

# Chronicling Themes *in the* **ECONOMIC** *and* **SOCIAL HISTORY** *of* **MALAYSIA**

*Edited and with an Introduction by*

**SULTAN NAZRIN SHAH**

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*Chronicling Themes in the Economic and Social History of Malaysia* comprises 35 fascinating chapters by highly distinguished scholars. The chapters cover multicultural and multiethnic Malaysia's volatile and intriguing past as it transformed itself from a low- to an almost-high-income economy.

In its tracing of the country's economic development, the book explores the institutions and governance of British colonial rule, when tin and rubber were the mainstay of Malaya's rising prosperity; the country's struggles during and after the Japanese occupation; the Emergency and Communist insurgency; Britain's counter-insurgency, as it fought to protect its huge economic investments in the country; and Malaya's independence in 1957.

Progressing further into the 20th century, the book critically evaluates the New Economic Policy, with its strident affirmative action to redress historically determined economic and social imbalances between Malays, Chinese, and Indians. It also analyses Malaysia's experience of structural change, from agricultural dependence to modern industry and services, which helped lagging rural communities move out of poverty, as well as the changing definitions, impacts, and meanings of poverty.

Alongside these historical discussions, the chapters touch on many issues of contemporary relevance, including Malaysia's current middle-income trap predicament, the challenges of its education system, women's contribution to development, the rise of Kuala Lumpur as a great Asian city, and the emergence of Penang as a global electrical and electronics hub.

Replete with expert perspectives, thorough analyses, and striking visuals, the book will be of great interest to policymakers and planners, academics and students, and anyone wishing to learn about the nation's captivating past—and the key challenges that it will surely overcome.

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To my teachers  
Dwight H. Perkins      C. Peter Timmer





# Preface

I established the Economic History of Malaya (EHM) Project—recently renamed the Economic History of Malaysia Project, retaining the same acronym—at the Asia-Europe Institute of Universiti Malaya shortly after my return from Harvard a quarter of a century ago. At that time, I was preoccupied with preparing a robust and comprehensive set of historical accounts of Malaya’s gross domestic product (GDP) for the first four decades of the 20th century. These were subsequently published as *Charting the Economy: Early 20th Century Malaya and Contemporary Malaysian Contrasts* (OUP, 2017).

Prior to that, in January 2016, the EHM Project had entered a new phase of research and outreach, and a website had been established to house and disseminate the outcomes of this research (<https://www.ehm.my>). Besides an extensive historical economic and population database, and a detailed technical description of the methodology behind the GDP accounts, the EHM website also hosts articles written by eminent scholars on the economic and social history of Malaya/Malaysia, their individual states, and smaller geographical areas. More than 50 articles have been published on the website thus far, representing a rich vein of diverse and fascinating material.

Among the articles on the website, 35 were selected to be published in this book. They are representative of three central interconnected themes: Part 1 covers the economic development of Malaya/Malaysia and is subdivided into three sections: the colonial years before independence, the post-independence era, and a holistic view of both periods. Part 2 covers social development, and Part 3 the development of states and cities. All these articles were uploaded to the EHM website between November 2016 and July 2024, and have been very lightly edited for the purposes of publication in book form.

In my Introduction, I have tried to contextualize each of the articles in relation to relevant phases and events in the country’s history, drawing from my own published

research. This research includes my second book, *Striving for Inclusive Development: From Pangkor to a Modern Malaysian State* (OUP, 2019), and my most recent book, *Globalization: Perak's Rise, Relative Decline, and Regeneration* (OUP, 2024).

I would like to express my deep appreciation to all the highly distinguished authors who have contributed articles to the EHM website, as well as to my small project team, led by Richard Leete, and including Cheng Fan Soon, Vincent Lim Choon Seng, Sharon Ng, and Linda Tham, which manages the process of reviewing and uploading these articles.

Understanding the economic and social history of any country—including both its achievements and its challenges—is fundamental for framing transformative policies. I hope that all institutions responsible for formulating policies at any level in Malaysia will take cognizance of the country's past, and that, through the publication of this book, a broader readership will become familiar with the economic and social themes of Malaysia's compelling history.

Sultan Nazrin Shah  
Istana Iskandariah  
July 2025

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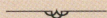
**Sultan Nazrin Shah** brings together highly distinguished researchers to explore issues in the economic, administrative, and social history of modern Malaysia.

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