
The conventional history of Malaya (now peninsular Malaysia) has been told countless times. It begins with European, particularly British, conquest and expansion—not much of importance is assumed to have occurred in the preceding centuries except for the arrival of Islam. The economic development of Malaya is thought to be a product of British enterprise and administration combined with immigrant labor from China and India. The Malay community, it is suggested, preferred to remain on the rural sidelines, protected by colonial benevolence. After the brief interruption by the Japanese occupation (again, not much of interest happened), there was steady progress toward Merdeka (independence) in 1957. The only problems encountered have been Communist terrorism mounted from the jungle during the Emergency (1948–1960) and the “race issue.” These antagonisms among Malays, Chinese, and Indians are said to be held in check by a consensus-minded government grounded in the country’s Western-educated elites. This thumbnail sketch, however simplistic, contains the essentials of most popular thinking about Malaysia and is often found in academic works as well.

These views of Malaysian history (and of the present) are in the process of being undermined, if not discarded. Among the scholars who have contributed to a more accurate and insightful understanding of Malaysian history are Wong Lin-Ken, Syed Husin Ali, William R. Roff, Khojo Kay Kim, Clive S. Kessler, Lim Teck-Ghee, and Martin Rudner. Michael Stenson’s Class, Race and Colonialism in West Malaysia: The Indian Case, is a major work that continues in these new directions. Although incomplete and uneven in many respects, it is a serious work that demands the attention of all Malaysia scholars.

Michael Stenson, the author of an earlier book—Industrial Conflict in Malaya: Prelude to the Communist Revolt of 1948 (1970)—and a number of articles on Malaysia, began this book as a study of the Indian community in Malaysian history. As he explains in the preface, he was unable to examine one community in the plural society of Malaysia without a parallel analysis of the evolution of Malaysian society and its position in the global political economy. The net result is an unusual mixture of revisionist history (primarily of the colonial era) and an analysis of socioeconomic differentiation and political movements within the Indian community. The uneven construction of the work is most certainly due to the tragic death of the author in 1977, before he finished the book.

Even readers who do not share Stenson’s political perspective will find much that is new and insightful in this book. He synthesizes facts and interpretations from secondary literature with his own detailed reading of official colonial records, newspaper accounts, and other primary materials. Although some of his sweeping generalizations are not completely supported by the available evidence, his interpretations and conclusions cannot be easily dismissed.

Indian labor was brought to the emerging plantation economy of colonial Malaya not because of an absolute shortage of labor, but because of a shortage of cheap labor that would work on the terms offered by the colonial masters. Wages and working conditions on plantations only slowly improved as a result of external political pressures, not because of rising profits. Declines in rubber revenues did, however, result in the lowering of wages and periodic repatriation of labor to India. The conditions of labor on estates prior to World War II thus resembled feudal serfdom more than capitalist wage labor. These conclusions are clearly documented and discussed in the early chapters of the book. Its most valuable contribution, however, is Stenson’s analysis of the political dynamics of labor, capital, and ethnic relations during the Japanese occupation and in the postwar years prior to independence. Here he challenges the conventional understanding of these years with a persistent focus on the class relations among and within ethnic communities. Yet he does not hesitate to document the excesses of racism and nationalism among progressive political groups on the left. Despite what his own political views might seem to suggest, Stenson sees history as a complex clash of forces, which do not always lead in one direction.

All scholars of Malaysian history are poorer for the loss of Michael Stenson in the midst of his promising and productive academic career. It remains our obligation to...

Tibbetts' book is a welcome revision and extensive expansion of his earlier article-length studies of Arab textual references to Southeast Asia. While many scholars have attempted to extract information from the texts of Arab geographers and travellers, they have generally not examined the relative importance of each author within the Arab geographical tradition nor have they properly considered the relationships of one author to another. They have thus often treated the Arab texts as a block of material from which information might be extracted about the area for any period before the European age. Unlike these scholars, Tibbetts examines the literature as a whole, paying close attention to the period when each work was composed, to the authenticity of each text, and to what is original material in it and what drawn from previous works.

There are two parts of Tibbetts' book, the first covering Arabic classical texts, and the second the navigational texts of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. The first and longest of Tibbetts' study critically examines the classical texts of A.D. 850-1350, presenting in chronological order the textual references to Southeast Asia. In this section the earliest form of a story is recorded together with careful note of new or differing information that may appear in subsequent texts. Critically evaluating each author, Tibbetts concludes that only the travel account of Ibn Batūta (ca. 1350) is authentic. All other words were a compilation of information on geographical, economic, and other conditions derived by geographers from Arab merchants and sailors who made the trip to the Malay world from Middle Eastern ports. Of these earliest works Tibbetts considers that the best and most reliable primary sources are the ninth century Akhābār al-Sīn wa'l-Hind, Ḥaqā'iq al-Hind and the tenth century geography of Abu Zaid, the latter drawing upon and updating the ninth century text of Abū Zaid.

Tibbetts notes that, since Southeast Asia was the source of spices and drugs used in Arab medicines, the Arabic reading public had an interest in the countries of origin. The geographers supplied this information, sometimes relating long and imaginary stories, in other instances simply providing the bare facts. They listed places and their products, gave details of method of extracting and mining, and reported on places used as general markets and methods of buying and selling from the native populations. Frequently copying both their predecessors and their contemporaries, they often inserted conflicting statements derived from various sources side by side. Here Tibbetts skillfully traces the history of each text and its information. Meanwhile historical material rarely entered the geographers' accounts