

MALAYSIA

Revisiting history: could Malaya's New Villages get heritage site nod?

Settlements erected by the British during emergency meet requirements of cultural listing, say experts

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A New Village erected during the emergency from 1948–1960 as part of the British's plan to separate the largely Chinese rural populace from communist guerillas. – Wikipedia pic, April 18, 2021

BY

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KUALA LUMPUR – Buried deep in the annals of the Education Ministry's history syllabus, some may remember coming across the term "New Villages", which forms a small part of the larger communist insurgency chapter.

Subsequent history textbooks barely mention the New Villages again.

So, what exactly are the New Villages?

During the emergency from 1948–1960, the communist army would attack village folk living in rural areas, prompting the British to relocate the villagers into single, protected enclaves called New Villages.

However, the history of the New Villages and its residents have continued past the emergency to the present day.

The International Council on Monuments and Sites Malaysia (Icomos) yesterday held a webinar entitled Malaysian New Villages, in conjunction with the International Day of Monuments and Sites, in which experts said the New Villages were more than just a security tactic by the British to curb the activities of communist militants.

The webinar featured speakers Francis Lok Wah, who taught politics in University Sains Malaysia, former deputy housing and local government ministry director-general Datuk Fong Tian Yong, Perunding Alam Rancang executive director Lim Yau Lee and former Melaka World Heritage Office general manager Rosli Nor.

Here are five interesting facts about the New Villages:

Village folk were resettled to by force

Resettling certain parts of the populace into New Villages was undertaken initially as a security tactic to keep people safe from communist militants.

But according to Francis, the British did not kindly request settlers to move into new homes.

Instead, they were ordered to do so.



Once moved into the New Villages, settlers were surrounded by barbed wire fences and guards. – Wikipedia pic, April 18, 2021

Francis cited a statement by Malayan Communist Party leader Chin Peng, who suggested that the resettlement was done “harshly, hastily and forcibly”.

The statement by Chin Peng also touched on how the British burnt the homes of the Chinese populace, and that those who resisted resettlement went down in flames with their homes.

However, Chin Peng also acknowledged that the formation of the New Villages was a major obstacle to his communist struggle.

Francis pointed out that, once moved into the New Villages, settlers were surrounded by barbed wire fences and guards.

Residents were also likely subject to routine arrests, body searches and home inspections, all rude interruptions to their daily lives, said Francis.

New Villages were badly maintained after emergency

While the emergency did end, the New Villages remained.

However, the conditions in the New Villages were deplorable and worsened over time.

In the 1970s, Francis said MCA formed the Perak Task Force (PTF), which went into the New Villages and noted the various problems faced by their residents.

The PTF concluded that the residents needed better housing, agricultural land, employment and infrastructure facilities.



Some of the residents of the New Villages, a majority of whom were Chinese. – Wikipedia pic, April 18, 2021

It then recommended the New Villages be designated poor groups in need of government assistance.

Francis said that academic studies were also undertaken in the same period, and confirmed the poverty-related issues.

The government then included New Villages in its five-year plan in the 1970s.

Not all in the New Villages were Chinese

In contrast to common belief, not all 573,000 individuals resettled into the 480 New Villages were Chinese.

Fong said this was not the case, saying some village heads comprised Malays and Thais.

While 86% were Chinese, the rest comprised other ethnicities.

New Villages main factor behind MCA's formation

Fong also highlighted the fact that MCA began as an association before it evolved into the political party we all know today.



Former deputy housing and local government ministry director-general Datuk Fong Tian Yong says MCA was initially formed as an association with Chinese squatters in mind. – Screen grab, April 18, 2021

The association was initially formed with Chinese squatters in mind.

Fong said that before the emergency, the Chinese populace lived as squatters, with many taking up farming activities illegally.

However, the British had allowed such practices for food cultivation purposes.

When the communist insurgency gained speed, distrust between the British administration and these squatters also grew.

The British were of the view that the Chinese squatters were sympathetic to the communist struggle.

As such, a group of elite Chinese individuals met with British colonial administrator Sir Henry Gurney to come up with a solution for the squatters.

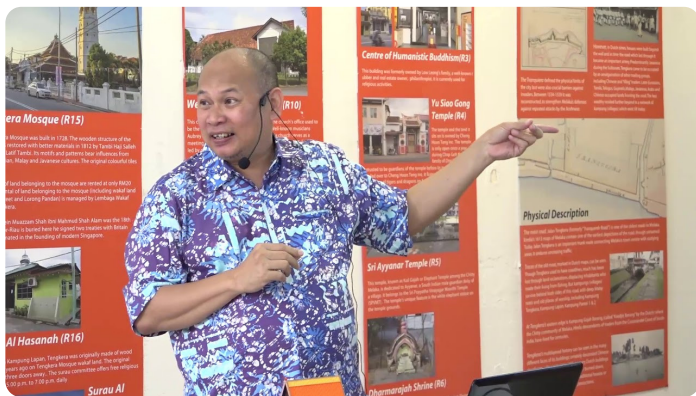
Fong cited a quote from then MCA president Tun Tan Cheng Lock, who said his organisation aimed to cooperate with the authorities to solve the problem and restore law and order.

MCA then took part in planning financial assistance for the resettlement of the squatters, but its initial task of managing the resettlement of 20 New Villages failed as it lacked funds.

New Villages could be listed as heritage sites

Rosli said it is possible for the New Villages to be declared national heritage sites or Unesco World Heritage sites.

He said for New Villages to be declared as such, provisions in the National Heritage Act must be followed.



Former Melaka World Heritage Office general manager Rosli Nor says the New Villages meet the criteria to be designated heritage sites by the Tourism, Arts and Culture Ministry. – Screen grab, April 18, 2021

This all comes down to the Tourism, Arts and Culture Ministry, which has the power to gazette and declare national heritage sites, he said.

Considerations for the minister to take into account, Rosli said, include the historical importance of the site, as well as the site's importance to Malaysian history.

Rosli said the New Villages meet these considerations.

However, all the remaining New Villages cannot simply be lumped together and declared heritage sites.

This is largely due to the fact that the New Villages are spread across various states, where land matters fall under the purview of the respective state

governments.

As for Unesco World Heritage sites, Rosli said New Villages fit the criteria, too.

Under Unesco, various New Villages could be lumped together to make one World Heritage site. – The Vibes, April 18, 2021

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