In the final chapter of her most recent book, *Planting Empire, Cultivating Subjects, British Malaya, 1786-1941*, Lynn Hollen Lees describes how memory—both real and imagined—shapes the current vogue of colonial nostalgia in Malaysia (then British Malaya). For European colonialists and their descendants, the status and luxurious lifestyles of whites in the colonies offer a romanticized view of empire, similar to the nostalgia for the American Antebellum South conveyed by the film (and book) “Gone with the Wind.” More difficult to explain, however, is the nostalgia for the colonial period voiced by quite a few contemporary Malaysians. Lees perceptively observes that historical memories are often statements about the present as well as the past. For example, many Malaysians who are troubled with the contemporary political and ethnic divisions fondly recall the ease of mixing and close friendships made across ethnic and religious lines during the colonial era. Lees also notes that some Malaysians look back at British colonials as objects of humor and ridicule rather than as heroic figures.

These gems are among the many interesting and insightful observations reported in this richly detailed empirical study that draws upon archival sources, historical newspapers, and periodicals, in addition to most of the standard texts on Malayan history. The story begins in 1786 when the British established a permanent settlement in Penang, but the primary focus of the book is the period of British economic ascendancy and political hegemony from the last quarter of the 19th century to December 1941 when the Japanese military invaded Malaya. After World War II, The British returned for 12 shaky years of colonial rule, but this period belongs the era of nationalism and the struggle for independence.

In the introduction, the author explains the objectives of the study—an analysis of the social history of plantations and towns in British Malaya, focusing on the experiences of individuals (workers, managers, merchants, teachers and officials) who became British subjects during the colonial era. The book is divided, almost equally into two parts: the first four chapters on the late 19th century and four additional chapters covering the early 20th century. The epilogue previews the end of empire in the post-World War II era and offers a perceptive search for representations and memories of colonialism in contemporary Malaysia.

Lees does not mince words in her detailed account of the horrific conditions endured by workers on plantations “who faced flogging, fines, or jail time if they did not obey orders and complete their contracts” (p. 64). The author concludes, “Plantation colonialism in Malaya was a coercive regime, which depends on physical violence and cultural caricatures to sustain a rigid hierarchy of power and inequality reinforced by the colonial state” (p. 99). This assessment of plantation life is contrasted with the author’s account of the lives of urban residents in British Malaya, especially in the 20th century, where colonial surveillance was relatively minor. Malaysians from all ethnic communicated with each other in Bazaar Malay or English (among the educated middle class), were exposed to international events and ideas through newspapers, periodicals and the cinema, and participated in civil society through new organizations, including the YMCA, Boy Scouts, and Rotary International associations. This layer of urban cosmopolitism, Lees argues, left a deep legacy in independent Malaysia through continuing ties to the British Commonwealth that shares a common language and values of transnational allegiances and the rule of law (p. 310).

All readers, even specialists on Malaysia, will learn many new facts and nuances of Malayan history from a close reading of this book. I was particularly impressed with the very detailed account of the costs of production, management, and profitability of British owned sugar plantations in the late 19th and early
20th century. The success of rubber plantations in the 20th century has created the popular impression that European entrepreneurship was the key that brought economic progress to Colonial Malaya. However, European investors in 19th century Malaya had a mixed record. European firms had to contend with the very high costs of imported machinery and technology, a very top heavy administration, and competition with lower cost producers. However, the colonial government subsidized European firms, directly and indirectly, though preferential access to land and cheap imported labor, a transportation infrastructure built for an export economy, and police and courts that largely reinforced European commercial interests. All of this came with virtually no taxes on European individuals or enterprises. Even with these subsidies, Lees reports that an 1882 audit of European sugar plantation revealed a return of only 4.4 percent annually on the initial investment (p. 35).

In spite of these and many more important contributions, I was disappointed with the lack of an overarching narrative about the colonial period. The author points to complexity and the contradictions of colonial rule, which reinforced economic exploitation, but also introduced Western ideas that subverted European dominance. Many Malayans were able to use the opportunities and knowledge created by the colonial regime to improve their lives and to advance their communities. However, without “connecting the dots” of the complex layers of economic, political, and social life during the colonial period, it is difficult to understand and assess the overall impact of colonialism.

The colonial regime was heavily dependent on indirect taxes on “sin” (gambling, prostitution, and especially opium) paid by the Chinese working class. These taxes were collected through “revenue farms” operated by large Chinese business syndicates that competed to purchase colonial government sanctioned monopolies on the management of “sinful” enterprises. The revenues from these taxes underpinned many of the other major features of the colonial period, including an acquiescent Malay royalty, a self-serving European community, an isolated Malay peasantry, upwardly mobile immigrant communities, and criminal gangs loosely organized around “secret societies.” Government revenues supported lavish lifestyles of the Malay royalty and the European colonial establishment. Conspicuous consumption, including houses staffed with servants, automobiles, formal dress, and avoidance of manual labor were markers of social status in colonial society. Government funds were also used to build a modern infrastructure for the export economy and an educational system with English schools for youth in towns and cities, but only dead-end vernacular schools in rural areas for Malay youth. The “secret society” criminal gangs were closely tied to the Chinese business syndicates that competed with other for the lucrative revenue farms from the colonial state. These were not isolated features of British Malaya, but parts of an interconnected system designed to reinforce power and to differentially reward communities and social groups based on their value to the colonial state.

My other concern is the interpretation of the influence of Western modernity and institutions, which are credited with the creation of a multicultural cosmopolitanism in urban areas. As Lees notes, there was a growing middle class in towns and cities that participated in civic society and occasionally petitioned the colonial government for recognition of Asian voices in governance. However, the term cosmopolitan has a broader meaning of a belief in a shared humanity and respect for peoples of different cultures and backgrounds. The problem was that colonialism reinforced and rigidified an ideology of hierarchy and race and not a liberal understanding of cultural differences.

In the early 20th century British Malaya, Europeans created caste lines with “whites only” institutions and organizations, including private clubs, professional organizations, railroad cars, and elite positions in government employment. The arrival in the early 20th century of significant numbers of European women—almost exclusively as wives—reinforced the growing segregation of social life between whites
and Asians. This disconnect between the popular aspirations to become more “Western” and the refusal of white colonials to accept Asians as status equals was one of the basic contradictions of colonial society. Europeans also reinforced ethnic stereotypes of lazy Malays, greedy Chinese, and indolent Indians.

These issues are important, not only to understand the past, but also because of their influence on the politics and culture of contemporary Malaysia. It has been more than 60 years since the end of the colonial era, and the most of the blame (or praise) for developments in Malaysia rests with its post-independence leaders. But there are simply too many continuities of illiberal policies from the colonial era to the present—authoritarian governance, government sanctioned racial preferences, prevention dentition (of political dissidents), and state subsidies for feudal aristocratic families (to name but a few) to simply ignore the pernicious legacy of colonialism.

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