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Malaysia

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Introduction

Controversies concerning history textbooks in Malaysia have surfaced sporadically since the beginning of the 1980s. However, no textbooks mobilised as much energy or were as contentious as the current edition of history textbooks in the new millennium.¹ These controversies are related to the convergence of several social dynamics: evolving perspectives on the orientation of academic history writing, the replacement of civics lessons with history education as a tool for nation-building, and, last but not least, the larger national context of ethnic politics.

One newly arisen aspect of historical revisionism concerns the role of leftwing personalities and movements in the independence struggle. This is indicative of a new social dynamic unleashed since the signing of the peace treaty between the Malaysian government and the Malayan Communist Party in 1989 and the end of the Cold War. The public controversies which arose in late 2011 over the 1950 Bukit Kepong incident prompted calls for a review of perspectives on the history of the independence struggle in history textbooks.

Following the independence of Malaya in 1957 and the formation of Malaysia in 1963, academics began to speak against Eurocentric historical writings. From time to time, the debate about how to produce more Malaya/Malaysia-centric historical studies elicited contentious discussions among local and foreign historians. The tone of debates among Malaysian academics became increasingly strident and nationalistic subsequent to the race riots of 1969. A notable figure in the discussion was Professor Ismail Hussein of the

University of Malaya's Department of Malay Studies, who in 1977 objected to the practice of the History Department of his university of referring to multiethnic Malaysia as a 'plural society', which according to him gave indigenous Malays the same status as the 'immigrant races' (i.e., the non-Malay Malaysian citizens). He asserted that Malays as the indigenous people should be regarded as the core, 'base society' of Malaysia while the 'immigrant races' were just splinter groups broken off from their respective countries of origin. His position is representative of a school of nationalist Malay academics and historians, who hold that Malaysian history should be based on a 'Malay-world' (*alam Melayu*) perspective, and that 'Malay nationalism is the basis of Malaysian nationalism'.² This increased emphasis on 'Malay elements' in the rewriting of Malaysian history has led to 'ethnic politics in which each community tries zealously to advance and protect its place within the nation's history'.³

This Malay-indigene versus non-Malay-immigrant debate in the articulation of national history in Malaysia is reflective of the larger context of ethnic politics. The peaceful but rushed process towards the independence of the Federation of Malaya meant that many contentious issues relating to the blueprint of nation-building and the identity of the nascent multi-ethnic nation state remained politically unresolved. At independence, the Malays represented barely half the population, whereas one third were Chinese and one tenth Indian. In seeking consensus on ethnically contentious issues, the English-educated, multi-ethnic political elites of the Alliance, a coalition of three race-based parties who led the independence negotiations, preferred closed-door negotiations on behalf of their respective communities. In a bid to shield themselves from the popular pressure of their vernacular grassroots communities, they resorted to the politics of ambiguity, avoiding clear articulation of their political stances on these issues. One central bone of contention was the constitutional provision, known as the Special Position of the Malays, for quotas for specific federal resources such as licences, scholarships, educational facilities and so on. While the national Alliance leaders agreed to it internally as a safeguard and a necessity for the socio-economic improvement of the Malay community, the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO, the leading Malay party of the Alliance) leaders presented it in public as affirming the indigenous status of the Malay people. At the rhetorical level, this appeared to support the radical Malay opposition that pushed for the symbolic assertion of Malay political primacy in the new nation.⁴

After independence, these issues returned to haunt them. Prolonged interethnic contention over issues such as official language, race-based quotas and education during the first decade after independence culminated in deteriorated electoral support for the Alliance in 1969. Even though the British controlled the major share of the economy into the 1970s, resentment over Malay poverty was vented instead against local Chinese, who were doing relatively better. In the aftermath of the election, the race riots marked a turning point in Malaysian politics. The riots brought down the first prime minister and heralded the ascent of the radical nationalist faction within UMNO. Englishmedium schools were converted progressively into Malay-medium schools. A national university which teaches only in the Malay language was set up. A National Culture Policy was formulated, stating clearly that the national culture was to be based on the cultures of the indigenous population and Islam was to play an important role. Authoritarian laws were passed to stifle dissenting voices and to muzzle the mass media. Affirmative action programmes in favour of the Malays multiplied and intensified. Measures were taken to buttress Malay and UMNO political hegemony. It was in this context of Malay nationalistic assertion and minority dissension that inter-ethnic debate over historical representation took place.

An early controversy regarding history textbooks was over the historical role of a nineteenth-century Chinese leader, Kapitan Yap Ah Loy, who had generally been recognised until then as the leading founder of the Malaysian capital Kuala Lumpur.⁵ Cheah notes that the Primary Four history textbook of 1977–1981 'was rather open and pluralistic in acknowledging the roles of Yap Ah Loy and other ethnic personalities in the development of Kuala Lumpur', and recognised the contribution of Yap Ah Loy as 'the most important' among them.⁶ In 1980, the Malay Minister of Culture, Youth and Sports suggested that Raja Abdullah, who sponsored the first tin mining operations in the Kuala Lumpur area in 1857, be recognised as the capital's founder instead of Yap Ah Loy. This statement drew strong responses in the local Chinese press. For two weeks, articles on the contribution of Yap Ah Loy to the development of the early township of Kuala Lumpur were published in all major Chinese newspapers. Despite this, not only were history textbooks 'rewritten to credit Raja Abdullah with Kuala Lumpur's beginnings',7 but the question of the capital's founder also appeared in national school examinations in 1983, which obliged the pupils to choose between Raja Abdullah and Yap Ah Loy. The contentious question was eventually withdrawn on the intervention of the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA), the major Chinese party of the coalition government.⁸ In the context of increased Malay political hegemony and the propagation of a Malay-dominated national identity, the responses of the Chinese community represented an expression of their 'demands for historical recognition of Chinese contributions to their Malaysian homeland'.9

In the Malaysian secondary school curriculum, it used to be civics education that was designated for the role of nation-building and citizenship education among school pupils. However, neither teachers nor students took it seriously, as it was not an examination subject. During a time when academic debates on the indigenisation of Malaysian history writing were ongoing, the Ministry of Education decided in 1978 that national history would be given priority over world history in secondary school history teaching.¹⁰ In 1983, when a new curriculum was introduced, civics was scrapped as a subject and integrated into the teaching of history. Subsequently, the Ministry of Education interfered in a more direct way to rewrite the school history syllabus 'in accordance with its official position'.¹¹

In August 1986, Abdullah Ahmad, a UMNO member of parliament, asserted polemically that the Malavsian political system was based on Malay dominance that had been agreed on prior to independence and could not be challenged without the threat of violence. It stirred up a storm of debates in the mass media. In addition, there was continued controversy over the Malay nationalists' assertion that the Malay be designated as the 'base society' of the Malaysian nation and the labelling of non-Malays as 'immigrants'.¹² In response, MCA members in Selangor state adopted a resolution in November 1986 declaring that all the three major races in Malavsia had originated outside Malaysia and that 'none had the right to proclaim itself the single "indigenous" ethnic group of the country'.¹³ Subsequently, Malay Education Minister Anwar Ibrahim declared at the UMNO General Assembly in 1987 that history textbooks would be rewritten to stress the Malays as the indigenous people. He also made it compulsory for all secondary students to study history.¹⁴ In addition, contrary to its previous practices, the ministry decided that there would be a single officially approved history textbook for each form.15

Cheah notes that the new history syllabus composed thereafter 'stated explicitly that the Malays were the original inhabitants of Malaysia and explained at great length why they had acquired "a special position" in the country'.¹⁶ The new version of the government-sanctioned Form 5 textbook appeared in 1992. It stated that the 1948 constitutional agreement between the British and the local rulers acknowledged the 'special position of the Malays as the original inhabitants of this country', and that it reinstated the 'sovereignty of the Malay rulers ... as before the Second World War' (even as it also acknowledged that it was the British High Commissioner who appointed members of the Federal Legislative and Executive Councils).¹⁷ On the other hand, it also struck an ethnically reconciliatory note, suggesting inter-ethnic sharing of the nation: 'The granting of citizenship based on the operation of law and registration (to non-Malays) ended the history of Malaya as solely owned by the Malays and heralded the sharing of our country. Non-

Malays can become citizens and enjoy rights as the Federal citizens of Malaya'. 18

The same textbook also listed five major issues agreed among the national Alliance leaders to be presented to the Reid Constitutional Commission for the drafting of a federal constitution. One of them was the 'Malay sultanate institution', described as a 'heritage of the Malay political system' that had become a 'symbol of splendour and protection of the Malays'.¹⁹ The Special Position of the Malays was explained as 'aiming to safeguard Malay rights as the original inhabitants of this country', as well as 'to promote the progress of the Malay community that was left behind in all aspects of life, so that they could reach parity with the more advanced non-Malays'.²⁰ Cheah notes perceptively that '[a]s nation-building got underway ... history became an important means to contest and determine the status and rights of each ethnic group'.²¹

A quantitative analysis of representations of various ethnic groups in the contents of successive versions of history textbooks demonstrated a clear trend towards incremental and excessive Malay bias. In the case of lower secondary history textbooks, the relative proportions of the representation of the Malay/ Chinese/Indian/other indigenous peoples evolved from 3:1:1:0 in 1969 to 21:2:1:1 in 1979 to 40:2:1:8 in 1990 and 80:3:1:16 in 2002.²² This ethnic imbalance had already led an educationist to make the following critical comment:

Recognition of the evolution of the plural society and the contribution of nonindigenous communities in Malaysia has to be re-examined with a view to providing a balanced account ... The non-Malays have come to play an important role in Malaysian affairs in the past 100 years. Their contribution has to be acknowledged and highlighted, instead of making only footnote references to their presence ... How can a people develop a sense of common historical experience and a sense of belonging to the nation if they feel alienated and marginalised and no recognition is made to their participation in the life of the country?²³

Nonetheless, as the depiction in the textbooks was still relatively succinct and circumspect, and retained a certain standard of objectivity, whatever complaints were voiced during the 1990s did not stir up particular public concern. The Ministry of Education does not seem to have taken heed of Santhiram's scholarly criticism: it went on to produce a new edition of textbooks in the new millennium that injected further ideological elements.²⁴

The next editions of textbooks were published over three consecutive years: Form 1 and Form 4 in 2002, Form 2 and Form 5 in 2003 and Form 3 in 2004. By the 1990s, the increasingly inward-looking orientation of history education meant that the Form 4 textbook on the history of world civilisations had become the only one concerned with history outside the region. While the 2002 edition of the Form 4 textbook was still about the history of civilisations, half the content was now dominated by the history of Islamic civilisation and Islamic government.²⁵ This excessive focus on Islam in the Form 4 textbook led to loud objections from the Chinese-based opposition party, the Democratic Action Party (DAP), who asked whether the drastic change had anything to do with the contentious declaration of Dr Mahathir Mohamed, the then Prime Minister, in September 2001, that Malaysia was already an Islamic state.²⁶

The Form 5 textbook published the following year stirred up further contention, in particular over the use of the words *ketuanan Melayu* (translated variously as Malay supremacy, Malay political primacy or Malay sovereignty). The Ministry of Education tried to calm the political storm by explaining that the term was used as one of the concepts of nation-building after the Second World War, and was no longer in use after independence. DAP Secretary-General Lim Guan Eng in turn asked why such a 'discredited racial dominance concept that reduces non-Malays to second-class citizens', which had never been used in history textbooks, was being revived.²⁷

Dissatisfaction was also expressed by parties in the governing coalition that had non-Malays as their political base. Lim Keng Yaik, the president of Parti Gerakan Rakyat and a senior cabinet minister at the time, spoke publicly in 2005 about the 'historical burden' which 'stemmed from a politically motivated view of interpreting our historical past' as an obstacle against the emergence of a united Malaysian nation. In 2006, an MCA member of parliament also voiced his opinion that the historical contribution of non-Malays to nation-building was not sufficiently acknowledged in the history textbooks.²⁸ Subsequently, in anticipation of the coming periodic revision of history textbooks, MCA formed an internal committee to look into the matter and submitted a memorandum to the Ministry of Education. However, no intention of compromise has been indicated by the Malay education minister on the issue.

A loose group of concerned civil society leaders was then considering the launch of a campaign to focus public attention on the matter. It was given a lease of energy when the education minister and deputy prime minister of the time, Muhyiddin Yassin, announced during the UMNO General Assembly in October 2010 that, in response to concerns raised by the delegates, a pass in history would be required from 2013 for Form 5 school leavers to obtain their school leaving certificates. In response, DAP and MCA publicly expressed their concern at the biased historical representations, urging a complete review

of the history syllabus before it was made a 'must-pass' subject.²⁹ Amidst voices of objection, a signature-gathering campaign was launched in early 2011, which called for a complete revamp of the history textbooks by representatives of civil society. Three key problems of the history textbooks highlighted in the campaign petition were numerous 'historical errors and half truths'; failure to 'reflect fairly the contribution of all communities in the development of the nation'; and the narrow perspective of the syllabus that 'fails to capture the wealth and diversity of all past and present civilizations and religions in the world and Malaysia'.³⁰

Concerned historians and history textbook writers also raised the issue in public forums organised by different social groups. Dr Ranjit Singh Malhi, a textbook writer, urged that textbook writing should be a scholarly pursuit and not be used to promote political interests.³¹ Professor Ramlah Adam, a historian and leading author of Form 3 and Form 5 history textbooks, was a prominent voice defending the existing textbooks, insisting that the syllabus was 'well balanced'. Speaking also as a leadership council member of Perkasa, a Malay rights group, she asserted that secondary school history textbooks seemed too Islamic and Malay-centric because 'non-Malays fail to understand Malaysia's history' and 'they do not want to accept the concept of Malay supremacy (ketuanan Melayu)'. Perkasa's president, Ibrahim Ali, put the blame for continued complaints on non-Malays and asserted that 'the "minorities" in the country were too demanding in wanting to assert their "rights".³² In May 2011, a committee of academics, parents and social activists was formed to drive the campaign for a 'Truly Malaysian History'. In its exploration of alternative proposals, various initiatives such as seeking student feedback, textbook studies and criticisms by various interested parties were carried out and summarised in a memorandum which was submitted to the Ministry of Education with more than 20,000 signatures.³³

In May 2011, in response to continued public debates on history education and the articulation of national history, the education minister appointed a special history curriculum committee, with Ramlah Adam as the deputy chair, to 'study the suitability of [the] existing curriculum and textbooks in terms of whether they give emphasis to unity and patriotism' and to 'determine the direction in the development of History [the] curriculum to meet current needs and future challenges'.³⁴ A historian in turn wrote to the press expressing his objections against using history education to 'nurture patriotism and loyalty to the country', voicing his concern that 'it will lead to value judgments in the narratives and affect evaluation of the facts'. He noted that this problem of the loss of objectivity and turning history into a mere 'tool for propaganda to instil nationalism' was also affecting institutions of higher learning.³⁵

On the sidelines of the debates surrounding history education was a round of furious public exchange over the interpretation of a historical incident which took place during the communist insurgency against British colonialism. In a local party seminar in August 2011, Mohamad Sabu, the deputy president of the opposition Islamic party, the Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS), claimed that Mat Indera, the Malay who led the communist assault on a police station in Bukit Kepong in February 1950, was a freedom fighter, because those Malay policemen who were attacked and killed were serving the British. He also dismissed the mainstream historical narratives which interpreted it otherwise as 'lies'. One week later, the UMNO-controlled newspaper Utusan Malaysia attacked Mohamad Sabu for 'labelling Communist terrorists as her[sic] in the Bukit Kepong tragedy'.³⁶ UMNO leaders also criticised his alleged statement, with the deputy prime minister calling him a 'traitor' who had insulted the Malay struggle in achieving independence.³⁷ In a war of words, PAS leaders urged the Cabinet to show their sincerity in recognising the nation's freedom fighters by setting up a bipartisan committee 'to rewrite ... the country's pre-independence history'.³⁸ The National Professorial Council joined the fray, declaring that the communists and left-wing groups in Malaya were not qualified to be recognised as freedom fighters, as they were traitors who had tried to replace the rule of Malay kingship under British protection with a communist republic. Speaking in the name of the council, Professor Zainal Kling also claimed that Malava was 'never colonised', just 'protected'.³⁹ This brought the debate onto another level, and the government was subsequently obliged to take the stance that Malaya was indeed 'colonised'. In a feature article, journalists from The Star wrote that this 'recent issue of Bukit Kepong could be food for thought for the special committee set up to carry out a review of history textbooks for secondary schools'.⁴⁰ The confidential report by the history curriculum committee was submitted to the government in early 2013, but to date there has been no indication of any official intention to make any drastic changes to the perspective used in the official history textbooks.

The public debates over the Mat Indera and Bukit Kepong attacks were indicative of an important, unresolved historical point of contention relating to the role of the communists and left-wing movements in the independence struggle which have emerged over the last decade or so. A public exhibition held at the historic heritage buildings of Carcosa Seri Negara in Kuala Lumpur during September and October 2017 and titled *Jalan Merdeka* (The Routes to Independence) is an attempt to integrate an element of this diversity of narratives into the historical understanding of the processes that led to Malaysian independence.⁴¹ However, whether it will have any future impact on history textbook writing remains to be seen.

Notes

- 1. The current edition of history textbooks is being replaced progressively with a new edition, starting from the Form 1 cohort in 2017.
- 2. B. K. Cheah, 'Writing Indigenous History in Malaysia: A Survey on Approaches and Problems', *Crossroads* 10, no. 2 (1997): 33–81; here, 59–61.
- 3. Ibid., 62.
- H. Ting, 'The Politics of National Identity in West Malaysia: Continued Mutation or Critical Transition?', *Southeast Asian Studies* 47, no. 1 (2009): 31–51.
- 5. This issue continues to be raised whenever debates over history textbooks resurface, such as currently by Ranjit Singh Malhi, a well-known veteran history textbook writer, in an article entitled 'Malaysian History Textbooks' published on 30 September 2017 in the *Malay Mail Online*, in reaction to a rather Malay-centric assertion of historical perspective as the only legitimate one by Arof Ishak entitled 'Do not tinker with discipline [sic] of history' in the *New Straits Times* on 17 September 2017 (see https://www.nst.com.my/opinion/letters/2017/09/280628/do-not-tinker-discipline-history and http://www.themalaymailonline.com/what-you-think/article/malaysian-history-textbooks-ranjit-singh-malhi#IH5kXlt1xcVLMIOf.97.
- 6. B. K. Cheah, 'Ethnicity, Politics, and History Textbook Controversies in Malaysia', *American Asian Review* XXI, no. 4 (2003): 229–252; here, 245.
- S. A. Carstens, 'Dancing Lions and Disappearing History: The National Culture Debates and Chinese Malaysian Culture'. In *Histories, Cultures, Identities: Studies in Malaysian Chinese Worlds*, ed. S. A. Carstens (Singapore: National University of Singapore Press, 2005), 144–176; here, 153.
- 8. Cheah, 'Ethnicity, Politics, and History Textbook Controversies', 244. While Yap Ah Loy was still included in the revised textbook, his name disappeared altogether from the 1996 edition of the Form 2 history textbook, whereas Raja Abdullah's role was briefly mentioned. His photograph appeared again in the 2003 edition of the Form 2 textbook, in which he was described as 'one among others who developed Kuala Lumpur' without any further discussion of his role, while Raja Abdullah was described as having 'pioneered' tin mining activities in the area. See Carstens, 'Dancing Lions and Disappearing History', 153.
- 9. Carstens, 'Dancing Lions and Disappearing History', 144.
- 10. CMCS (Centre for Malaysian Chinese Studies) and Nantah (Nanyang University Alumni Association of Malaya), Perbincangan Tentang Sukatan Pelajaran dan Buku Teks Sejarah Sekolah Menengah Kebangsaan [Discussions on national secondary school history syllabus and textbooks] (Kuala Lumpur: CMCS & Nantah, 2001), 6. Unless otherwise specified, all translations my own.

- 11. Cheah, 'Ethnicity, Politics, and History Textbook Controversies', 248.
- 12. Ibid., 247.
- 13. Cheah, 'Writing Indigenous History in Malaysia', 66.
- 14. Ibid.; Cheah, 'Ethnicity, Politics, and History Textbook Controversies'.
- 15. R. Santhiram, 'Curriculum Materials for National Integration in Malaysia: Match or Mismatch?', *Asia Pacific Journal of Education* 17, no. 2 (1997): 7–20: here, 10–11.
- 16. Cheah, 'Writing Indigenous History in Malaysia', 67.
- Z. A. M. Siti, M. Y. Hashim, A. Z. Ghazali, L. K. Hing, A. F. Basri and A. A. W. Zainal Sejarah, *Malaysia Tingkatan 5* [Form 5 Malaysian history] (Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, 1992), 126.
- 18. Ibid., 126.
- 19. Ibid., 130.
- 20. Ibid., 131.
- 21. Cheah, 'Ethnicity, Politics, and History Textbook Controversies', 241.
- 22. CMCS and Nantah, Perbincangan Tentang Sukatan Pelajaran, 13.
- 23. R. Santhiram, 'Curriculum Materials for National Integration', 15.
- Ting, 'The Politics of National Identity'; H. Ting, 'The Battle over the Memory of the Nation: Whose National History?'. In *Controversial History Education in Asian Contexts*, ed. M. Baildon et al. (London and New York: Routledge, 2014), 36–52.
- 25. Ting, 'The Battle over the Memory of the Nation'.
- H. Ting, 'Malaysian History Textbooks and the Discourse of *Ketuanan Melayu*'. In *Race and Multiculturalism in Malaysia and Singapore*, ed. D. Goh et al. (London and New York: Routledge, 2009).
- 27. Ibid., 37.
- 28. Ibid.
- 29. 'DAP wants review of History subject' and 'Fix biased version of History first, MCA tells Education Ministry', *The Malaysian Insider*, 25 October 2010.
- 30. See online petition statement at https://www.ipetitions.com/petition/reviewhistorysyllabusinmalaysia/; signatures were also collected manually in hard copies.
- 31. 'History textbooks biased, say writers', The Sun, 12 December 2010.
- 32. 'Non-Malays don't understand Malaysia's history, says Perkasa', *The Malaysian Insider*, 10 April 2011.
- 33. See two writeups of a related event here by a participant: http://homeschool homefrontier.com/2011/malaysian-history-textbooks-too-narrow-say-ouryouths, http://homeschoolhomefrontier.com/2011/homeschoolers-add-tomalaysian-history-debate. The memorandum was subsequently submitted to the Education Ministry together with more than 20,000 signatures; see Ting, 'The Battle over the Memory of the Nation' 2014, p. 53;
- 34. 'DPM appoints new History curriculum committee', *Malaysiakini*, 3 May 2011.
- 35. S. S. Raja, 'Historians and Integrity', The Sun, 12 May 2011.

- 36. 'Mat Sabu dikecam [Mat Sabu criticised]', Utusan Malaysia, 28 August 2011.
- 37. 'Muhyiddin dakwa Mat Sabu khianati bangsa, gesa minta maaf [Muhyiddin accuses Mat Sabu of betraying race, urges him to apologise]', *The Malaysian Insider*, 28 August 2011.
- 'PAS wants cabinet committee to review history', *Malaysiakini*, 6 September 2011.
- 39. 'Profs' council: Leftists not freedom fighters', *Malaysiakini*, 9 September 2011.
- 40. 'Revise perspectives, not facts', The Star, 25 September 2011.
- 41. Tunku Zain Al-'Abidin, 'Traversing The Many Paths To Merdeka', *Malay Mail Online*, 8 September 2017.

Further Reading

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- Naoki, S. 'The Malay World in Textbooks: The Transmission of Colonial Knowledge in British Malaya'. *Southeast Asian Studies*, 39, no. 2 (2001): 188–234.
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