

## ULASAN BUKU/BOOK REVIEW

Planting Empire, Cultivating Subjects: British Malaya, 1786-1941

By Lynn Hollen Lees. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press,

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The Malaya position as a principal raw material supplier in the British Empire was recognised by Winston Churchill during the Imperial Conference in 1921, which declared that the modern world could not get on without the commodities from it. Thus, much of the Malayan economic historiography was inundated with the development of rubber, tin and other export economies throughout the colonial period. Considered as the latest historiography on this field, *Planting Empire, Cultivating Subjects: British Malaya, 1786-1941* offers a fresh perspective and new findings that explore the planters' transnational movement in developing the Malaya economy. Besides the colonial officers, Lees emphasised the main characters in the planters' society in Malaya including workers, managers, merchants and teachers, which were given less attention by the previous researcher (p. 2).

However, the framework used by Less in this book needs to be reconsidered since the author preferred to use colonialism as a key concept for understanding British Malaya rather than imperialism, which the author believed that the colonised people cannot be understood from an imperial and central vantage point (p. 8). This argument may be partially justified since the Malay communities born in the Malay states were never considered as a British subject, but as the Ruler subject. Yet, if their parents are not originally a Malay descendant, they will become the stateless citizen. Nevertheless, any immigrants or Malay descendants born in the Straits Settlements (SS) will become the British subject (p.279). Notwithstanding with the citizenship fact, the Malaya cannot be understood as a single political and economic unit as it comprised three different political and economic units – Federated Malay States (FMS), Unfederated Malay States (UMS) and the SS. Though the FMS and UMS were protected states (that played as a raw materials supplier, while the SS were the staple port), several agreements between the Malay Rulers and SS Governor have bestowed the political sovereign to the British Government's representative known as the High Commissioner for the Malay States. Through the imperial machinery, the imperial government has a legitimate channel intervene in the whole situation in Malaya. This included the implementation of trade war measures towards the planters, businessmen and traders related to British enemy during the First World War. Furthermore, it included the Foreign Office judgement in 1927 concluding that the FMS were not foreign states to Britain and other foreign countries cannot denounce their position in the British Empire. Actually, the imperial machinery in Malaya has much influence over

the indigenous and British subject in the formation of the co-operative society as well as the establishment of English education and healthcare. However, the prominent features were in agriculture and commerce development, which were much influenced by colonial development policy that also concerned with tropical health issues and the economic protection through the imperial preference during the inter-war years.

The book portrayed the transformation of planters' community in Malaya within the nineteenth and twentieth centuries into two parts. Also, the book distinctions were in the use of oral history sources, which was also given less attention by the early authors. In the first part, the author constructed the British control in Malaya through the development of plantation agriculture and urbanisation of territories drawn into the SS and the FMS (p.15). The significant findings in this part were the expectation by the gentlemanly capitalists with the imperial government to support them with the infrastructure facilities such as government-built roads, bridges, telegraphs and the post offices (pp.32-7). This circumstance proved that the capitalists did not wholly leverage in determining the economic development in Malaya when the colonial government possessed the authority over the lands for plantation (p.65). In addition, the capitalists dependency towards the imperial government became more notable after the enactment of Colonial Development Act. in 1929 that gave the imperial government full power to approve financial assistance for the Colonial Empire. However, due to the lack of imperial references especially the Colonial Office records in series 273, 576 and 717, the discussion about British movement in Malaya seemed confusing, especially on how the agreements in the 1870s recognised the formal sovereignty of the sultans and the native rulers (p.117). This confusion had caused polemic particularly on Malaysian researchers who argued that the Malaya has never been colonised, without realising the real fact that the British Government only recognised the rulers' dignity in being immune from the jurisdiction of the courts.

The part two centred on plantations and towns as well the primary setting of British rules in the twentieth century (p.15). The growth in rubber industry developed by the alliance of planters and the civil servant had modernised the Malaya and made many residents to become rich, but rubber has reinforced the inequality among societies in the Malaya (p.173). Another confusing argument in this book is that while the FMS official records proved an increasing trend in cost of living from 1914 to 1935. The discussion has however contributed to the other side of rubber obsession in Malaya that caused the unemployment problem during the fall of rubber price (p. 216). It may have neglected the rise of canned pineapples industries during the 1930s, which also made the Malaya a main importer to the United Kingdom and the second-largest producer in the global market after Hawaii.

To conclude, even there were some disagreements in Less' findings and arguments, the research has significantly contributed present foreign and

immigrant planters' contributions in developing the Malayan economy. Also, the author provided an insight beyond the modern Malaya where the urban poverty was present, which led to the street crimes in large cities (p.262). Nonetheless, further studies need to work on the Malay planters' positions in the colonial development in Malaya since they have been often associated with smallholder economic activities.

Mohd Shazwan Mokhtar  
Research Center for History, Politics and International Affairs  
Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia  
43600 UKM Bangi, Selangor  
Malaysia  
e-mail: [mism@ukm.edu.my](mailto:mism@ukm.edu.my)