

BOOK REVIEW

Sultan Nazrin Shah (ed.) (2026). *Chronicling Themes in the Economic and Social History of Malaysia*. Singapore: World Scientific.

by Hal Hill*, *Australian National University*

This encyclopaedic volume provides a rich and accessible analysis of the Malaysian development success story written by a virtual who's who of eminent scholars. An initiative of HRH Sultan Nazrin Shah, it draws on recent contributions to his innovative Economic History of Malaysia Project (www.ehm.my), itself a major resource for scholars, officials and business people with an interest in the country. Reflecting the editor's immersion in the subject matter, and his three pioneering books to date, the 35 chapters range across the colonial and independence eras, and offer a kaleidoscope of economic, social and institutional perspectives.

The book is divided into five parts, each with a brief scene-setting summary that draws on the editor's earlier books. Sections in turn examine economic development: colonial years to independence in 1957; economic development: post-independence; economic development: pre- and post-independence; social development; and state/city development.

Sultan Nazrin Shah deftly guides the reader through this rich and varied collection, comprehensively summarising its contents while also imparting analytical coherence. The colonial legacies, both positive and negative, are highlighted, as is the strong post-independence economic performance. The challenges are also dissected, including "deeper societal challenges and simmering political challenges" that triggered the May 1969 crisis. In a similar vein the editor draws attention to the "lax financial regulations, weak corporate governance, market exuberance, and increasing inefficiencies" that were exposed by the Asian financial crisis. Looking forward, Sultan Nazrin Shah also sets out a reform agenda for policy makers, with particular emphasis on societal cohesion and improving the quality of the education system.

One review cannot do justice to all the contributions, which range from short, focused articles to longer essays. Examples of the former include Dwight Perkins (one of the editor's PhD supervisors) on Malaysia graduating from middle-income status, Jeffrey Sachs on structural change, looking back and forward, and Charles Hirschman on women and development in Malaysia. (The latter author also officially launched the volume at a lively event in Kuala Lumpur in early December 2025.)

These contributions are supplemented by longer academic pieces. Peter Timmer, the leading authority on international agricultural development over the past 50 years (and also a PhD supervisor of the editor) analyses long term agricultural development in Malaysia, Indonesia and Japan. Malaysia's New Economic Policy and its successors

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are critically examined by two leading authorities on the subject, Lee Hwok Aun and Terence Gomez. Ownership issues also feature in Thillainathan Ramasamy's essay on Malay business activities in the early post-independence era, Gregg Huff on the "bargain" among the country's principal ethnic groups in 1957, and its subsequent dynamics, and Nicholas White on the declining British business presence after independence. Anne Booth examines welfare in colonial Malaya and compares it to other Asian colonies, reminding the reader that at independence the country's per capita income was among the highest, but it was a highly unequal society.

Reflecting the work of the EHM Project there is wide ranging coverage of historical issues by leading scholars. Peter Drake writes about British banks in the colonial era, and in a later chapter the role of the first colonial governor of the Straits Settlements. Suresh Narayanan and Parthiban Gopal trace the role of South Indian labour in the colonial rubber industry, their subtitle "profits over people" capturing the essence of their argument. Barbara Watson Andaya revisits her earlier work on the dynamics of tin mining in the nineteenth century. Other historical pieces include John Drabble's summary of his extensive research on the 19th century Malayan economy, Paul Kratoska on the economy during and after the Japanese occupation, and Karl Hack on the Malayan Communist Party strategies during the Emergency.

Richard Leete writes about historical demographic issues in the early 20th century as Malayan global economic integration induced large scale in-migration from China, South Asia and elsewhere. Living standards and social development are examined in two chapters by David Demery. In the first essay, he urges the government to place much greater emphasis on educational quality rather than years of schooling and other quantitative educational indicators. His second contribution delves into the technicalities of poverty measurement, including the importance of more nuanced approaches on the road to achieving high-income status.

Recognising Malaysia's regional diversity, several chapters provide fascinating snapshots of local economies. Francis Hutchison focuses on the able political leadership that underpinned the dynamic Penang economy, in many ways the spearhead of Malaysia's successful participation in the rapidly growing global electronics industry. Ooi Keat Gin and Vincent Lim examine the evolution of the Sarawak economy through to the mid 20th century. Gregg Huff traces the emergence of Kuala Lumpur, which in the author's words "lacks the locational advantage [namely a sea port] of Southeast Asia's great cities", but has nonetheless "come to rank among them", owing to "a combination of political decisions and the economics of agglomeration". Yeah Kim Leng's analysis of Malaysian forestry is national in scope, but inevitably has particular relevance to the two resource-rich East Malaysian states.

Malaysia's development success for more than six decades has been widely recognised. It was one of the very few countries included in the World Bank's 1993 "Miracle" report, and the work of its 2008 Growth Commission. The bases of its success are well known – an open economy, mostly competent macroeconomic management, political and legal stability, supply-side investments (infrastructure, etc.), and efforts to achieve broad-based social development, the latter particularly important owing to the colonial legacy of pronounced ethnic disparities. But economic growth has slowed significantly since the Asian financial crisis, principally owing to political

economy factors and the need to adjust development strategies as the country has lost its comparative advantage in labour-intensive activities. With its focus on both the historical and the contemporary, this volume provides an indispensable guide to understanding these complex development challenges.

This review provides only a brief snapshot of the book's contents. Starting with the extended editorial introduction, readers will learn much from it. As Malaysia approaches its 70th year of independence, the volume will be of interest to a wide audience, including those wanting a general primer on the country, established scholars in need of a compendium of major research on the country, and university students enrolled in Asian studies courses. World Scientific has provided an excellent public service in producing such a handsome volume. Hopefully an open access online version for Malaysian university students will also be made available before too long.

