

British Colonial Rule in Malaya

Amanda Soh

“The benefits of British colonial rule outweighed its negative impacts.” How far do you agree with the statement? Explain your answer.

Colonial rule is the control of a less “advanced” people by a more “advanced” one. In this case, it is the establishment, acquisition and expansion of the British colony in Malaya by the British. The statement “The benefits of British colonial rule outweighed its negative impacts” suggests that British colonial rule brought about more positive impacts than negative impacts to the Malayan society and left it in a better state than before. Though the British colonial rule did bring about several positive impacts, mainly economically, such as the creation of an export-oriented economy which increased trade greatly, the revenue generated did not reach the locals and the British colonial power gained significantly more, economically, as compared to the locals. Moreover, this indirectly resulted in the creation of the plural society, or in other words, social divide, as different races are treated differently and some races are more privileged and gained more than the others. This goes to show that British colonial rule in Malaya was exploitative and the cons outweigh the pros, playing an instrumental role in the gradual downfall of the Malayan society. Therefore, I disagree with the statement that the “benefits of British colonial rule outweighed its negative impacts” to a large extent, though I do acknowledge that British colonial rule indeed brought about some positive impacts to the Malayan society.

An argument to support the given perspective, which is that the benefits of British colonial rule outweighed its negative impacts, would be that [the British helped to create an export-oriented economy](#), which was efficient, increased trade and had a high reward system. Before British colonial rule, Malaya's economy revolved around subsistence farming, fishing and regional trade in local produce. British colonial rule brought about benefits to Malaya's economy by encouraging the growth of new industries, namely the tin and rubber industries, which became the pillars of the Malayan economy, bringing in most of its revenues. Malaya's economy hence transformed from an economy that revolved around subsistence farming to one that was export-oriented. The export-oriented economy was highly efficient and large amounts of revenue were brought in, due to high demand for tin and rubber. The demand for rubber was especially high from the late 19th century onwards, due to the growth of the automobile industry. Moreover, Malaya was transformed into the world's largest producer of tin, with an output of 40,000 tonnes, up from 6500 tonnes in 1851. This shows that the export-oriented economy was a high reward system and the growth and development of the economy in Malaya was very rapid. Hence, British colonial rule brought about economic development and wealth to Malaya.

However, this argument is flawed as it fails to acknowledge the fact that the export-oriented economy, which was created under British colonial rule, made Malaya's [economy more vulnerable to external shocks](#) and despite the fact that there were great amounts of profit, the general Malayan society did not reap the benefits. Before the British colonial rule, Malaya's economy was mainly subsistence-based and the people were mainly unaffected by the prices of goods. However, under British colonial rule, Malaya's economy became export-oriented, supplying cash crops and raw materials to the world, resulting in Malaya having to rely on wages or income directly linked to the prices of products which rose and fell according to the world demand, making the economy extremely vulnerable. This later caused Malaya to be greatly affected by world economic crises such as the Great Depression, where prices hit rock bottom and demand fell steeply, resulting in a very poor economy in Malaya in the later stage. This goes to show that the export-oriented economy created under the British colonial rule made the economy in Malaya

all the more vulnerable. Secondly, most of the profits gained by the then thriving tin industry, while demand was still high, were paid out to investors and shareholders, many of whom lived in Europe. As for the rubber industry, investors in Europe profited, together with enterprising Malay and Chinese smallholders who grew rubber, who reaped a share of the profits. However, although the work of tapping rubber was usually carried out by Indian labourers, they did not seem to profit much from the thriving rubber industry, while it lasted. This goes to show that different races were treated differently, especially in the case of the Indian labourers, suggesting mistreatment of certain groups of people. Hence, while some profited, others did not, even though both parties contributed to the industry, showing unequal treatment and unbalanced profits ; the British and in general, the Europeans had the most to gain, as much of the profits were reaped by them, leaving little for their subjects, showing that British colonial rule was an exploitative one as revenue generated did not reach the majority of the locals. This counter-argument proves that under British colonial rule, there was an unequal distribution of wealth, and Malaya's economy also became vulnerable to external shocks which ultimately led to Malaya's economy crumbling and being in a worse state than it was previously ; while the thriving tin and rubber industries lasted, the British and European powers in general, reaped off significantly more benefits than locals themselves, proving that British colonial rule was an exploitative one, deeming it impossible for British colonial power to put into a colony more money than it squeezes out. A conclusion can hence be drawn that British colonial rule left Malaya in a worse state than before and the cons of British colonial rule outweigh the pros.

One prominent problem which the British brought to the Malayan society was the [marginalisation of indigenous Malays](#) due to the creation of a plural society. Since the time of the Melakan Sultanate, there had been foreign communities in Malaya, however, the majority of the indigenous Malays lived in rural villages with few intrusions from outside. During British rule, a wave of Chinese and Indian immigrants, together with people from other parts of the peninsula, migrated to Malaya to work in the mines and plantations, changing the nature of Malaya's relatively ethnically homogenous society

to more pluralistic society due to the integration of different communities who practise different cultures, languages and beliefs – groups of people from different races. The mass migration of Chinese and Indians resulted in the size of the Chinese and Indian populations in some places to grow so large that indigenous Malays became the minority ethnic group. In order to appease and protect the interests of the Malays, the British set up a Malay Land Reservations System which defined lands which were preserved for the Malays and could not be sold to non-Malays. The system was set up with a goal to ensure that Malays did not lose all their land to non-Malays and to try to solve the issue of marginalisation of indigenous Malays. However, this pro-Malay policy which the British set up had a perverse effect and instead encouraged the division of society along racial lines, where mindsets that a certain race, which in this case is the Malays, would have privileges which the others did not have, to be entrenched in the Malayan society. Policies such as the Malay Land Reservations System hence laid the foundation for racial tension and friction between people of different races in Malaya to surface, which would later flare into racial riots in the 20th century. Therefore, the British brought about the grave problem of the marginalisation of the Malays due to their creation of a plural society ; they tried to solve the issue by introducing the Malay Land Reservations System but the policy had a perverse effect and took a toll on society by promoting social divide and laying the foundation for racial tensions. Hence, instead of solving the issue they introduced, the British created another problem on top of the previous issue, ultimately bringing about many problems that were left unresolved in Malaya, and there were more problems than benefits.

British colonial rule brought about the [improvement of public health](#). Previously, the hygiene and sanitation in towns were poor and working and living conditions in and around tin mines and rubber plantations were harsh, with high annual death rates from infectious diseases such as malaria which exceeded birth rates. Making matters worse, the migrant population introduced new infections into the local population and at the same time, were exposed to local endemic diseases. The increasing influx of European medical practitioners in government hospitals and outpatient clinics began to spread awareness of

the need for improved hygiene and safe sanitation, which helped to control the spread of diseases, contributing to overall improvements in health and progressively contributing to a gradual reduction in mortality rates. The British improved public health facilities which reduced the incidence of various tropical diseases. However, advances in the social sectors, which in this case is the improvement of public health facilities and public health in general, were [influenced more by the need to ensure the success of colonial economic activities](#) than by the vision of social development and welfare of the people in Malaya. Investments in healthcare mainly benefited the colonial administrators and elite families living in towns, with only very limited medical services reaching rural areas. Where they did exist, out-of-town clinics served primarily to protect the health of the British and only secondarily to maintain the health of the labour force, which consisted mainly of the Chinese and Indian immigrants, working to support colonial economic interests. Hence, though steps the British took did have positive impacts on the general well-being of the population, these positive impacts were merely a side effect of the British protecting themselves and the labourers from the diseases, in order to ensure the success of colonial economic activities. This goes to show that the British wanted to profit off the people in Malaya but in order to successfully do so, they needed to ensure that the health of the general public was good.

In conclusion, British colonial rule was an exploitive venture that is first and foremost an economic activity with a vested economic interest by the British, as it is impossible for the British to put into a colony more money than it squeezes out. In its economic venture, the British brought about not one, but many problems to the Malayan society and in the end, created more problems than they could solve. As mentioned above, although the export-oriented economy which the British introduced was very efficient and had a high reward system which led to the development of Malaya's economy, it resulted in Malaya's economy being extremely vulnerable to external shocks and Malaya's economy indeed dipped during events such as the Great Depression. Secondly, indigenous Malays were marginalised due to the British's creation of a plural society in Malaya. The British tried to solve this problem but failed miserably when they brought about other

problems – social divide and racial tension, which laid the foundation for racial riots later on. Lastly, any benefits to the Malayan society were merely side effects of the British benefiting themselves. For instance, the improvement of public health facilities and the improvement of public health were just so that the British's economic activities were not disrupted and the improvement of public health services was mainly to protect the health of the British, with the labourers being protected as well, so that they could continue to work for the British and sustain its economic activities. All in all, the British created more problems than they could solve and these problems were left unresolved, resulting in the Malayan society being worse off than before, proving that the negative impacts of British colonial rule outweigh its positive impacts.