20th Century Malaysia: A Historiographical Perspective*

By

Khoo Kay Kim

PRELUDE

The younger generation of historians need to be aware that History is a discipline which exists in its own right. It does not have to take shelter under other disciplines. Equally important, the scope of history has no boundary. The historian is free to deal with any aspect of the past.

The historian is also free to choose the most suitable methodology. He does not have to adopt the theoretical approach favoured by scholars of other human disciplines. The theoretical approach is an adaptation of the methodology of the natural sciences. But whereas in the natural sciences, theories have to be tested in the laboratory under controlled conditions, in the human disciplines, a similar testing of the theories formulated is not possible.

---

* A slightly revised version of this paper was presented at the 16th Conference of the International Association of the Historians of Asia at Kota Kinabalu, 27th – 3rd July 2000

Instead scholars involved in such disciplines merely assume that the theories are valid and proceed to draw coclusions which, not surprisingly, are usually erroneous. They can, however, rely on empirical data to substantiate their findings but increasingly there is a tendency to reject the need for empirical data claiming that even such data are no more than subjective perceptions.

Students of history need to be aware too that while their discipline is primarily concerned with "the past", there is no precise time frame. They can choose to deal with the distant past, the recent past as well as the contemporary era.

MALAYSIAN HISTORIOGRAPHY

The 'fifties and 'sixties in particular may justifiably be deemed the golden age of Malaysian historiography. There were healthy historiographical debates among interested members of the academic community and young scholars then were consumed by genuine passion. Some of their M.A. dissertations were published. The preoccupation then was with the approach to Asian history, a forum indeed initiated by Western scholars involved in the study of Asian history. In the aftermath of World War II, a younger generation of scholars expressed disagreement with the approach of their seniors whom they avered wrote Euro-centric Asian history. An Asian-centric approach was needed to re-write and re-interpret Asian history.

The late 'forties' and early 'fifties' was a period of rapid decolonization. Not surprisingly political developments contributed significantly to the flowering of historiography in many newly emerging nations. In Asia, there were calls too, inspired by the debates in the West, for Euro-centric history to be replaced by Asian-centric history. Students of Malaysian history then were directly influenced.

Politics soon made an impact again with the growing influence of the Soviet Union and the opposition among intellectuals to the US intervention in Vietnam which unleashed strong anti-capitalist energies among young scholars in the West and Asia.

"Class struggle" and "mode of production" quickly marginalized the hitherto more popular themes on government and administration favoured by conventional historians. Economic history was unavoidably affected too. It was expected to focus on the evils of capitalism, the exploitation of labour and the

plight of the oppressed masses - themes which have continued to be popular even today but couched in a different garb.

In more recent years, many of those trained in conventional historiography appear quite happy to allow scholars from other disciplines to upstage them. Although there are still diehards in the field of history who continue to be actively involved in research and writing the conventional way, the trend, in general, is to emulate scholars of other disciplines, decrying, to borrow a more trendy term, "metanarratives" and suggesting that their more conservative peers are no more than "tellers of pointless stories".

Since each discipline, in fact, highlights certain aspects of human activity in a particular society and discusses them within the framework that it creates for itself, by imitating other disciplines, scholars in the discipline of history have tended to duplicate rather than invent ideas.

In the past, historiographical works required that the scholar must meticulously collect data and, keeping an open mind, allow himself/herself to be guided by the data assembled in the interpretation of the past, letting it emerge from the available evidence rather than impose on the subject under study preconceived, and sometimes anachronistic, conclusions. It was considered a virtue once to try to be impartial difficult as it admittedly was (and still is).

During the last three decades, the trend (not only in Malaysian historiography) has been to identify a theme currently popular and to apply it to the study of the past. The shortcoming is that, in most instances, the scholar is merely looking for data to substantiate a ready-made conclusion. Today, to be ideologically partial is condoned, but usually only when the scholar also displays anti-establishment proclivities.

There has also been a growing tendency to use labels, again invented by scholars of other disciplines, which are presented as technical terms, in imitation of the natural sciences. But unlike the natural sciences, such terminology cannot be defined with precision. It serves, however, the purpose of allowing those concerned to form "exclusive clubs" and achieve recognition and status which would be difficult if a spade were blandly called a spade rather than something pompous and esoteric thereby justifying lengthy discussions in conferences and journals.

For historians, in the past at any rate, it was more important to amplify and explicate, endeavouring to make the difficult more easily comprehensible to everyone instead of merely addressing a small number of like-minded people.

To explain in simple language is not to generalize much less to oversimplify. It is an exercise in precision which suits only those who know their subjects well.

Serious historians have never been mere story tellers even if their descriptive-narrative style appears intellectually unintimidating. They are just as interested in the study of systems but usually prefer to focus on the people operating or manipulating the systems. They are, at the same time, interested in the subject of continuity and change, but often, approach it rather differently, by working from the unknown to the known, though there is nothing to prevent them from looking for answers to contemporary problems by delving into the past if they choose to do so. Indeed, this is one useful way of understanding the present. Conventional historians are free persons; they are not fettered by the need to conform to a particular methodology or ideology or structure.

Historians traditionally have always been conscious of time and for that reason periodization is an element which has not been ignored in their writings because time lends perspective to the subject under discussion, all the more so when the main objective is to study developments which span a lengthy period of time.

In the case of Malaysian history, however, this can be a specially difficult problem because even "Malaya" (without Sarawak and Sabah) between 1900 and WW II was not a single political entity. Moreover, in terms of space and time, the rate of development was drastically uneven. Its present political structure, for instance, evolved rather laboriously beginning from the 19th century and, in the course of the 20th century, progressively took shape especially after the Japanese Occupation. The Malaysia that exists today, as it is now common knowledge, was born only in 1963.

But WW II is as important a watershed as 1963 and for that matter 1957 too is no less significant. Although political and other forms of development did not occur simultaneously in various parts of the country, the attainment of nationhood did lead directly to major, though not necessarily identical, development patterns in various parts of the country. For one thing, physically, the country was rapidly transformed.

For example, until the 1950s, bridges had not been built across numerous rivers on the east coast of the Peninsula. But despite various other forms of development, economic development, it may be argued, was the principal agenda pursued by the government of the new nation and it had a powerful impact on the total society.

However, important as WW II is, a case can be made for WW I too as another dividing line because much of the initial basic infrastructural and technological change began not after WW II but after WW I.

Contemporary Malaysian history, covering the last 25-30 years, appears to intimidate, historians. With the media itself primarily interested in politics and economics, both political scientists and economists have had a field day. Sociologists seem less inclined to be seduced by the high-profile. They have preferred to look at problems of poverty in rural areas and plantations, and now at gender problems as well, to the extent that urban studies have been generally less popular among them though geographers have made useful contributions to the subject. But being more concerned with demographic and spatial aspects of the subject, they too tend to view the country unholistically.

A cursory glance at the whole of the 20th century, era by era (determined somewhat generally here), may be useful in highlighting more specifically what historians, as distinct from scholars of other disciplines, can do to update the writing of 20th century Malaysian history.

THE PRE-WW I ERA

Historians constantly face the problem of having to differentiate between that which is considered significant and that which can be justifiably marginalized. In the past, as mentioned earlier, they concentrated on rulers, wars and dramatic events - the conquerors rather than the conquered, as it used to be said. Such an approach no longer gains sympathy from serious scholars, including historians.

Moreover, if history is about the total past, and there is no reason why it should not be, to omit any part of it is to render the whole incomplete. Yet the task is patently too enormous for any single historian to accomplish. But he/she does not have to work alone. The notion of the division of labour is relevant to not only the discipline of economics.

In Malaysia, at the beginning of the 20th century, the growth of the rubber sector was a development which galvanized almost the entire society into action. Involved were not merely the leading entrepreneurs - European agency houses and planters (many of the latter were previously coffee and sugar planters) - but also Chinese and Malay small tholders. The Chinese, comprising primarily successful businessmen (some of them tin miners) owned larger hold-

ings than the Malays who, to the chagrin of the British administration, preferred rubber to padi planting, a phenomenon which has yet to be seriously studied.

The Indians - mainly labourers but with a small number also owning rubber smallholdings - formed the third group. Important as Indian labourers were - in certain localities their number increased by 100-200 per cent. between 1911 and 1921 through immigration - labour in the rubber sector included not only the Chinese but also Javanese.

But the story of Malaysian rubber, if viewed strictly within the country's geographical boundary, would be grossly lop-sided. It was a commodity bolstered almost entirely by foreign consumers, dependent to a large extent on the growth of the automobile industry in the US - summer and winter demands differed radically - and whose price fluctuation was determined by not only the law of supply and demand but also the less predictable behaviour of stock market players mainly in Britain, the majority of whom had never seen a rubber plantation.

But this interdependence of multi-faceted factors is not something that the average student (indeed teacher too) of Malaysian history has been able to understand. Similarly, there has never been sufficient emphasis placed on the overall effects of the industry on the local society.

For instance, it has sometimes been argued that because Malaya's multi-ethnic labour was involved in separate economic sectors - the Chinese in tin, the Indians in rubber and the Malays in rural pursuits, e.g. padi planting (quite mistakenly), a phenomenon usually attributed to the "divide and rule" policy of the British - it was not possible for the working class to form a cohesive movement against British colonialism.

The real situation, however, was quite different from that advanced by the proponents of that argument. It was considerably more complex and cannot be understood by those who refuse to subscribe to the reality that ethnicity in Malaysia (probably in other countries too) has been a more potent force than ideology.

In fact, even among the Asian rubber producers, there was no effectively cohesive effort made to work towards the achievement of common interests. Among the Chinese owners themselves, parochialism was often an obstacle difficult to surmount - e.g. the Chinese owners of Penang and Kedah did not always see eye to eye with those of the FMS or even those of Melaka and Singapore.

The rubber sector is used merely as an illustration here of the need for a more holistic approach towards Malaysian history. It is of course insufficient to understand the whole process of societal development during that period by focusing on rubber alone or for that matter even if tin, administration and politics are also incorporated in the discussion which hitherto has been the observable trend in Malaysian historiography.

Religion and education are two aspects of Malaysian history which cannot be ignored. Education of course has not been neglected. But it has been looked at mainly by those preoccupied with problems of pedagogy, syllabus and school administration to the extent of downplaying several other aspects of the subject. Many who have written on education have little knowledge of how the schools actually functioned in the past. No mention, for instance, has ever been made of the importance attached to extra-curricular activities especially sport whereas principals of schools then were obsessed with the need to win in inter-school competitions. This was one of the main features of school culture then.

Malaysian society in the past was sport crazy. It still is but far less so. It had been so since the beginning of the 20th century, encouraged by the British, and gained even greater fervour during the inter-war years. Sport, in some measure, helped to contribute to the perception of the Straits Settlements, the Federated and five Unfederated Malay States as a single political entity. Although officially "Malaya" did not exist until after WW II, a few sports (athletics, soccer, rugby and tennis) had formed "Malayan associations" by the 1920s.

Sport was a major activity too in the King Edward VII School of Medicine and the Raffles College. After completing their education, graduates of the former served as the patrons of sports at the local level and those of the latter helped to instil passion in sport among the school children and taught them the finer points of various games.

Religion too deserves greater attention in Malaysian historiography. Not that the country's numerous religions have been left unstudied but they have been examined by those not primarily concerned with the study of the society as a whole. The subject has yet to be fully integrated into serious discussions of the multifarious aspects of societal development in Malaysia.

Infrastructural development, urbanization, the railway link between Prai and Johor Bahru, the advent of motor transport, the establishment of Port Swettenham (now Port Klang), the effects of the growth of schools, Malaysian students (of various ethnic groups) furthering their tertiary education in Brit-

ain, entrepreneurship at the local level, ethnic relations, the formation of social and commercial/professional associations, etc., singly and collectively, require attention from those concerned with historiographical studies, i.e., those trained to look for minute details and not merely apply broad theories formulated on the basis of studies undertaken in other societies. There is no reason why scholars should focus on similarities and not differences among societies.

THE INTER- WAR YEARS

Four main themes have more or less dominated published works on Malaysian history of this period:

(i) Chinese political activities (of both the nationalists and the communists);
(ii) administrative and constitutional development, primarily the policy of decentralization;
(iii) origins and growth of Malay nationalism; and
(iv) the development of tin mining and rubber planting,

While these themes are very important, in general they have been discussed quite independently of one another. Such an approach, as a prelude to the broader study of Malaysia, given the complexity of its society, is unavoidable but they should not be left as unrelated subjects. Moreover, there were other developments which had an important impact on the society, e.g. ethnicity which began to pose a serious problem by the early 1930s.

Ethnicity then was not merely a socio-political reality, it was a vital factor which determined the country's economic structure too. Not that there was no inter-ethnic economic activity. Apartheid was not practised here, the only exception being the European clubs which barred the admission of Asians. But occupational differentiation based on ethnicity was a fact of life.

Also, ethnic separation did not help to reduce tension as it was hoped it might in certain cases, e.g. the creation, by design or otherwise, of ethnic enclaves even in urban areas. Each group was fully conscious of the existence of the others. Ethnic organizations easily outnumbered those that were non-ethnic.

Ethnicity was already a serious problem in Singapore by the 1920s leading to a major division within the Malay-Muslim community. It had repercussions on the other parts of Malaya as well. It was unavoidably a political issue but it was far more than that. Ethnicity was certainly not skin deep or a creation of colonialism. It was an obstacle on which even the Communist Party of Malaya floundered.

Important though political events may be, the 1920s cannot be justifiably seen in purely political-constitutional terms. Nor is it sufficient to trace the fluctuating fortunes of rubber and tin although both were crucial to the shaping of Malaya's society.

The 'twenties marked the beginnings of a period of major reconstruction in many urban areas - for instance, Kuala Lumpur, where physical reconstruction began to take place rapidly after WW I. Significant attempts were also made to diversify the country's economy. Pineapples and oil palm were successfully introduced to avoid too heavy a dependence on rubber; tea too, by the late 1920s.

Electricity though first introduced by the late 19th century in Rawang was made available to the major Peninsular towns beginning from only the 1920s, giving however a tremendous boost to cinematography, radio broadcasting and refiigeration, with important social effects. Cinematography and the radio in particular exposed the local society to Western culture on a scale previously unknown despite the earlier development of the print media (since the early 19th century).

The successful completion of the Johor Causeway in 1923 resulted in the rapid advancement of lorry transport. A fierce rivalry ensued between road and rail. The Causeway also contributed to the growing popularity of motor cars. Roads were quickly up-graded enabling, at the same time, bus transport to provide a more convenient means of communication for the rural population especially those in the interior hitherto heavily up-graded allowing, at the same time, bus transport to provide a more convenient means of communication for the rural population especially those in the interior hitherto heavily dependent on the train or river. The improvement in transport and communication encouraged the common people to travel more often to urban areas as well as across state boundaries helping to forge closer people-to-people contact.

Industrafization in Malaysia had its origins in the 1920s too. The manufacture of matches, the canning of pineapples and the processing of oil palm -

all of which have been neglected by historians - were followed, a little later, by the production of rubber goods, especially footwear and motor car tyres. Interestingly, here the Chinese led the way although it has been opined generally that they were inclined to distance themselves from modem technology. This view was based on developments in the tin sector where, by the late 1920s, European capital, after the introduction of the dredge in 1912, was able to overhaul Chinese capital which had dominated tin mining since the middle of the 19th century.

The 1920s also witnessed the growing importance of Japanese economic activities in Singapore and the Peninsula. Originally involved in the fishing sector which they managed to control by the early years of the 20th century, and then rubber, they next moved into commerce during WW I when European supplies, especially textiles, were unable to meet local needs. Japanese goods filled the void.

Japanese interests in rubber planting expanded through the 1910s but after the rubber crisis of 1920-1921, Japanese owners began to divest their interests in rubber. However, they completely monopolized iron mining in which they had invested by the time of the European War. Their mines initially were located in Johor, mainly Batu Pahat, from where they expanded to Terengganu in the 1930s.

But it was in the town of Seremban that a Japan Club was formed and the Japanese there were better able to participate in local social activities. In general, it is not yet clear how the Japanese in each locality related to the local population, but it may not be irrelevant to mention that the first two Malayan tennis champions (1921 and 1922) were Japanese who were then residing in Singapore. Japanese players were also tennis champions in Melaka and Negeri Sembilan on several occasions.

Japan exported rubber goods to Malaya too and not surprisingly ranked among the world's leading consumers of rubber. By the mid-1930s, their hold over the financial sector in Singapore caused grave concern among European and Chinese businessmen.

Educational development reached an important stage at this juncture. Several of the country's major schools had been founded by then, the last among them was the King George V School in Seremban, officially opened in 1928 which was also the year when teaching began at the Raffles College in Singapore.

By the late 1920s, many more students from the country had furthered their education in British universities, mainly in medicine and law. Tunku Abdul Ralunan (the country's first Prime Nfinister) in fact completed his B.A. degree in 1925, the year Dr. Mahathir was born.

The country's premier college for Malay-medium students - the Sultan Idris Teachers' College - was established at Tanjong Malim in 1922. But it was not, as claimed by some, a hotbed of Malay radical activities before WW II though its first principal, O.T. Dussek, did attempt to try to plant the seed of Malay nationalism. The College, not by design, prepared the ground for Malay school teachers progressively to take over leadership of Malay society at the lower level in both the urban and rural areas.

Sport activities quickly took on an international look even before the 1930s as foreign teams, mainly from China, and Japanese Davis Cup players, made yearly visits to the country. It helped the population to be more aware of the outside world. In 1927, the Australian Test team was defeated at the Selangor Club Padang by a Malayan side, comprising however mainly European players.

Developments in the 1930s were even more impressive. Dyan Chand, the legendary Indian hockey player, led the Indian Olympic team in a friendly game against a Malayan side at Singapore in 1932. Henry Cochet of France (his first visit was in the late 1920s), and "Big" Bill Tilden of the US, both former Wimbledon champions, were among professional tennis players who played here, and J.F. Devlin, the Irish professional badminton player and ex-All-England champion, toured the country in 1936. Significantly, Devlin was defeated in all four singles games he played at Singapore, Kuala Lumpur, Ipoh and Penang.

Serious historians have hitherto marginalised sport history because sport is considered of little consequence. But between 1920 and 1941, a very large segment of the country's population was involved in sport activities, not merely as spectators but also as participants. The fact that the British administration ensured that every little town had what was commonly called "the town padang" is testimony to the importance it attached to sport.

Basically, the British believed that sport could contribute to better social relations among the country's multi-ethnic population. More important still, they believed that sport could draw the local population closer to Britain. In other words, there would be less "disaffected" towards Britain. Moreover, British expatriates came with vast experience of sport participation "at Home".

Many were Oxford or Cambridge Blues; some even played in international competitions. They openly favoured their subordinates who were good sportsmen.

Sport, many do not realize, also contributed to the emancipation of women in Malaysia. By the early 1920s, school girls and young ladies in the major towns were persuaded to play hockey in public places. Eurasian and Chinese girls led the way. Much of the ground work was laid by schools, the Girl Guides and the YWCA. Girls in Penang wearing swim suits took part in competitions publicly. Badminton, netball, volleyball and basketball were also popular among school girls. Socializing between the sexes began as a result with the conservative elements in the society continuing to register strong protests but to no avail. Later Indian and Malay girls also participated in sport. The subject is worthy of an in-depth study.

An event of singular importance occurred in 1930 - the economic depression, possibly the worst ever in the country's history, the financial crisis of 1997 not excluded. But, oddly, it has hardly been studied. It had wide ramifications. It heightened interethnic tension and contributed subsequently to the intensification of communist activities. Many Chinese owners of rubber holdings who could not repay their loans faced foreclosure. Some of the Chettiar moneylenders took possession of the estates and operated them. The business house of Malaya's "Henry Ford" (Tan Kah Kee) collapsed. Squatting on government land also had its genesis during the period of the slump, owing to widespread unemployment.

It was in the 'thirties that the "amusement park" was introduced spreading from the larger to the smaller towns. Here was the centre of entertainment and gambling for the local population. It drew large numbers of clientele nightly including those from the surrounding rural areas.

For the avid theatre fan, however, there were the Chinese opera and *bangsawan* (Malay opera). Cabaret (Western) dancing, already popular mainly among the English-educated gained an even larger following as the cabaret also became a feature of the parks. Later, the Malay form *(joget moden)* was introduced - the couple danced to Malay and Western music (waltz, foxtrot and tango) but did not hold each other. Professional boxing which made its debut in the country after WW I was brought to the smaller towns with the advent of the "amusement park". By 1941, the amusement park had become institutionalized. It had important consequences on the social lives of the people many of

whom nightly made a beeline for the park. The number of "grass widows" increased. But the parks were not exclusively a male domain.

The west coast of the Malay Peninsula had developed more rapidly than other places in the region with some of the following features being particularly prominent: urban areas with comparatively advanced amenities, efficient road and rail transport, modem schools with science laboratories, a technical and an agricultural college, a large middle class (including teachers and government servants), and many families that could afford to send their children to further their education overseas thereby augmenting the class of Anglophiles. The war which broke out in late 1941 merely delayed the process of modernization and transformation.

FROM OCCUPATION TO NATIONHOOD

There is in fact no dearth of literature on the Japanese Occupation in Malaysia but the subject is far from being exhausted. There are still many around, although their number has dwindled considerably, who have first-hand experience of the war. Some continue to be able to speak "classical" Japanese.

To date there has been a propensity to see the Occupation years largely in terms of Japanese atrocities. But not all the soldiers were Japanese. Many were Taiwanese and the locals then referred to them as "Hokkien speaking Japanese'. There have been interestimg accounts too of the heroism displayed by members of the MPAJA, but little has been said of the atrocities they committed especially during the interregnum (between the Japanese surrender in mid-August 1945 and the return of the British in early September the same year).

A great deal more needs to be written on the social aspect of the Occupation years. Information should be culled from people from various walks of life and various ethnic groups who lived through the war in different parts of the country in order that it may be possible to obtain as broad a perspective as possible.

Such information should be published and made available for popular reading. There is no need for historians to be unduly preoccupied with methodology. The stories can be simply and clearly told by each individual. Priority should be given to how he/she understood, perceived and felt *vis-a-vis* the total scenario within, of course, a given environment. As many individuals as pos-

sible should be interviewed or invited to write themselves if they have the ability to.

The historian can help to piece things together into a more coherent whole without being perturbed by the propensity these days among younger scholars to introduce surrealistic terminology and models of analysis which turn simple situations into incomprehensible ones, serving no useful purpose except for those who have grave doubts about their own as well as other people's perceptions of reality. Suffice it to say that the majority do not have that problem.

Although it is generally true that the late 1941 to the latter part of 1945 were difficult years - there was shortage of all essentials; educational facilities were grossly inadequate; the economy was at a standstill; travel was dfffficult; social amenities were lacking; life for the adults in particular was fraught with danger, etc. - there were other aspects of that era which should not be glossed over.

For example, few today are aware that the administration was run largely by government servants who had served under the British regime. Heads of departments at the local level were not Japanese but Malay bureaucrats from the Malayan Civil Service (MCS) and Malay Administrative Service (MAS). Incidentally, there were about 40 Malays in the MCS by 1941. English or Malay continued to be the main language of administration as there was insufficient time for the clerical as well as the senior staff to learn and use the Japanese language effectively though they were required to attend Japanese language classes. Life was more disciplined; there was not as much time for fun and frolic.

Although leisure activities were considerably reduced, the amusement parks survived; so did horse racing. Many recreation clubs continued to function and various forms of gambling were permitted. Space for games, however, was not easily available as many fields had to be used to plant food mainly tapioca. Sport equipment too was not available.

Many teenagers had to work to help supplement family income. Some even married young but it did not prevent them from going back to school in late 1945. They caused numerous problems in the schools. Housewives had to chip in by seeking parttime employment, doing manual work or selling food in order to help unemployed husbands or husbands who managed to earn only meagre salaries. It did not, however, help the cause of female emancipation.

Necessity is the mother of invention and the local population extracted fuel from rubber, produced non-pneumatic tyres (called *tayar mati)* and with

the limited ingredients available produced tasty food. Alternative medicine quickly replaced Western medicine as drugs were difficult to obtain. Chinese medicine shops in particular flourished. If anything it proved that many of these Chinese physicians were not quacks.

The crime rate in certain instances (burglary, robbery, assault and battery, rape except by Japanese personnel - juvenile delinquency, secret society activities, etc.) was low. The Japanese managed to put fear into would-be criminals by imposing extremely harsh punishments without proper legal procedures.

Yet anti-Japanese activities never abated. Police detectives in particular were often shot in the heart of a town. By the middle of 1945, even police stations in urban areas were attacked by anti-Japanese guerrillas. Despite severe punishment for listening to radio, many took the risk and news of the progress of the war continued to be disseminated by word of mouth to the people especially the better educated.

The Japanese Occupation deserves attention even today because it was a significant phase in the development of Malaysia. It was the only time in the country's modern history when a large number of people suffered. There is much to be gleaned from the manner people survived in times of adversity.

There were mistakes made too and these were sufficiently serious to cause the fragmentation of the country. Ethnic animosity escalated, owing mainly to MPAJA misdemeanor, beyond the control of the country's leaders. Sino-Malay clashes in early September 1945 and, periodically thereafter, were to some extent the prelude to the riots of May 13th 1969, because suspicion and distrust thereafter persisted. Existing studies have not really linked the two and indeed studies of ethnicity in Malaysia have hardly seriously used historical data.

At the same time, the tendency to look at the late 1940s and early 1950s purely as a product of the Occupation has shortcomings. In many instances (ethnic relations, for example, as mentioned previously), the'scenario existing then was in effect a continuation of that which had become current in the 1930s. To say, for instance, that it was the Occupation which breathed life into Malay nationalism (the *perjuangan* or struggle to establish Malay hegemony over the country) is to understate the developments of the 1930s.

One has merely to refer to the Malay press of the 'thirties to understand the emotional intensity with which the Malays already perceived their position in the country. UMNO certainly was not purely a development resulting from the imposition of the Malayan Union. The meeting at the Sultan Sulaiman Club

in March 1946 was not, as often stated, the first All-Malaya Malay Congress. The first was held in 1939 in Kuala Lumpur; the second in Singapore- and the third scheduled to be held in Ipoh was called off because of the outbreak of war in Europe.

A point worthy of note is that, had Tengku Ismail of Negeri Sembilan survived the war, he and not Dato Onn might have been the first President of UMNO, as the foremer was the undisputed leader of the Malay Congress before WW II. How he would have led UMNO is of course anybody's guess. Yet there has been no biography of Tengku Ismail.

But again, important as politics was (apart from constitutional problems, a state of Emergency was declared in 1948), it is insufficient to discuss the immediate post-WW II years in purely political terms. Admittedly, political upheavals considerably reduced the efficacy of the govermnent's socio-economic rehabilitation programmes, and had not the Korean War (1950) raised the price of rubber, the British might have been hard put, financially, to handle the communist insurrection. Still, it was not the entire country that was placed in a state of uncertainty.

It is noteworthy that most sport organizations had revived by 1948 and regular competitions which had begun before WW II re-commenced. Indeed, the 1950s may be said to be the golden age of sport in Malaysia, the terrorist activities of the CPM notwithstanding. School children and adults, initially, played together or against one another in local league competitions. Club teams fielded school players if the schools were not participating which, however, was rare. In certain sports, soccer in particular, even inter-school games drew large (sometimes paying) crowds.

Those who would speak of the dangerous days of the Emergency should remember that Malaya first became world champion in badminton in 1949. The country's weightlifters emerged unofficial team champion at the Auckland British Empire Games in 1950. The Federation of Malaya Olympic Council (FMOC) was formed in 1953 and the country (not yet officially a nation) first participated in the Olympic Games in 1956 (Melbourne). Had the FMOC been formed earlier, Malaya might have won its first gold medal at the Helsinki Olympics (1952) in weightlifling.

Again, from a social point of view, the Emergency was a period of high excitement as in the mid-1950s the country was flooded by armed forces from various countries of the British Empire (now Commonwealth) – British, New

Zealanders, Australians, Fijians, and members of the East African formerly Rhodesia) Rifles. The Gurkhas were still here.

The local population had the opportunity to see sportsmen of a high calibre perform live. The Fijians in particular, by the prowess they displayed in rugby and athletics, totally captured the imagination of the school children. There were a couple of occasions too when the Fijians clashed with the communist guerrillas in the jungle and brought their athletic skills into play.

But during the Conunonwealth Games, Malaysia brought a foreign commentator for the opening ceremony who did not have a clue about Malaysian history or Malaysia's sport history. When the contingent from the Seychelles appeared, he had nothing to say about Sultan Abdullah and the possibility that Malaysia's national anthem might have originated from there. Neither did he know of the links between India or Sri Lanka and Malaysia or that Victoria Institution's outstanding sportsman of the late 1940s (Mohd. Amin) later became Pakistan's football captain or that England's test captain Ted Dexter served in Negeri Sembilan in the 1950s, etc., etc.

Much of Malaysia's political history between 1942-1956 has been painstakingly written but mainly by political scientists rather than conventional historians whose perception not only of politics and economics but the society as a whole could be in fact very different.

FROM MALAYA TO MALAYSIA

Politics was undoubtedly important during this period as internal political strife (ethnically based) continued as a sequel to the country's attainment of nationhood in 1957. The subsequent incorporation of other territories into the new nation of Malaysia added a new dimension to the political turbulence. Internally, there was considerable friction between the centre and the new territories of Sabah and Sarawak. Externally, the formation of Malaysia led to a breakdown in bilateral ties with the neighbouring states of Indonesia and the Phillipines.

Before it was over, the relationship between Peninsular Malaysia and Singapore had turned ugly which did not immediately cool down despite Singapore's expulsion from Malaysia. This was also the period which witnessed the escalation of the Vietnam war accompanied by the "Domino Theory" threat

propounded by the US in the face of growing communist power in the Indochinese peninsula.

It is not surprising that scholars interested in Malaysia and Southeast Asia have focused their attention on Malaysia's internal as well as external (at the regional level) politics. But that again is at best one facet of Malaysia's history in the decade subsequent to 1957.

Malaysia's leaders themselves, at that juncture, were greatly perturbed by Malaysia's isolation at the international level and began to rethink the country's foreign policy which the Tunku had earlier formulated based on a simple principle - stay close to the West and defence-wise, shelter under Britain's umbrella.

The Tunku's lieutenants, however, felt compelled to re-examine the policy realizing that the majority of the members of the United Nations comprised nations from the Non-aligned bloc. Also, by distancing itself from the communist states, Malaysia was losing out in terms of trade. They managed to influence the Tunku, and the policy was reversed by 1967. Malaysia began to pursue a policy of maintaining amicable ties with all other countries except Israel and South Africa, a major change which has not received the attention it deserves. Why historians do not deal with past international relations is, to say the least, puzzling.

Internally, a great deal had to be done to consolidate the young nation. National unity was important, given Malaysia's background of ethnic strife. Therefore, it was hoped that a national education system created to replace that in vogue during the time of British administration would greatly contribute towards cementing ethnic relations. Since then the education system and school syllabus have been repeatedly re-structured. Ironically, today, the schools are more than ever obsessed with the achievement of good examination results. The subject of national unity may be occasionally addressed by politicians, implementation-wise it is not visible in the schools.

A recent development, however, is the proposal to introduce Visions Schools- the children from the primary schools using Malay or Chinese or Tamil as the medium of instruction are to be housed in the same premises. The proposal has not received unanimous support because of fear that this may mark the beginning of the end of the Chinese/Tamil medium primary schools.

No particular quarter, including teachers and parents, hitherto has bothered to ensure that national unity, the core component of the national education policy, is conscientiously implemented. The occasional rhetoric has not

helped to eradicate a situation where university students of different ethnic groups, unlike during "colonial times" (and the British were supposed to have practised a "divide and rule" policy), find it greatly uncomfortable to have to share rooms.

The government's main priority, though not stated without qualification, has been economic development. Soon after 1957, the development of infrastructure commenced - a new international airport was built close to the capital, laws were changed to allow the construction of high-rise buildings in Kuala Lumpur, T.V. was introduced; a Federal highway was constructed to link the capital with the country's leading port at Klang.

There had to be a university too - the University of Malaya was duly brought to Kuala Lumpur from Singapore. An imposing building housed the country's Parliament. Tunku, being the avid sportsman that he was, built the Merdeka Stadium not merely to herald the birth of a new nation but to be the venue of numerous international sports competitions to enable the country to enjoy a high profile. Malaysia hosted the Southeast Asian Peninsular (SEAP) Games in 1965. Kuala Lumpur had to be turned into a worthy national capital - modern with state-of-the-art facilities. It was also planned to be a vibrant international commercial centre.

Perhaps even more important still was the need to promote industries which would amply symbolize the country's modernity and create better employment opportunities. Malaysia should not long remain a commodity-exporting country.

In short, although the nation-building programme involved a holistic approach, overall, economic development was given the higher priority. The study of post-1957 Malaysia has hardly been treated holistically. Scholars from various disciplines have tended to focus on particular aspects of the subject.

Therefore, far from being irrelevant, the historian has ample opportunities to undertake research and writing which would be productive of a more rounded discussion of the change which occurred as well as the response to it which, however, ought to include a serious study of the opposition to innovations.

Despite the large amount of literature turned out by scholars of various disciplines, there is again that fragmentation and compartmentalization which makes it difficult for those interested in Malaysia to perceive the effects of various changes experienced by the society as a whole. Ironically, it is no longer

the historian but also the scholar from other disciplines who tends to focus on the dramatic and melodramatic.

THE CONTEMPORARY SCENARIO

Historians appear to lack the confidence to deal with the recent past. Intimidated no doubt by scholars who dabble in theories and models of analysis, resort to mathematics, and invent labels almost incessantly (now one no longer re-interprets or re-writes but reconstructs history), it is practically a command that those who venture to study developments in Malaysia over the past two decades must ensure that their works are dressed in the proper attire. Never mind if the scholar is not familiar with the "facts" the meaning of which (like "reality") has been challenged to allow discussions to be conducted in vague terminology described, however, as scientific.

Ideology continues to be a potent element in academic discussions. Many seminars and conferences are held where certain issues are persistently highlighted and the scholars' views are expected to follow certain grooves laid down by activists.

This is the age of technology (e-commerce, e-banking, e-publishing, ICT, wireless phones, etc.), which undeniably has brought about great changes which are sometimes quantitative and sometimes qualitative. Where they are quantitative, a clinical approach is certainly apt. But, increasingly, the trend is to quantify even that which is qualitative. That which is quantitative is scientific. The essence of science is prediction. Those who quantify the qualitative repeatedly flounder in their predictions. But the respectability and credibility of the scholars concerned, oddly, have remained unimpaired.

So much has happened around the world which has had an important impact on Malaysia but it has not been made common knowledge in the educational system. Even the development of IT has not really changed the perceptions of students or for that matter their teachers/lecturers who continue to look at developments with anachronistic eyes. Not all of them are out to uphold tradition, however. They just do not find it necessary to monitor what is happening globally except when there is political upheaval.

It is insufficient, for example, purely to speak in terms of a country's GNP and GDP growth. How have Malaysians been living in the past two decades? Is

there a difference, e.g., between those who live in towns or rural areas in cases where both have been relatively unexposed to new ideas and new knowledge? These are questions which are not irrelevant to an understanding of the country's economy.

Then there is the issue of human rights which the West continually harps on these days. How many people in the country understand or bother to think about the subject? Malaysia's *Sun* newspaper not so long ago conducted a survey to try to find out what people understood by the term "constitution". There was one classic answer: "A Constitution is very good. It helps to solve traffic problems."

One swallow does not make a summer, it may be argued. But is it just one swallow? How many university students understand the meaning of constitution? How many know what the Plaza Accord was which had a major impact on global economy and greatly affected Malaysia's economy too?

The past 25-30 years have witnessed major developments in Malaysia. But some of the events are hardly noticed by scholars. Hardly anything has been said, for example, about the construction of the Expressway and the impact it has had on numerous towns. Even the much-touted Internet contains no information on the progressive construction of the Expressway. Nor does it contain information on the development of the electronic industry in Penang.

And not surprisingly, nothing has been said about Malaysia's hosting of the Commonwealth Games, the World Cup Golf tournament, and the World Formula I Racing. These were not just sport events. They were staged with an ambitious agenda in mind - to sell Malaysia and eventually enable the country to meet the target of Vision 2020. How successful have they been? This is one area where the historian can make a contribution since others are not interested.

While economists and those in the field of International Relations focus on ASEAN, APEC, the Uruguay Round and WTO, hardly any attention has been given to the study of Malaysia's bilateral ties with many countries of the South (African nations, for example) despite Malaysia's consistent participation in conferences involving those countries.

So many issues are being raised from time to time because people need to understand, and they are crying for answers. Why cannot historians make a meaningful contribution? Even a purely descriptive-narrative approach can help to clarify complex situations. In other words, what have historians to say about

what is happening in and to Malaysia today? Is it not possible to analyse developments in the country in a dispassionate manner without undue moralising?

Again contemporary Malaysia is being viewed largely from a political-economic perspective. What about problems of the youth? What kind of social scenario obtains in the country as a whole? What leisure activities are most popular among different age/income/ethnic groups in different localities? These are some of the questions which historians too can address without surrendering them to scholars of other disciplines. At any rate, other scholars too have paid scant attention to these subjects.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

If history is interested in human beings and not just systems which are operated or manipulated by human beings anyway, then the historian must ask questions which are focused more on human beings but without being slavishly dependent on the discipline of psychology or psychiatry which despite its pompous claim is as fuzzy as the humanities. Every group is an aggregate of individuals. It can be very generally treated as a category; but to ignore individual peculiarities and idiosyncracies is the first step towards making erroneous predictions.

Historians need not ignore the questions which are commonly asked by scholars of other disciplines. But they must also attempt to ask new questions and be interested in what others are not interested in. At the same time the questions commonly asked can be answered differently.

In other words, at a time when scholars from other disciplines are inventing, historians must do likewise. They need to be proactive. Indeed they should try to be more resourceful. To be different is not to be irrelevant.

Therefore, in dealing with Malaysia's past - remote or recent - it is imperative that historians must ask to what extent other scholars have been able to provide meaningful, not just trendy, explanations which can contribute towards a more enlightened understanding of Malaysia today.

The historian is a very free person - free to use any methodology, existing or in the process of being invented, as and when the necessity arises. He/she is equally freely to discuss any aspect of the past. That flexibility is an asset not a liability. There is therefore so much that be worked on. The cultural world is not rigidly structured neither is human experience. But unless historians them-

selves believe that they have a role in the modern world, and unless they are prepared to challenge prevailing opinions advanced by those who claim to be more scientific, they will soon be a redundant group.