged and respected in their own communities, these teachers were not alienated from them by language and culture. SITC history teacher Hadi Hassan's alternative history, posthumously -republished in 1952 in three volumes as *Sejarah Alam Melayu*, was the first nationalist alternative to R. O. Winstedt's (various) and R. J. Wilkinson's English language colonial historical narratives.⁶ Before its post-war publication in Rumi (Roman script), his cyclo-styled notes in Jawi (Arabic script) were reputedly the source of inspiration for many putative

nationalists.

Meanwhile, the Kesatuan Melayu Muda (KMM), formed in 1938, apparently drawing inspiration for its name from the Young Turks, mobilised younger educated Malays from diverse social backgrounds and inspired by a world in ferment during the Great Depression, against British imperialism and its discontents in the peninsula. As in Indonesia and India, the KMM leadership had some differences among themselves over whether or not to collaborate with the Japanese Occupation against British imperialism. However, the top leadership of KMM, namely Ibrahim Yaakob, Dr Burhanddin al-Helmy and Mustapha Hussein initially worked with the Japanese against the British, although Ibrahim and Mustapha were soon at loggerheads with each other over whether the Japanese could be relied upon.

Malay journalism and literary publications were also important in generating mass popular support for ethno-populism of various tendencies. Meanwhile, the British promoted broader ethnic categories by using the census in connection with its more pronounced “divide and rule” approach in the 1930s and the related preference for ethno-populism over more radical anti-colonial mobilisation (Hirschman 1987).

Malay journalism and literature, largely based in Singapore then, included a variety of tendencies. On the one hand, Rahim Kajai emulated his Indonesian counterparts who complained of the excessive power and influence of Muslims of Arab and Indian ancestry (Latiff 1984). On the other, Yusof Ishak’s *Utusan Melayu* soon earned a reputation for advocating anti-colonial causes in support of a progressive conception of the postcolonial nation (Norshahril 2015). After the Japanese Occupation, his editor, Samad Ismail connected the newspaper with other progressive movements, especially those based in Singapore who envisioned its future as part of the Malayan nation. The anti-colonial literary movement, Angkatan Sasterawan 50 (ASAS 50), contributed to this vision, helping shape progressive anti-colonial thinking among writers and students for several decades before and after independence.

The editors of this volume, though not necessarily most of its contributors, seek to elaborate a novel approach, namely that of “Malaya as method”, inspired by Chen Kuan-Hsing’s (2010) “Asia as method”. It identifies itself with post-colonial thought, which many see as inspired by a critique of post-modernism. At the risk of over-simplification, post-

colonialism offers critiques of modernism, especially colonialism, and by implication, imperialism, while Chen's method rejects much extant scholarship on Asia.

As I understand it, Chen's "Asia as method" rejects much of contemporary scholarship on Asia, or more accurately, Asian subject matters, on at least two grounds, namely of method as well as source materials. However, it is not clear that most authors of chapters in this book are familiar with, let alone inspired or guided by Chen's approach. The question then arises as to whether the editorial work in preparing this book sufficiently repositions it as an expression or manifestation of the method.

Nevertheless, this volume is an important contribution to the literature, not only because of the originality of the individual chapters, but also for providing important critiques of their respective subject matters, especially by demanding critical interrogation of extant scholarship on their subjects. By thoughtfully convening the two conferences and their editorial efforts, the editors have served all of us interested in the future of the nation, and the contribution of scholarship to this challenge. Aably compiled in this volume, it collectively represents a challenge to much extant mainstream scholarship.

But instead of elaborating "Malaya as method" narrowly, whether geographically, historically or even in terms of the conventional significance attached to "Malaya", the editors, especially in Show's introduction, boldly seek to invest it with additional significance, e.g., in relation to the Nusantara, even beyond "Malaysia".

Despite the end of the communist-led insurgency, confirmed by the Hat Yai peace treaty signed in December 1989, it is still crucial to learn from the failure of the Left to remain relevant in contemporary political discourse from at least a decade before. While not underestimating the significance of the repression on both sides of the Causeway as well as the changed international situation, it is particularly relevant to revisit the classical "national question", especially the difficult ethnic, language, religious, cultural, education and related issues.

The contents of this volume go a long way to furthering our understanding of many dimensions of the difficult issues involved, including the national question. I, for one, am grateful to the chapter authors and the editors for their sustained efforts. The questions are difficult. The answers are probably even more divisive and difficult, and not likely to be easily

amenable to public policy interpretation and implementation. But at the risk of stating the obvious, it is the responsibility of all patriotic intellectuals to work towards progressive solutions, by learning and working with others similarly committed, adopting new innovative approaches and speaking truth to power.

Notes

- ¹ I am grateful to Noelle Rodriguez, Show Ying Xin and William Tham for providing me with many references. Needless to say, none of them are responsible for the heresies expressed here.
- ² The creation of Perlis as a separate kingdom to serve as a buffer state further weakened Kedah after it had lost Penang and then Province Wellesley (now Seberang Perai) as well as the “empire” of Siam as it negotiated its own survival in relation to British and French imperialisms (Bonney 1971; Chandran 1977; Thongchai 1994).
- ³ The British corrupted Brunei to refer to the island of Borneo, known in Indonesia and beyond as Kalimantan.
- ⁴ Ahmat Adam (2020) continues to draw attention to problems raised by relying primarily on the *Sejarah Melayu*, a literary work completed a century after the Portuguese conquest in 1511 had ended the original Malay sultanate.
- ⁵ The complicated historical role of the Orang Laut in the Nusantara over time is a fascinating under-researched subject (e.g., Barnard 2007). Melaka’s *Undang-undang Laut* and the scant available historical accounts hint at a possibly significant role in providing protection against piracy to merchant vessels plying the Straits.
- ⁶ With the ongoing revival of British imperial nostalgia, there is renewed interest in and legitimisation of the colonialist gaze which Winstedt probably best exemplifies for Malaya.

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Foreword

Syed Husin Ali

This comprehensive book is a compilation of twenty-two of the papers that were contributed by Southeast Asian scholars – mainly from Malaysia, Singapore and Indonesia – to two conferences, one in Kuala Lumpur in 2014 and Yogyakarta two years later.

Its main title, *Revisiting Malaya* (following the title of the conferences), may give the impression that the book focuses mainly on Malaya, the name by which the Malay Peninsular was known before the formation of Malaysia in 1963 – made up of Malaya, Sabah, Sarawak and briefly, Singapore – and essentially viewed from a historical perspective. The subtitle of the book, *Uncovering Historical and Political Thought in Nustantara*, gives a closer description, although not fully.

Firstly, the discussions on Malaya do not end with the formation of Malaysia but extend to contemporary Malaysia. Secondly, Malaya or Malaysia is not confined only to the Peninsula, but instead related to other countries like Singapore, Indonesia and the Philippines within the context of the wider Malay Archipelago, commonly known as Nusantara.

Thirdly, the link between Malaya or Malaysia with Indonesia is strongly emphasised. Finally, the subject dealt with does not cover only historical aspects, but also touches widely on art and literature, politics (anti-colonial struggles and nationalism), economics, and social issues (such as imagined communities).

Each article (which constitutes an individual chapter in this volume) deals with a particular topic. But all of them are closely knit by a common thread, which is history. Although Show Ying Xin, one of the editors, writes that ‘the conception of revisiting Malaya is not only to trace history’ in the first chapter, she also admits that it is ‘a social memory heavily embedded within history’ (p.2). Indeed, I find that the historical theme is most dominant. For this reason, I shall now delve on this aspect.

As I have discussed elsewhere (*A People's History of Malaysia*), it is possible to categorise history into three types, namely, the official, alternative and people's history. Official history is often the history of the victorious or the ruling elites and what they performed and achieved. It is commonly depicted in school textbooks and similar official writings. More often than not it focuses on the roles and achievements of a select number of individuals rather than the ruling elite as a group.

On the other hand, alternative history recognises the roles and contributions of people and events that are usually left out (often deliberately) in official history. It should be noted that a good alternative history combines both the official and alternative aspects in a fair and balanced manner. Therefore, when totally rejecting a one-sided official history, it does not mean we should adopt alternative history exclusively.

As for people's history, it focuses on the role of the ordinary people from the lower classes in creating history. In other words, history is written from the people's perspective. This is difficult to do because the people's contributions are rarely recorded in writing and may sometimes be inherited only in the form of legendary traditions, which are not historically reliable. In contrast, contemporary history can be more easily written by collecting oral history from those still alive.

In my considered opinion, based on the approach and contents of almost all the chapters in this volume, *Revisiting Malaya* does not represent an official history. Neither does it fully constitute a people's history. Instead it combines both the elements of alternative and people's history. Therein lies its originality and strength.

Undoubtedly, *Revisiting Malaya* is an important and useful contribution to knowledge on Malaya or Malaysia, within the context of Nusantara. The two editors, Show Ying Xin and Ngoi Guat Peng, deserve to be congratulated for their praiseworthy efforts in compiling and publishing it.

Towards 'Malaya as Method': Revisiting Nusantara thoughts through 'Malaya'¹

Show Ying Xin

Speaking of “Malaya” – a term that denotes a passage into history – often evokes a sense of nostalgia and reminiscence for a long-gone era. We picture landscapes of rain and breeze under the banana and coconut trees in the *kampung*, just like images out of the golden age of the Malayan cinema in the 1950s and 1960s, where P. Ramlee and Saloma sang along with the *keroncong*. Images of cheerful Malays singing, dancing, and courting in movie scenes abound, which are often contrasted with our current society by contemporary critics.

Needless to say, this is not the only Malayan imaginary in existence, but one that resonates with many as one of the sanguine, positive images of the period even as the Cold War played out with devastating effect across Asia. It is also one that leaves out the not-so-happy episode of the so-called Malayan Emergency (1948-1960), launched to curtail not just communist ideology, but also leftist politics.

Returning to the pre-war era, the colonial ideal of Malaya, in which the domiciled European subjects occupied a central space alongside local and migrant elites, also demonstrated another, undoubtedly Orientalist, discourse on Malayan imaginaries. It was precisely this Malayan imaginary that triggered Malay nationalist resistance in the colony. Feeling subjugated by the Malayan “upper class”, the hitherto “underclass” Malay nationalists sought to reclaim their identity through political means. In the mainstream narrative, radical struggles are often downplayed – the “peaceful” independence of Malaya was only granted by the British in 1957.

In this sense, “Malaya” can be regarded as a site of memory where people express their multifaceted, if not contested, memories of the past. If Malaya is

Revisiting Malaya seeks to explicitly address problems of colonialism and its legacy, taking regional Cold War divisions as well as historical links and fractures into consideration. By considering a wide range of topics presented by speakers at two landmark conferences, from the propaganda efforts of the Malayan Film Unit to the writings of visionaries and revolutionaries, ranging from Usman Awang to Tan Malaka, this book uses 'Malaya as method' to better understand historical and contemporary realities.

Revisiting Malaya does not represent an official history...Instead it combines both the elements of alternative and people's history. Therein lies its originality and strength....an important and useful contribution to knowledge on Malaya or Malaysia, within the context of Nusantara.

- Dr Syed Husin Ali

This volume is an important contribution to the literature, not only because of the originality of the individual chapters, but also for providing important critiques of their respective subject matters...By thoughtfully convening the two conferences and their editorial efforts, the editors have served all of us interested in the future of the nation, and the contribution of scholarship to this challenge.

- Dr Jomo Kwame Sundaram

>>>>>>>>>> **Revisiting Malaya**

Uncovering Historical and Political Thoughts in Nusantara

