

PENANG MONTHLY

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THE MANY LEVELS OF LIVEABILITY



COVER STORY
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THRIVES: WE ARE
HOW WE LIVE

FEATURE
REVITALISING A
VANISHING TONGUE:
DEAR YOU AND
THE POLITICS OF
TEOCHEW HERITAGE

LEST WE FORGET
THE SULKING PILOT
AND THE SEA-
DEVIL: A FRENCH
ASTRONOMER'S
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A publication of Penang Institute, *Penang Monthly* aims to be an inspiring read for the curious Malaysian. We highlight Penang's changemakers and trailblazers; celebrate its heritage, arts and culture; and provide national and regional analysis on politics, economy, technology and society.

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- 1 Supply Penangites with information about significant issues in order to promote public participation.
- 2 Encourage discussion about various aspects of Penang's fate and fortune.
- 3 Profile Penang personalities who have contributed, sometimes in very unassuming but critical ways, to the reputation and wellbeing of the state.
- 4 Put the spotlight on ordinary Penangites who otherwise go unnoticed, but who nevertheless define the culture of the state in essential ways.
- 5 Highlight the importance of Penang as a generator of culture, education, industry and cosmopolitan values.
- 6 Emphasise present trends in the economics, industry, politics and arts which affect the immediate future of the state and country.
- 7 Offer reliable socioeconomic data for the benefit of decision makers in government and the private sector.

THE MANY LEVELS OF LIVEABILITY

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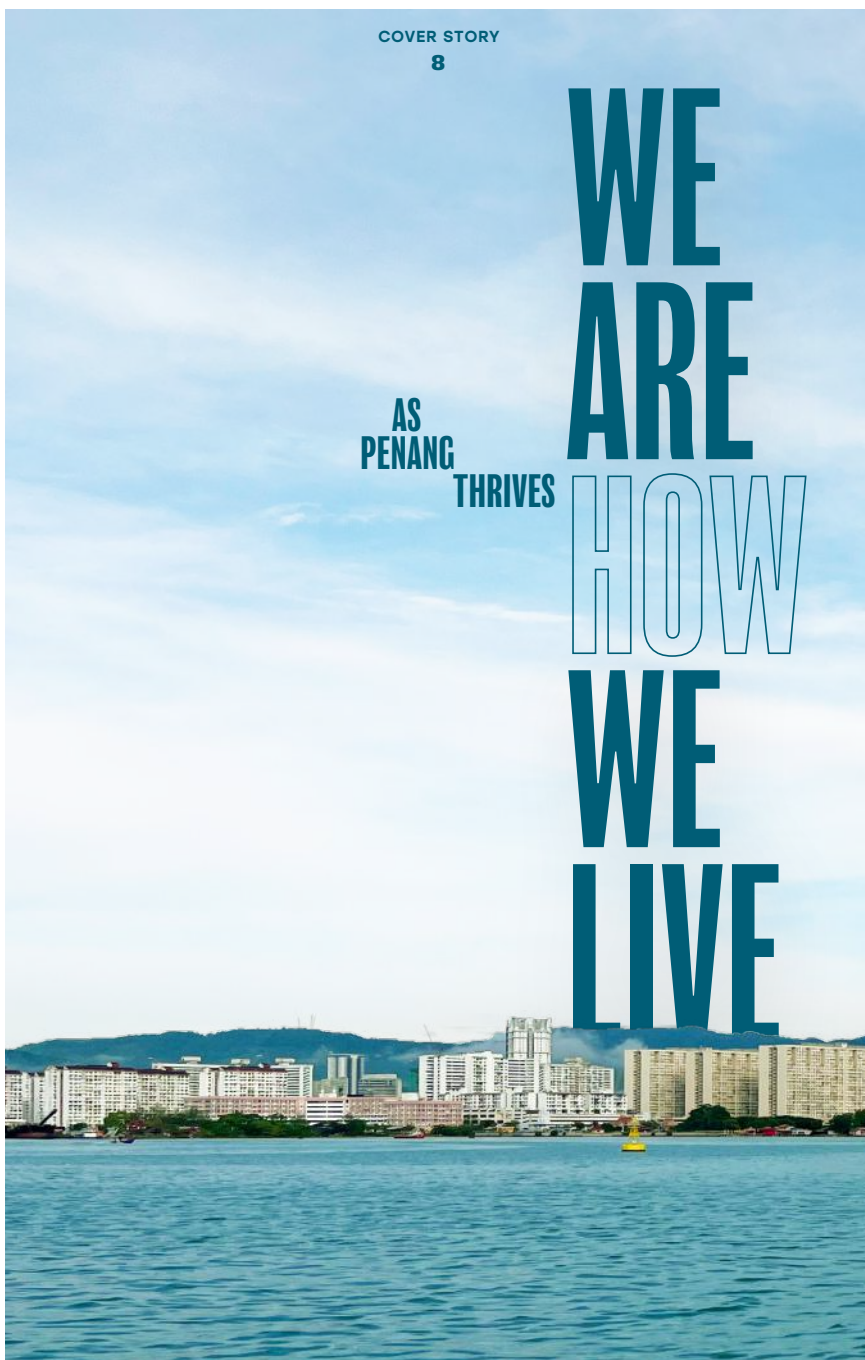
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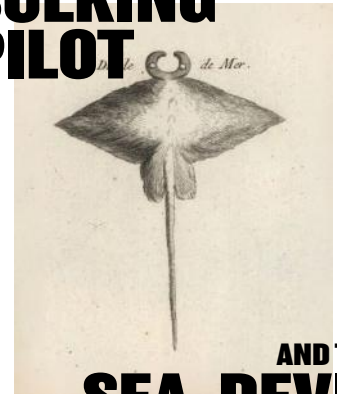


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BEYOND THE LIVEABILITY CHECKLIST

VIEWS FROM THE SOCIAL SCIENCES

BY OOI KEE BENG

THIS ISSUE HIGHLIGHTS liveability in Penang, and an initial word of warning is in order. A particular kind of misleading confidence comes from a spreadsheet. Ask a town planner what makes a city liveable, and you will be handed numbers: walkability scores, transit access, density targets, hectares of green space per resident. These are not unimportant, but they only describe a city's skeleton, not its temperament. And a city, like a person, is not reducible to its bone structure.

What I want to do here is walk through what gets left out when we let a checklist do our thinking for us—and why the disciplines that study meaning, rather than infrastructure, need to be heard.

Start with something modest: the idea of place. Marc Augé distinguishes between “place”—saturated with memory and relationality—and “non-place”—functional, anonymous and interchangeable. A city can be efficient in every measurable sense and still produce non-places: the mall corridor, the transit interchange, the plaza nobody remembers. What transforms ordinary geography into something people actually love is repetition, whether from the same walk, seeing the same stallholders or nods exchanged each morning. This is not nostalgia; it is how meaning accrues, which in the case of George Town, emerges from its living heritage and street life.

The corner coffee shop, the barber-shop and the void deck are examples of what American sociologist Ray Oldenburg calls “third places”. Neither home nor the workplace, these are where casual and low-stakes contact between people actually happens. A planner might tick the box that says an amenity exists within a radius of 500m; but this is a different achievement from inviting people to linger (see *Penang Monthly*, February 2026).

CONDITIONS FOR RELAXING

Environmental psychologists bring a more physiological argument to the table. Rachel and Stephen Kaplan’s Attention Restoration Theory proposes that the mind, fatigued by the demands of urban life, needs exposure to environments of “soft fascination”—for example, greenery, water or the gentle complexity of a garden—to recover. This is not an aesthetic preference, but hews closer to a biological requirement. Colin Ellard’s work measures this need directly. Blank façades and relentless visual monotony produce quantifiable stress responses, as does the opposite extreme: chaotic overstimulation. The liveable street, it seems, lives in a narrow band between dullness and onslaught.

And then there is the older, more intuitive observation that streets feel safe not because of statistics, but because of “eyes”, in the sense that someone, somewhere, is paying quiet attention. Oscar Newman’s concept of “defensible space” argues that the legible ownership of a courtyard or stairwell changes how people behave within it. A place can be statistically safe yet feel unsafe, simply because no one appears to be responsible for governance and management. The gap between the two is where a great deal of urban anxiety

quietly lives. Sadly, the prevalent culture in Penang, and Malaysia at large, is one of bad maintenance, where public spaces actually cause “urban anxiety”, thus detracting from their levels of liveability.

Feminist geographers also point out that most liveability metrics are built around commuters travelling in a straight line—from home to work, and the reverse—when a great many residents, particularly those with caregiving responsibilities, move through the city in loops: school, market, clinic and home again. A city designed for linearity fails the loop, even while scoring well on paper.

CULTURAL DIVERSITY NEEDS WORK TO FLOURISH

One condition for liveability rarely appears on any checklist at all: whether residents can, in any meaningful sense, think together. A shared working language is not a convenience; it is what makes arguments, complaints and negotiations between strangers possible in the first place. Sociolinguists studying linguistically fragmented cities describe a condition of spatial proximity without social contact—people who share a street but never quite share a sentence. A related point is how intellectual vibrancy in a multicultural place like Penang needs conscious input from its residents. Public exhibitions, seminars and book launches, such as those held at Penang Institute in Pulau Tikus, and Hikayat in George Town, contribute *vitality on this front*.

Social scientists have also argued, plausibly, that the capacity to argue with strangers in public is a trained skill, one that atrophies without spaces designed to exercise it. And where local newspapers close, American research on “news deserts” finds concrete civic costs: falling voter turnout, weaker scrutiny of local government and a public retreating into partisan shorthand adopted from the national level, because it no longer has anything more local to reason from. Penang Institute has consciously been contributing here with *Penang Monthly* since 2009, providing a structured textual space in which cases are made and passionately defended, in line with editorial and civic norms.

No discussion of liveability can avoid the question of plurality, and here the honest answer cuts both ways. Diverse cities plug into wider economic and cultural networks; Ash Amin’s idea of “throwntogetherness”—that is, the ordinary, unglamorous



contact of queuing and commuting alongside difference—does real civic work over time, however modestly. Along this sits Robert Putnam’s well-known finding that ethnic diversity, at least in the short run, can correlate with lower social trust, although this particular finding has since been substantially complicated. Such effects may actually be traceable to where people of different backgrounds *happen to be sorted*, rather than a result of diversity itself. The more defensible position, which most careful scholars now hold, is that diversity’s fruits depend on whether a city’s institutions *convert proximity into actual contact*—such as mixed schools, integrated housing and shared public spaces—or merely allow difference to sit beside itself, unmet.

Malaysia and Singapore, close neighbours facing the same demographic inheritance, have answered this question in almost opposite ways. One keeps ethnicity constantly present in formal politics while leaving public argument relatively open, and the other removes ethnicity from formal contest while engineering integration directly into the architecture of public housing, at some cost to open contestation. Both approaches to governmentality mentioned above are, therefore, wagers about which parts of civic life a state should shape by hand, and which it should leave citizens to work out by themselves, slowly, at street level.

What runs beneath all this is a shift in the question being asked about a city. The planner asks whether a city functions. The sociologist, the anthropologist and the psychologist ask whether it produces encounter, memory and restoration; the elements that a person needs to simply keep living well within urban places.

Both questions deserve an answer. It is only that the second rarely gets asked with the same rigour. This is an imbalance that needs correcting: a city, in the end, is judged less by its efficiency, than by whether the people living in it feel, in some unmeasurable but real sense, at home.

1

PENANGITES APPEAR MATURE IN UNDERSTANDING GOVERNANCE

BY NADHIRAH ZAINUDDIN

PENANGITES, IT SEEMS, do not evaluate government in the abstract. Their assessments are connected to what they can actually see and experience: infrastructure, public services, traffic, housing, prices, economic opportunities and policies that are actually delivered. In other words, governance becomes tangible when it enters everyday life. What are the key lessons that we can learn from Penang Institute's Penang Satisfaction Survey (PSS) 2026 findings, and what can these tell policymakers about how they should then govern?



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DIFFERENT GOVERNMENTS, DIFFERENT EXPECTATIONS

One of the clearest findings from the survey's open-ended responses is that residents appear to use different yardsticks when evaluating the federal and state governments. Among the 1,686 respondents, 70.8% express satisfaction with the Penang state government, compared with 59.6% for the federal government: an 11.2 percentage point difference. Put simply, around 7 in 10 respondents are satisfied with the state government, compared with 6 in 10 for the federal government.

Perhaps the more interesting question is not which government scores higher, *but why*. When respondents speak positively about the federal government, they refer to issues such as economic recovery and the strengthening of the ringgit, foreign investment and job creation, welfare assistance and political stability. Criticism, meanwhile, centres upon the cost of living and inflation, the pace of reform, governance concerns, and racial and religious politics.

Their assessment of the state government involves noticeably more local matters. Positive comments refer to infrastructure development, the leadership of Chief Minister Chow Kon Yeow, a stable and responsive administration as well as economic opportunities. Criticism focuses on matters much closer to residents' daily experiences: traffic congestion and parking, housing affordability, overdevelopment, rising water charges and the cost of living.

This distinction matters because it suggests that Penang residents have some understanding—whether explicitly or intuitively—of Malaysia's different layers of government. The federal government is more readily judged in terms of national economic and political conditions, while the state government is evaluated by the quality of the place in which people live. For policymakers, this means that public confidence cannot be built through messaging alone. Governance, especially at the state level, is experienced through commutes, the availability of housing, the quality of infrastructure and whether or not development actually improves people's surroundings.

2

SATISFACTION IS NOT UNIFORM

The relatively high overall satisfaction with the state government should not be interpreted as uniform support for the authorities across Penang society. Satisfaction varies considerably by age and ethnicity.

Among respondents aged 15–24, 86% are satisfied with the state government and 82% with the federal government. Among those aged 60–74, however, the corresponding figures are 72% and 43%. The state–federal satisfaction gap therefore widens substantially among older respondents. Differences are also visible across ethnic groups. Satisfaction with the state government stands at 74% among Malay respondents, 66% among Chinese respondents and 82% among Indian respondents, compared to satisfaction with the federal government (67%, 51% and 62%, respectively).

These differences should not automatically be read as indicators of political preferences. PSS 2026 establishes patterns of association, but does not, by itself, explain the causal mechanisms behind them. What the findings do show is that an overall image of satisfaction can conceal very different experiences and expectations within the population.



3

FOR PENANGITES, FAIRNESS NEEDS TO BE VISIBLE

Another revealing aspect of PSS 2026 concerns residents' perceptions of Penang's treatment by the federal government. Here, the open-ended responses show that fairness is understood in highly concrete terms.

Respondents who feel that Penang has been treated fairly point to visible federal investments such as the Mutiara Line Light Rail Transit system, Penang International Airport expansion, highways and other major projects. They also mention improved federal-state political alignment, project approvals and improvements in infrastructure and public services. Those who feel Penang has not been treated fairly, meanwhile, raise almost the mirror image of these issues. They question whether or not Penang receives adequate returns relative to its economic and tax contributions, express frustration over projects taking too long to complete and raise concerns about political biases, inconsistent implementation, uneven development and the rising cost of living.

This distinction tells us about public perceptions of federalism. For residents, the relationship between Penang and Putrajaya is not simply a constitutional or fiscal question. It is interpreted in terms of reciprocity: if Penang contributes significantly to the national economy, then residents want to see its contributions reflected in terms of investment, infrastructure and public services at the state level. Fairness, therefore, needs to be *seen* as well as stated—through projects that are approved and completed, infrastructure that meets local needs and public services that residents can experience in their daily lives.



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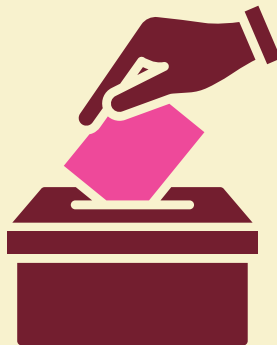
DISSATISFIED WITH POLITICS, BUT STILL CHOOSING PENANG

Perhaps one of the most striking findings is that dissatisfaction with the state government does not necessarily translate to a desire to leave. 87.6% of respondents say they intend to remain in Penang, while only 12.4% intend to move elsewhere.

There is, nevertheless, a clear relationship between satisfaction and one's intention to stay. Among those who were very satisfied with Malaysia's political direction, 93% intend to remain in Penang. Among the very dissatisfied, this figure falls to 72.6%. Yet this latter figure is itself revealing: read another way, nearly three-quarters of even the most politically dissatisfied respondents still want to stay.

Why? Open-ended responses point to factors such as stable local governance, effective public service delivery and confidence in Penang's long-term development. Those considering leaving, meanwhile, cite the rising cost of living, limited economic opportunities locally and the prospect of a better quality of life elsewhere.

People can therefore be dissatisfied with politics while remaining deeply attached to Penang, yet their attachments should not be taken for granted. The reasons given by those considering leaving point less to political disaffection, and more to mounting economic and liveability pressures.



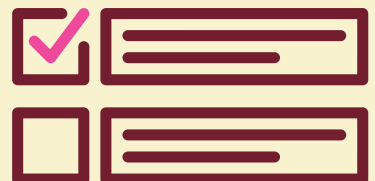
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GOVERNANCE GOES BEYOND SATISFACTION SCORE

Taken together, PSS 2026 shows that public satisfaction cannot be reduced to a simple contest between the state and federal governments. Residents apply different expectations to each level of government, experiences differ across social groups, and even political dissatisfaction does not necessarily weaken their attachment to Penang. Yes, satisfaction with the state government is comparatively high, but responses also contain clear demands for improvement. Traffic congestion, housing affordability, development pressures and the cost of living remain part of how residents experience Penang. At the same time, these findings also suggest that Penangites value stability, responsiveness and visible delivery, alongside expecting a fair relationship with the federal government: what Penang contributes at the national level, it should receive in return.

The broader lesson here is that public satisfaction is better understood as feedback, rather than as endorsement. A high satisfaction score tells policymakers what appears to be working, while criticism tells them where expectations are not being met. The differences across demographic groups, whether disaggregated by age or ethnicity, remind us that there is no single Penang experience.

Perhaps the most encouraging finding is that *nearly 9 in 10 respondents* still intend to call Penang home. But retaining this confidence depends on whether or not good governance continues translating economic progress and public investment into tangible experiences. Ultimately, it is measured not only by how satisfied people say they are, but by whether they can see, feel and share in the progress around them.



AS
PENANG
THRIVES

WE
ARE
HOW
WE
LIVE



BY TAN LEE OOI

UPON RETURNING TO Penang in 2013 after completing my PhD, I found the state's urban environment visibly cleaner and tidier than before, buttressed by a sense of optimism that its demeaning moniker, "*Pulau Pinang Darul Sampah*" (lit., "Penang, the Abode of Garbage"), was history.^[1] Over the subsequent decade, Penang's transition into a new phase of major transformation to reverse urban decline and rejuvenate its socioeconomic situation has been reasonably well-managed. The prevailing sentiment is a mixture of hope for the future, coupled with the growing pains of political and socioeconomic transition. In this context, what does Penang's liveability—an intrinsically multidimensional and multi-temporal concept—look like?



THE PAST IS THE PRESENT

What has Penang accomplished, whether fully or partially? While some Malaysians chase the “Singapore dream” of rapid financial uplift, Penangites can at least build a prosperous life without leaving home, coupled with a strong will from all quarters to make it liveable. There are three relevant major reports regarding this pursuit of liveability: *The Sustainable Penang Initiative* (1999), *The Penang Paradigm* (2013) and *Penang2030* (2018). While the first two reports have seemingly “expired” and only the last one is ongoing, many aspects of these past reports remain highly relevant. Any new plan should contemplate the past, with its yet-unfulfilled projects and visions. Indeed, the second report, in particular, still provides a working definition of a well-balanced society: a Penang which is materially prosperous, intellectually creative, socially progressive, politically empowered, environmentally sustainable and culturally vibrant.

Penang’s gross domestic product (GDP) per capita stood at RM 80,584 in 2025, the highest among the 13 states (excluding the Federal Territories). Meanwhile, the sharp decline in its Gini coefficient in 2024 to 0.311, compared with the preceding decade,^[2] indicates a significantly more equal distribution of income despite minor fluctuations. With this in mind, what economic successes have been achieved so far, and what shortcomings still exist?

The electrical and electronics sector in Bayan Lepas and other industrial areas have provided decent jobs for qualified workers. My friends and relatives now work as professionals, run their own businesses or climb the corporate ladder to make a comfortable living. The booming tourism sector, meanwhile, has benefited several categories of business owners (e.g., accommodation, food and beverages, leisure, transportation), where gentrification—a double-edged sword—has led to the mushrooming of cafes, restaurants,

street art, museums, waterfront promenades and adaptive reuse in tourist areas. Indirectly, consumption choices have multiplied for locals. Chatting over lunch with a recently returned academic, I noticed her delight with Penang’s current gastronomic sophistication. Despite the challenges posed by tourism’s rapid growth, opportunities remain for *developmental tourism* to become “a powerful engine of urban (and rural) renewal, sparking business growth, breathing life into forgotten spaces and nudging governments towards providing better infrastructure that benefits locals as much as visitors” (see *Penang Monthly*, “Beyond numbers”, May 2026).

Another landmark achievement is the rollout of mega infrastructure projects. Following years of gridlock, delay and financial hurdles, the highly anticipated Mutiara Line Light Rail Transit (LRT) system and Penang International Airport expansion are finally being realised, although their potential positive impacts can only be fully enjoyed with holistic planning. The LRT project, in particular, is closely linked with urban rejuvenation projects related to sustainable transportation, namely the 2015 “Pedestrian is King” initiative and the Penang Bicycle Lane Master Plan.

Since 2008, new pedestrian lanes have extended beyond the heritage core, some heroically accommodating existing obstacles (whether trees, lampposts or signage). As a public transport user, I rely heavily on such routes to travel short distances. But I have to avoid directly comparing our infrastructure with, for example, Singapore. The disproportionate difference in our respective GDP per capita means that the state has less funding available for public transportation, among other factors. Furthermore, there is the question of usage. Many pedestrian lanes are under-utilised or have even become dead spaces because they lack foot traffic and experience low usage for most of the day, compounded by Penang’s significant reliance on private transport (whether cars, motorcycles or other motorised vehicles).

Penang’s cycling dream is similarly compromised. 205km of cycling routes have been built along the island’s eastern coastline since the launch of the Master Plan, yet cycling generally remains recreational, with meets occasionally organised for charity or eco-friendly causes. Cycling, among the relatively affluent, remains a leisure activity rather than a utilitarian choice. At my previous company, precisely one out of 250 colleagues actually cycled to work daily, until he was discouraged by accidents with cars or motorbikes. My few cycling enthusiast friends only treat it as a hobby: ironically, they drive to designated starting points for group rides, their bicycles properly mounted atop their cars.





THE PRESENT IS THE FUTURE

Such are the objective measures of livability, as imagined from the perspective of policymakers and planners. But more subjective indicators, which are sensitive to how people *feel* about their living conditions, are also necessary. In this respect, it is also important to think seriously about what satisfaction feels like (see “How are Penang’s residents feeling?” and “Khoo Suet Leng”, in this issue).

According to the Penang Satisfaction Survey (PSS) 2026, the overall satisfaction level is 7.06 out of 10 points: a slight decline from the 2020–21 happiness benchmark of 7.24 (see “Penangites’ satisfaction by the numbers”, in this issue). Overall, people still experience high satisfaction with living in Penang; however, middle-income groups, and even upper-middle-income ones, report lower levels of satisfaction regarding financial savings and resilience (see “Financial resilience”, in this issue).

From a macroeconomic perspective, this issue is structural rather than individual. Although Penang has already crossed the high-income threshold, as per the World Bank’s definition, the creation of high-income jobs remains challenging. Good salaries are highly concentrated in certain sectors and at upper-management levels. But Penang Institute’s initial analysis also indicates the presence of a “per-

sonal middle-income trap” for people in these income brackets. Just as a country trapped in a middle-income bracket can take decades to break out, if ever, this dynamic manifests itself in a career plateau at the micro level, with a low probability of upward mobility or higher wages. In sociological terms, these individuals are the “squeezed middle”, facing stagnant wages while the cost of living rises rapidly.

What does satisfaction around commuting look like? To no one’s surprise, traffic congestion remains the chief complaint among respondents. With scheduled road rerouting and closures required for the LRT’s construction, not to mention the long timeline for its completion, more should be done to prepare for this future modal shift. The authorities should also be cognisant of existing habits, for instance, our crucial finding that Penang’s multimodal commuters (individuals integrating both private vehicles and public transport into single journeys) substantially outnumber exclusive public transport users by *nearly two to one*. It is unrealistic to expect individuals fully reliant on private transport to completely switch to public transport overnight. However, we can encourage them to alternate between both modes, based on optimal timing and specific destinations.

The state must seriously encourage the growth of multimodal users in the next five years to facilitate LRT usage upon its completion. Both pedestrian and bicycle infrastructure should continue receiving a larger share of resources for further improvement, which could serve as the foundation for addressing the recurring first- and last-mile connectivity problem, one which railways alone cannot solve. A comprehensive local network of pedestrian and cyclist paths along the Mutiara LRT, integrated with nearby neighbourhoods, is urgently needed. The transit network—including an expanded network of bus routes—must extend beyond proximal commercial and residential zones alone, thus giving Penangites a compelling reason to make this modal shift (see “The measure of a system”, in this issue). Such an initiative can be more easily implemented in certain sites (e.g., the Macallum, Sungai Pinang and The Light areas, or even the entire Bayan Lepas Free Industrial Zone) than others. Ideally, these walkways would also be fully shaded, designed to maintain a comfortable thermal threshold. Indeed, expecting Malaysians accustomed to commuting in air-conditioned cars to walk under intense tropical heat is simply untenable.

3



Liveability is, in its most basic sense, measured by how well we solve the small, everyday problems that people encounter. Consequently, in the pursuit of satisfaction, it is not enough to treat citizens as passive actors, but to encourage a substantial degree of citizen engagement in governance.”

CAPTIONS

1. (Cover photo)
Penang Island's skyline taken from the Penang Strait.
2. Several heritage buildings in George Town have fallen into disrepair, their historic façades slowly being reclaimed by plants. Many pre-war shophouses in the UNESCO Heritage Site core and buffer areas belong to elderly locals or multi-generational families who simply lack the financial means to fund a restoration that follows the specific guidelines under the George Town Special Area Plan.
3. In the city, cyclists have to use the main roads. This photo was taken along Jalan Magazine, where traffic is almost always heavy during the daytime.
4. There is a dedicated bicycle pathway that runs alongside the Tun Dr Lim Chong Eu Expressway, which offers a scenic coastal route.
5. The new mini bus stops (completed this year) are built to provide shaded seating. However, “adding a seat” is not a substitute for an interconnected, barrier-free transit environment. Here, one can imagine a wheelchair-bound person's difficulties at a stop located inches from the curb with no additional space to manoeuvre.



THE FUTURE IS THE PAST

Penang's journey is not a linear march forward, but an accumulation of setbacks and advances spanning generations. The past never truly disappears, but lives quietly within the present: it is the very substance from which the future is formed. The future, in turn, must be built upon the layers of the past. Transforming Penang into a highly liveable state requires policymakers to learn from historical contexts, confront contemporary challenges—particularly real sustainability amidst Anthropogenic climate change—and actively shape the future.

The immensity of the future needs to be considered at various scales. Perhaps one personal and relatable way of doing so is by focusing on *retirement*. Based on various retirement rankings, Penang is often a preferred choice for retirees. To be sure, “retireability” is Penang's strength, especially for those who return after many years of pursuing opportunities overseas (see “Managing success”, in this issue). But for younger generations working and living locally, significant policy interventions are also needed.

An effective response to liveability expectations requires stronger monitoring, supported by actionable measures. I therefore propose developing a Penang Liveability Index, by adapting global city liveability indices to local governance. Rather than replicating existing indicators, this index integrates established frameworks with local realities through a systematic and long-term perspective, by recognising that some indicators may be too generic or lack relevance. The foundation of each category should be closely tied to routine government functions, service delivery and measurable outcomes.

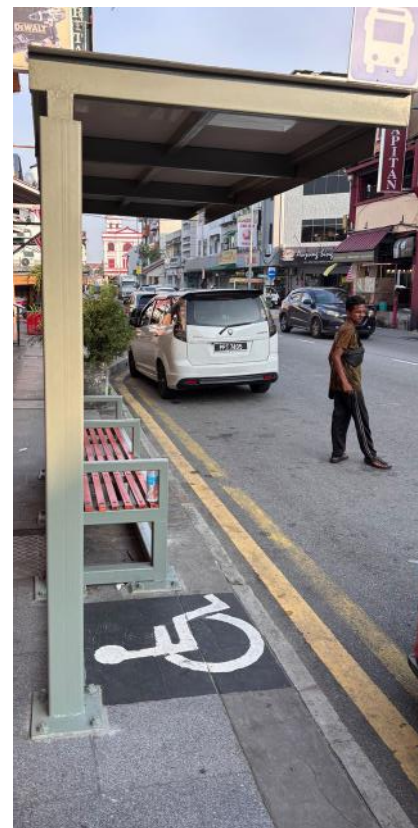
Further, these metrics should be categorised clearly and aligned directly with the portfolios of the relevant state executive council members. The resulting report will ideally be presented and debated in the State Legislative Assembly, where it should provide a framework for asking targeted questions. Although Penang state assemblypersons are undeniably hardworking, submitting at least 700 to 800 questions per session, most are formulated ad hoc and lack a longitudinal perspective. Imagine how the quality of

life in Penang could be vastly improved if each backbencher was to track an aspect of liveability closely and systematically. Only thus can our institutions be capable of turning good governance into tangible improvements in people's daily lives (see “Penangites appear mature”, in this issue).

Yet change does not rest solely with policymakers: the active participation of residents remains our most powerful catalyst. Liveability is, in its most basic sense, measured by how well we solve the small, everyday problems that people encounter. Consequently, in the pursuit of satisfaction, it is not enough to treat citizens as passive actors, but to encourage a substantial degree of citizen engagement in governance. Just as a relatively lower GDP per capita should not excuse broken footpaths, it should not excuse a passive civic culture. If we want a better living environment, we should provide more feedback to our city councils through active and everyday civic participation. The city councils of Penang Island and Seberang Perai do receive and respond to complaints through various platforms (e.g., e-Aduan, 24-hour hotlines, WhatsApp accounts).^[3] There are no data on the total accumulated complaints, but under the Majlis Bandaraya Pulau Pinang's Online Services Statistics, an average of 2,895 cases were logged monthly in 2023–25.^[4] After filtering out categories such as “tracking complaints”, “general enquiries”, “suggestions” and “acknowledgements”, the final number would likely be quite low.

In short, Penangites do not seem to complain much—at least not officially. When adjusted for population size, this figure becomes even less significant in comparison with Singapore, whose residents made 1.7mil complaints in one year.^[5] The point here is not to encourage a culture of complaining per se, but to nurture a citizenry which is sensitive to official shortcomings and performs the civic duty of providing feedback. After all, under current constraints, the authorities cannot meticulously monitor every corner of the state. Ultimately, its clean and considerable urban landscape and facilities must be co-created by city-planners and conscientious residents.

We are how we live.^[6]



5

ENDNOTES

1. Chan, L. (2015, January 22). Garbage dump to shining city. *Buletin Mutiara*.
2. Penang's Gini coefficient dropped from 0.419 in 2009 to 0.37 in 2012, increased slightly to 0.371 in 2022, and then fell to 0.311 in 2024.
3. Here, the rise of platformised governance in Malaysia is worth considering. See: Gayathry Venkiteswaran. (2026). *Justice beyond virality*. ISIS Malaysia.
4. Relevant statistics can be filtered here: <https://www.mbpp.gov.my/en/corporate/sumber/statistik>.
5. Channel News Asia. (2021). *Singapore residents make 1.7 million complaints every year*.

6. Healthcare matters too for all individuals, regardless of age. See “Making Penang more inclusive as a medical hub”, in this issue.



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IN THE MIDDLE of a major medical crisis, you may find yourself navigating the confusing corridors of Penang General Hospital (PGH). Every visit inevitably requires preparation the night before and processing afterwards: whether emotionally, to come to terms with the diagnosis, or cognitively, to make sense of the system itself. It is hard not to feel overwhelmed when a simple blood test means navigating queues, counters, labyrinthine hallways and waiting rooms before reaching the doctor—not to mention the struggle to access the results later. Although Malaysia has an extensive and highly developed public healthcare system, its workers labour under considerable pressure to keep it running. Amidst Penang's ambition of becoming one of Southeast Asia's most important (private) medical tourism destinations, it is time to ask who this system serves—and who is left out in the process.

MAKING PENANG MORE INCLUSIVE AS A MEDICAL HUB

BY LIANI MK

PENANG'S SUCCESS AS A MEDICAL TOURISM HUB

In late-August, Penang's Health Department apologised after a viral video showed long queues at PGH's emergency and trauma department, and announced measures to expand treatment space and improve patient flow.^[1] This followed the Ministry of Health's (MOH) acknowledgement of its significant manpower needs, projecting the necessity for more than 63,000 doctors by 2025 (including nearly 19,000 specialists) to keep the public healthcare system running.^[2] Yet only around 8,000 specialists were serving the public sector as of 2024.^[3]

None of this means that public healthcare workers are failing patients. The problem, instead, is that there are too many patients, but too few people and resources available to attend to them quickly. PGH, being a tertiary referral centre for the northern region, also serves patients from Perlis, Kedah and Perak, and thus experiences greater pressure than other public hospitals.

There is another side to Penang's healthcare system. Head to a private hospital, and the experience feels almost foreign. Over the public address system, one hears Mandarin and Indonesian alongside English and Malay, indicating that the hospital also caters to overseas patients. Appointments can be arranged quickly, tests completed within days and a diagnosis acquired within a week (or even a day). The patient's concerns are just their diagnosis (and bill), minus logistical hassles and lengthy waiting times.

The private healthcare system's boom is difficult to ignore. In 2025, 16 private hospitals in Penang recorded 527,176 foreign patients, up nearly 26% from 418,608 the previous year.^[4] Meanwhile, medical tourism revenue rose 26.6%, up from RM898.07mil to RM1.136bil.^[5] By July, Penang accounted for approximately 45% of Malaysia's total medical tourism revenue.^[6] In 2026, Malaysia was ranked the sixth-most popular global medical tourism destination, with Penang driving domestic growth.^[7] The state's success is the result of years spent building a reputation around specialist care, private hospitals, relatively competitive prices and a multilingual environment. Its proximity to Indonesia, with direct flights to cities such as Medan, also provides an enormous regional advantage.

There is plenty to celebrate. A thriving private medical sector brings investment, jobs and expertise, while creating demand for professionals (for example, nurses, technicians, hospitality workers), transport services and other businesses. Penang's residents can also access specialists and facilities that might otherwise require a trip to more expensive cities like Kuala Lumpur or Singapore. But as Penang is marketed internationally as a place where high-quality medical care can be obtained quickly and affordably, what does this mean for the public healthcare system?

THE UNEVEN SIDE OF THE BOOM

While private patients arriving from abroad are, by default, able to pay for treatment (whether through savings, employers or insurance), those in the Malaysian public system are not necessarily able to afford such services. Therefore, the latter operates on a fundamentally different model. Operational costs are subsidised through general taxation to provide near-universal access to healthcare for Malaysians. Such access, according to Bank Negara, constitutes the foundation of the system.^[8]

Worryingly, between 2023 and 2025, 351 medical and dental specialists resigned—an average of 117 yearly—according to a parliamentary reply from the MOH. Private sector opportunities were cited as among the reasons for their departure, alongside personal reasons, academic opportunities and health problems.^[9] Doctors themselves have described the pressures of the public system (including heavy workloads, bureaucratic constraints, limited career progression and comparatively lower remuneration than private practice).^[10] Other actors, such as Parti Sosialis Malaysia, have raised concerns over the ongoing public healthcare crisis, linking the severe overcrowding at facilities like PGH to a shortage of specialists and medical staff.

This does not necessarily mean that medical tourism, by itself, causes public sector shortages: a crisis can have multiple causes. But it does raise uncomfortable questions about what happens when a state becomes increasingly successful at attracting patients who can pay more, while its public hospitals remain responsible for everyone else. A Penangite with comprehensive insurance or sufficient savings can reap tremendous benefits from its emergence as a medical hub. But for someone without either, this may mean very little, or worse, makes unequal access harder to ignore.

WHAT SHOULD A SUSTAINABLE MEDICAL HUB LOOK LIKE?

As Penang's medical facilities expand, who should they ultimately serve? Answering this question does not necessarily mean slowing down Penang's medical tourism ambitions or diminishing the achievements of its private healthcare workers. Rather, it requires thinking critically about what medical access looks like for all. If Penang wants to be liveable, then its healthcare system's success cannot be measured only by the number of international patients it can accommodate, or the revenue it generates. It should also be measured by how long a local patient needs to wait for a specialist; whether a public hospital has enough staff, whether a family can obtain a diagnosis without being pushed into debt; or whether a doctor is professionally supported and has reasons to stay in the public system.

Malaysia is already trying to address some of these tensions at the federal level. Budget 2026 allocated RM46.52bil to the MOH, while reforms under the RESET strategy are attempting to make private healthcare more affordable and sustainable.^[11] However, RESET-linked schemes such as "Rakan KKM", an MOH initiative to offer a paid-premium layer at selected public hospitals (in other words, allowing patients to jump the queue for specialist care), might simply reproduce the same unevenness found in the wider healthcare system at a smaller scale.

For Penang, its next healthcare challenge is ensuring that the prosperity generated by being a medical hub does not further distance those who can walk into a private hospital from ordinary Penangites and other northern patients, who cannot afford to leave the queue.

ENDNOTES

1. Bernama. (2026). *Measures Implemented to Ease Penang Hospital Emergency Dept Congestion*.
2. Rahimy et al. (2025, July 23). Over 4,000 new positions for government doctors, says PM. *The Star*.
3. Mohd Radhi. (2024, June 26). Over 8,000 specialists currently serving at govt healthcare facilities. *New Straits Times*.
4. Lo T.C., & Low C.S. (2026, May 11). Penang medical tourism records 26% growth in 2025. *The Star*.
5. Mok, O. (2026, May 11). Penang sees surge in medical tourists, [...]. *Malay Mail*.
6. Lo, T.C. (2026, July 7). Penang makes up 45% of national medical tourism revenue. *The Star*. Overall, national revenue reached RM3.35bil in 2025, up from RM2.72bil the year before, while international patient numbers rose to 1.85mil.
7. Dermawan, A. (2026, July 7). Malaysia ranked world's 6th-best medical tourism destination, led by Penang. *New Straits Times*.
8. Bank Negara Malaysia. (n.d.). *Base MHIT Plan*.
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An aerial photograph of Penang, Malaysia, showing a dense urban landscape with a mix of modern high-rise buildings and older, lower-rise structures. A prominent, tall, cylindrical skyscraper with a green-tinted top section stands out on the left. The city is situated along a coastline with a large body of water in the background. The sky is clear and blue.

HOW ARE PENANG'S RESIDENTS FEELING?

BY YEONG PEY JUNG

FOR THOSE OF us who call Penang home, our sense of attachment is strongly tied the state's liveability. Beyond its famous food trails, rich culture, heritage and greenery that appeal to tourists, the comfort of our physical environment and accessibility to services contribute to a particular quality of life, which actively supports our overall wellbeing. Besides that, the strength of Penang's social infrastructure is also an important measure of its liveability. The Penang Satisfaction Survey (PSS) 2026 measures how satisfied residents are with their everyday lives, as seen through the lens of liveability.

HOME IS WHERE THE HEART IS

Comfortable space is one of the foundations for making a city attractive. With 74.8% of residents surveyed satisfied with their current living conditions, this foundation appears to hold strong. Consequently, housing is one of the more positively rated dimensions of liveability. But for a home to offer more than just shelter, family and close relationships necessarily come into play. This is the third-most important priority for respondents when it comes to gauging what a satisfying life means.

Overall, PSS 2026 finds that Penang residents are highly satisfied with their familial relationships. Overall, the percentage of satisfied respondents stands at 88.6%, with Seberang Perai Tengah scoring particularly high (96.5%). Respondents also viewed their community relationships rather positively, with 86% expressing satisfaction. Seberang Perai Utara seemingly has a particularly strong sense of community, with 90.6% of its respondents satisfied with their community links. Moreover, this positive outlook also carries across to community safety, where 89.5% of these respondents feel safe within their own communities. This finding possibly points to stronger community connections between local residents, which may help create an inclusive environment for active engagement.

A clear pattern is sustained across all districts: strong satisfaction with community relationships translates into a high sense of community safety. Even in Seberang Perai Selatan—the district with the lowest satisfaction ratings for both community relationships and community safety—87% of respondents still feel relatively safe. For residents, Penang's liveability is felt not only within their living spaces, but also among the wider community around them.

EVALUATING UNDERLYING INFRASTRUCTURE

Beyond homes and neighbourhoods, public spaces and services also shape liveability, which residents are dependent upon for their daily routines. Cleanliness, and its maintenance by state and local governments, receive a satisfaction rating of 67%: generally, most people feel positive about the conditions of their surroundings. After all, rubbish-free streets and clean neighbourhoods are undoubtedly basic expectations integral to comfort. Additionally, the high rating of waste management efforts under the "Environmental" pillar of PSS 2026 further reflects residents' satisfaction with the maintenance of cleanliness (as discussed below).

Healthcare access is another vital element of everyday support and an important component of liveability, receiving a satisfaction rating of 80.2%. The state gov-

ernment has also implemented efforts to widen accessibility to hospitals by launching a new free Central Area Transit (CAT) shuttle bus in January 2026. This service connects KOMTAR with Hospital Pulau Pinang (Penang General Hospital) and other key health facilities; with ridership steadily rising, connections to healthcare services are strengthened.

Another essential aspect of liveability is digital connectivity. Fast and reliable internet services and the availability of a public Wi-Fi network are significantly shaping work, education and social connections, where key services are rapidly moving online. Penang residents report 58.2% satisfaction with this metric, suggesting that digital connectivity still has room to improve, especially in terms of dependable access.

Road conditions and traffic congestion management, however, are key sources of dissatisfaction. As it stands, only 25% of private vehicle users and 32% of multimodal users (those using both private vehicles and public transport) report satisfaction. 21.7% of respondents are satisfied with current efforts to manage traffic conditions, making traffic management the lowest-ranked indicator in PSS 2026. This is understandable since mobility is a major dimension of liveability, which directly impacts how residents organise their daily lives.

To alleviate traffic congestion and increase mobility, the state government has been actively advancing the Penang Transport Master Plan, anchored by the Mutiara Line Light Rail Transit system connecting the island to the mainland. Implemented by MRT Corp, it is slated for completion by 2031. However, for residents facing daily congestion today, immediate improvements to road conditions and real-time traffic management remain important.

A MATTER OF THE ENVIRONMENT

Penang's natural environment is another important part of everyday life in the state. Its hills and coastlines exist close to dense urban and industrial development, making the delicate balance between growth and conservation particularly important. In PSS 2026, 64.6% of residents are satisfied with the balance between environmental protection and development, while 66.1% are satisfied with environmental and biodiversity conservation.

Different areas of environmental management however, see significant variations in levels of satisfaction across districts. On the whole, disaster management and waste management show relatively higher levels (69.8% and 65.2%, respectively). Satisfaction with pollution management (for example, air, river and noise pollution) and land reclamation fall in the 50% range. Meanwhile, only 47%

of respondents are satisfied with efforts to handle marine and coastal erosion. As an island and coastal state, the latter has a significant impact on Penang's natural environment, meaning that preventing erosion is vital to long-term liveability. Timur Laut emerges as the least-satisfied district in this regard, ranking lowest in six out of nine environmental issues: possibly signifying its greater environmental pressures as Penang's most urbanised district. On the flip side, Seberang Perai Tengah and Seberang Perai Utara have more satisfied respondents, seeing higher ratings in four out of nine issues.

Meanwhile, it is clear why waste management receives higher satisfaction ratings. Penang's "Waste Segregation at Source" policy (launched 2016) seeks to reduce the amount of waste sent to landfills by encouraging households and businesses to separate recyclable material from general waste. Doing so lowers greenhouse gas emissions from landfills while shaping a cleaner physical environment.

Overall, Penang still possesses the many qualities that have established its status as a liveable state, one where residents derive a sense of comfort and belonging, driving their life satisfaction accordingly. However, there are still many improvements to be made to further strengthen the state's overall liveability. As Penang continues to grow, ensuring the safety and wellbeing of each and every resident should lie at the heart of policymaking. Economic development should go hand-in-hand with efforts to sustain liveability, so that the quality of life in Penang steadily improves as residents make their homes and build their futures.



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FINANCIAL

A PRIORITY FOR ALL PENANGITES

BY ONG WOOL LENG



ONG WOOL LENG heads the Socioeconomics and Statistics Programme at Penang Institute. Her work lies in labour market analysis and socio-economic development.

THE RISING COST of living always impacts financial resilience—one's capability to save and how long the savings last, accounting for accrued debt and living expenses. Such resilience is not simply a function of how much a household earns, but also of how well income, expenditure and expectations are balanced over time. While macro-level data may show stable and robust growth, households' financial resilience may weaken. Shoring up resilience is crucial; a household that can meet current bills but cannot strengthen a buffer for tomorrow is, by definition, financially fragile: they may be one medical bill or one job loss away from real distress.

RESILIENCE

BETWEEN THE MACRO AND THE MICRO

In the absence of shocks, Malaysia's average real gross domestic product (GDP) grew by more than 4%, with gross national income (GNI) per capita at RM57,200 in 2025. At the macro level, Bank Negara Malaysia's (BNM) latest *Financial Stability Review – Second Half 2025* indicates that household finances remain robust and resilient. Malaysia's median debt service ratio has remained steady at 33%, reflecting stable debt repayment obligations relative to income. Additionally, the median debt-to-income ratio, which measures borrower leverage and potential financial vulnerability, has remained broadly stable at 1.3. This suggests that households are maintaining consistent debt levels relative to their income.

What surprises us is that BNM's Financial Literacy and Capability Index reached 59.1 out of 100 in 2024, a slight increase from 59.0 in 2021. This incremental improvement suggests that efforts to boost financial literacy are gradually having an impact, which could lead to better financially informed decision-making among the population and, over time, improved financial stability and economic resilience. After all, those with stronger financial capability often seek out relevant financial information to improve their knowledge and plan ahead.

Financial resilience looks quite different at the micro level, however. As we know, macro-scale economic growth does not necessarily translate into household well-being. While median monthly household income rose to RM7,017 in 2024 (up 5.1%), monthly household expenditure actually outstripped it, rising by 5.3%. When expenditure growth consistently outpaces income growth, however narrowly, the cushion available for setting savings aside shrinks yearly, regardless of how healthy the topline growth figures appear.

Despite strong financial literacy figures, there remain concerns about whether or not Malaysians possess the financial resilience needed for future stability: many still do not prioritise or consider long-term savings. Household borrowers earning less than RM5,000 per month account for the largest share (59%) of borrowers at risk of defaulting; this is to be expected, given their thinner financial buffers.

WHAT PENANG RESIDENTS SAY

The Penang Satisfaction Survey 2026 shows that financial security and living costs are the main concerns for respondents, particularly for those aged 20–59. Over one in two are satisfied with their immediate finances, but over half are not satisfied with their current savings or ability to save. This raises serious worries about long-term financial resilience, with its implications for family planning and Penang's ageing society.

Although Penang's overall inflation rate remains low (1.8% in June 2026), inflation in insurance and financial services has increased by 12.7%, compared with the national average of 5.7%. This implies that demand has been high, possibly driven by medical cost inflation and policy repricing. Insurers may increase the utilisation of healthcare services and periodically adjust premiums for medical and healthcare insurance to cover higher claims payouts. An ageing population is another factor behind higher insurance costs, and Penang has one of the fastest-ageing populations in Malaysia (see *Penang Monthly*, March 2026).

Despite having the highest GDP per capita among the states (excluding Federal Territories) of Malaysia, Penang's higher-income respondents (earning between RM7,000–9,000) paradoxically report lower satisfaction with their financial situation, including their ability to save for the future. Their financial resilience is not shaped by income level alone; the fixed costs, family obligations and lifestyle expectations attached to this income bracket add up.

The Survey also found that respondents with a better match between their jobs and skills are more satisfied with their current income, than those who do not have the right skills for their jobs. In other words, those with relevant knowledge and skills generally feel confident about their financial situation and future financial resilience, compared with those who do not.

FINANCIAL PRESSURE HITS THE MIDDLE-INCOME BRACKET HARDEST

As seen above, financial pressure is not always about a drop in income and a lack of employment opportunities and access to financial services. It is a more general form of pressure that affects all walks of life. However, what the figures do show is that middle-income earners are being particularly impacted.

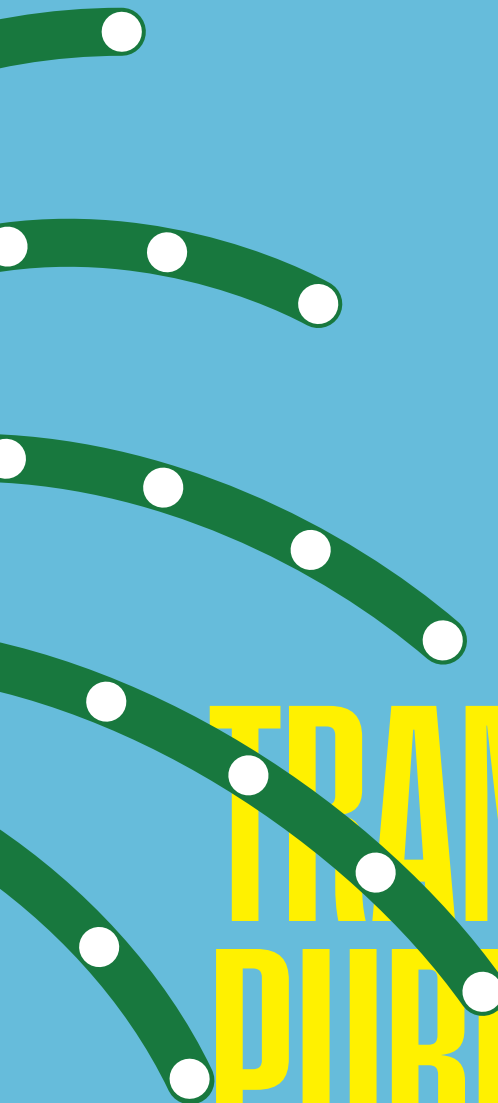
In Penang, the median household income was RM7,386 per month in 2024, and out of 491,800 households, as many as one-third of them earned between RM7,000–9,000. However, this group also requires attention: even though they may be considered financially secure, they do not necessarily *feel* secure. Consequently, policy conversations that focus only on lower-income households risk overlooking a squeezed middle, one which is quietly absorbing rising costs. If we dive into each component of household expenditure, we notice that medicine, pre-primary and primary education as well as health insurance are major ones, along with basic necessities (such as food and beverages, rent, fuel and restaurant bills). Penang's monthly household expenses already increased by 4.7% in 2024—a faster rate than the consumer price index (3%). The high cost of childcare and elderly care, increased medical insurance and rampant emergence of illness have caused post-Covid-19 financial burdens for young families.

The satisfaction levels of those with income from paid employment or self-employment, meanwhile, are likely to differ from those receiving rental income, investment dividends and government transfers (including pensions). In the final analysis, several key demographics require further attention and intervention from policymakers, which reminds us that financial resilience is a universal concern.

THE MEASURE OF A SYSTEM

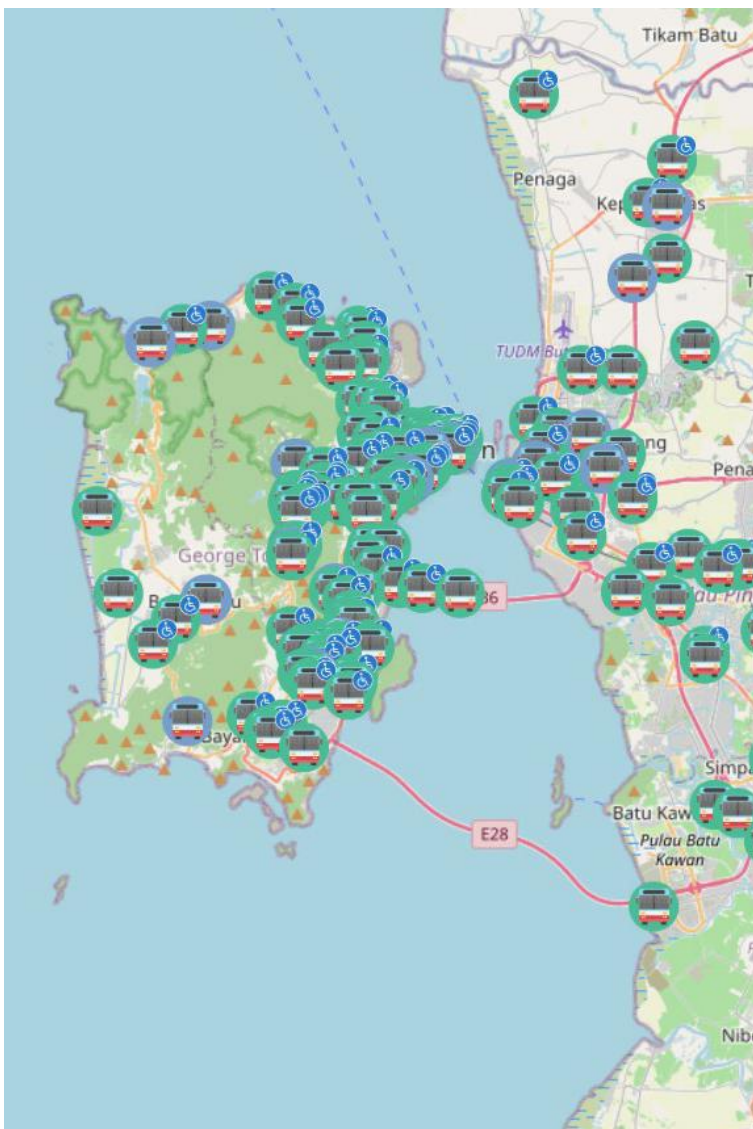


A BIRD'S-EYE VIEW of Penang's public transportation network charts the real-time movements of all buses traversing the state, extending into Kedah and Perak.^[1] But for Rapid Penang's approximately 49,460 daily users,^[2] this overview is distant from the physical act of waiting patiently, if uncertainly, for their journeys to commence or conclude. Commutes are compounded by the geographical challenges posed by the island and mainland, seasonal surges in tourist numbers, as well as safety and logistical challenges involved in transporting a significant share of senior commuters. As the Mutiara Line Light Rail Transit (LRT) system proceeds towards expected completion in 2031, what do Penang's public transportation prospects look like?



TRANSFORMING PUBLIC TRANSPORTATION IN PENANG

BY
WILLIAM
THAM



INFRASTRUCTURAL DREAMS, TECHNOLOGICAL MEANS

For ardent bus-spotters, there might be no better vantage point than KOMTAR. The buses cycling through the ground-floor terminal resolve into circular motions from the upper storeys, steadily dispersing island-wide. But as Zairil Khir Johari, Penang's state EXCO for infrastructure, transport & digital, observes from the complex's tower, greater increases in bus ridership are hampered by a lack of alternative public transportation options and the traffic challenges shared by all road users, compounded by limited room for expanding road and parking provisions.

This congestion is the root problem that the Penang Transport Master Plan (PTMP), a project that Zairil has been involved in since its inception 15 years earlier, aims to resolve. He sees the PTMP as a living document, forming the scaffolding for alternative transportation futures amidst funding, demographic and technological changes. It holistically integrates rideshare applications, micromobility devices and demand-responsive transit, the "variables that contribute to restrategising and rethinking a different and new approach". But the shape of a public transportation network is also depen-

dent on funding. Now with federal financial support, the LRT promises to be a game-changer. Besides providing an alternative commuting option, it enables predictability, without which initiatives such as congestion pricing and pedestrianisation cannot work.

Until the LRT comes online, Penang's authorities must optimise their current resources. Insufficient bus frequency and reliability can be addressed by bus lanes to some extent, as a trial along a 400m stretch from Jalan Penang (starting from Chowrasta Market) to the KOMTAR bus terminal showed. Peak-hour travel times fell and ridership increased significantly, despite initial resistance from local shopkeepers and non-compliance by some road users.^[3] As City Council of Penang Island (MBPP) councillor Lee Seng Hwai noted, however, having fragmented bus lanes "is unlikely to yield significant efficiency gains." The upcoming Mobility Management Study for Penang (expected completion end-2026), which includes bus routes in George Town and pedestrian connectivity along the LRT corridor, "will guide decisions on whether to expand, modify or discontinue the trial bus lane initiative".

In the meantime, technologically enabled options, namely the Rapid On-Demand demand-responsive service, has been particularly useful "in lower-density locations where conventional fixed-route buses are less effective", according to Rapid Penang representatives. While enabling some first- and last-mile connectivity, teething problems remain during high peak-hour demand, coupled with the unfamiliarity of some passengers with its smartphone-based operations. Regardless, at its peak, a promising 95,600 trips were recorded in October 2025.

INCENTIVISING EQUITABLE BENEFITS FOR MAINLAND AND ISLAND

Transportation interventions are also crucial in Seberang Perai, and the PTMP aims to physically and economically integrate the island and mainland further. Lee explained that both jurisdictions are currently beset by geographical challenges which hamper improved transportation. The mainland, with its comparatively larger size and lower population density, is characterised by more dispersed travel demands. With "many residents commuting across districts or to the island for work and other activities", this means that "journey patterns tend to be longer and more complex, which affects the scalability and efficiency of public transport services."

But an expanded railway network, Zairil anticipates, provides the scaffolding upon which future public transportation services, such as feeder buses, can be built. Through the LRT's direct integration with the Penang Sentral hub—and by extension KTM Berhad's long-distance and commuter services—the disadvantages of a Penang Port ferry transfer between George Town and Butterworth can be offset. Otherwise, "if you have to change mode, the viability of that transport just drops significantly."

Putting such a system together goes beyond infrastructural challenges. There has already been operational coordination between Penang's bus and ferry services, although full integration faces several complications (e.g., separate ticketing systems, technical barriers, funding, revenue-sharing). But many difficulties lie beyond Rapid Penang's immediate ability to resolve, including the current lack of bus lanes, insufficient sheltered bus stops, narrow streets in older neighbourhoods and constraints

on terminal space. The LRT project offers the chance to do things right. Federal–state coordination, Rapid Penang representatives noted, enables “early land aggregation, clear development rights around future stations, and well-structured partnerships with private developers”, which can generate value along the entire railway corridor. Here, it helps to think of the future system in organic metaphors: the bus network is akin to the nervous system surrounding the central spine of the LRT. From Rapid Penang’s institutional perspective, “the two modes are complementary, not competing”.

Meanwhile, the MBPP plays a crucial role in enacting local-level behavioural changes. Encouraging a general shift away from private vehicles demands significant initiatives, but it is crucial in light of demographic change. “While the current generation may still rely heavily on private vehicles, this does not mean we are fit to drive forever. There will come a time when public transportation will be essential to bring us around, particularly in our later years,” Lee remarked. Adoption can be partly driven by means such as higher parking rates. In March 2025, MBPP adjusted parking fees (RM0.40 to RM0.60 for every half-hour), with a two-hour parking limit in busy areas (pending inclusion in the gazette). But not every change needs to be drastic: even seemingly smaller ones, such as the provision of more comfortable mini bus stops, can help boost ridership.

TO PROFIT A STATE?

These changes and their impacts cannot be represented in a simple profit-and-loss model, but only make sense in a self-reinforcing virtuous cycle. Improved transportation catalyses future productivity, making possible economic returns such as time-savings and improved quality of life. “At the rate for public transportation to be profitable, people wouldn’t use it,” Zairil said. Even supposedly “profitable” mass transit systems such as in Hong Kong and Singapore require subsidies in other forms (such as cheap land), while generating non-fare revenue through property. The subsidies going into Rapid Penang should not be thought of as handouts, but rather, as indirect strategic investments for overall productivity improvement.

Rapid Penang envisions financial sustainability rather than profit, where fares and government funding can be coupled with non-fare revenue. Rapid KL, its sister company, monetises rail assets through “retail, advertising and property development at high-traffic stations”. Rapid Penang has a slightly different approach, by planning a “corridor-based” approach of well-planned hubs along key routes, as “integrated nodes where transport, retail, services, and residential or office spaces come together”.

Until the LRT is deployed, Rapid Penang’s buses bear the main burden of ferrying passengers, particularly along high-density urban corridors. The affordable monthly pass, Pas Mutiara, which has received significant state-level subsidisation since 2021, may yet catalyse a broader modal shift. However, according to Zairil, the share of bus passengers remains low (approx. 4–5%) compared with ever-growing private commuters. Yet Rapid Penang is confident of future passenger growth. What also often goes unremarked is the freedom, flexibility and cost-effectiveness offered by the current Pas Mutiara. One can travel easily along Rapid Penang’s network—from Balik Pulau to the jetty; Teluk Bahang to Teluk Kumbar—virtually for free.

Another notable aspect of Penang’s transportation subsidies is their general inclusivity, particularly where the free Central Area Transit buses (whose newest route, CAT15, services four key hospitals) are concerned. Zairil notes that subsidies for all help achieve the main objective of the PTMP: reducing congestion. Whether a user is from Penang or not matters less than having one fewer vehicle on the road, not to mention reducing the associated emissions. These improvements are only set to improve with time, opening greater vistas for all travellers and workers.

Year	Annual subscriptions	Total ridership
2019	12,933	26,844,368
2020	24,011	13,026,263
2021	70,975	7,608,494
2022	124,707	11,464,196
2023	186,026	14,296,579
2024	227,499	16,270,231
2025	270,328	17,402,492

Table 1: Pas Mutiara subscription growth and total ridership overview (2019–25). Note the disruptions caused by the Covid-19 pandemic.^[4]



2

HOW DO YOU MAKE A RAPID PENANG JOURNEY?

MyRapid PULSE is Rapid Penang’s mobile phone application, but users can also use its online journey planner (www.myrapid.com.my/journey-planner), Google Maps (where bus routes, stops, timetables and real-time locations are visible) or check the passenger information displays and scan QR codes to access further travel information at hubs and selected stops.

Applying for the Pas Mutiara is highly recommended. The pass can be bought for RM10 and is valid for 30 days, but it can be renewed every 30 days for free. Otherwise, exact payment can still be made in cash, although Rapid On-Demand accepts multiple modes of payment. The roll-out of an open payment system across all services, including Rapid Penang buses, is expected in 2027–28.

CAPTIONS

1. Real-time tracking for all Rapid Penang buses available online.
2. Zairil Khir Johari at KOMTAR.

ENDNOTES

1. To track Rapid Penang’s buses in real-time, see <https://myrapidbus.prasarana.com.my/kiosk/rpg>.
2. Data calculated based on January–August 2026 ridership, courtesy of Rapid Penang.
3. During the trial from November 2024 to February 2025, average travel time reductions were recorded during morning peak hours (33%) and evenings (30%). Daily ridership increased by 27% (from 34,289 to 43,613 at its peak) for all buses plying that route. A planned lane near WOW Hotel was discontinued because of safety concerns. Data from Lee Seng Hwai.
4. See detailed figures at <https://myrapid.com.my/rapid-bus-performance/>.



WILLIAM THAM has been published in *NANG*, *PR&TA*, *The Best of World SF: Volume 2*, and the *Southeast Asian Review of English*. He co-edited *The Second Link: An Anthology of Malaysian and Singaporean Writing*.

PENANGITES’ SATISFACTION BY THE NUMBERS

BY HAJAR ARIFF

WHAT DOES LIVING a good life in Penang, long celebrated for its food, heritage, beaches and unmistakable sense of place, entail? It lies in the everyday experiences, priorities and challenges shaping how Penangites live, work and thrive. The Penang Satisfaction Survey 2026, conducted from February to April, offers a closer look at these experiences through the voices and perspectives of residents, captured in the following statistics. Ultimately, a liveable Penang is one where people not only make a living, but also live well; with financial security, good health, meaningful connections and a sense of fulfilment.

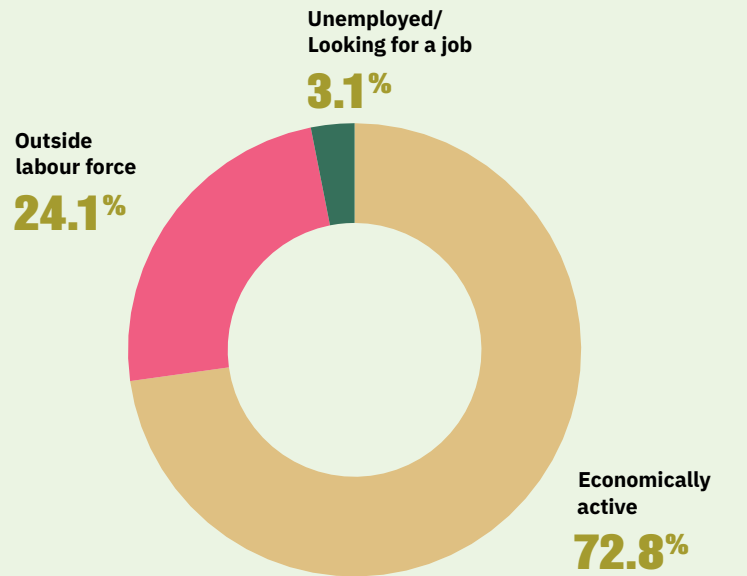


HAJAR ARIFF enjoys exploring the stories behind the numbers and making statistics more accessible to a wider audience.

THE PEOPLE BEHIND THE NUMBERS

1 The perspectives of **1,686 respondents** across all five districts of Penang are captured, providing both broad geographical representation and reflecting their diverse socioeconomic circumstances. Respondents span the **economically active** (employed and self-employed), those **outside the labour force** (retired, studying and homemakers/caregivers), and the **unemployed**; they are also subdivided into **lower-, middle- and higher-income groups**. Their diverse economic statuses and places of residence shape **perceptions of liveability** accordingly.

EMPLOYMENT STATUS



Income group	Monthly income	Share
Middle income	RM3,000–RM6,999	36.6%
Lower income	RM1,000–RM2,999	25.2%
Higher income	≥RM7,000	20.6%
No income reported		17.6%

HOW SATISFIED ARE PENANGITES WITH LIFE?

2

OVERALL LIFE SATISFACTION SCORE



1	Barat Daya	7.23
2	Seberang Perai Tengah	7.19
3	Seberang Perai Utara	7.10
4	Seberang Perai Selatan	7.03
5	Timur Laut	6.99

Penangites remain **generally satisfied** with life, scoring **7.06 out of 10** overall. Although this is a slight decline from the score of **7.24** recorded in the Happiness in Penang Index 2020/21 survey, it remains within the “Satisfied” range (a score between 6 and 8). With district scores ranging from **7.23** in Barat Daya to **6.99** in Timur Laut, overall life satisfaction appears **broadly consistent** across Penang.



Ultimately, a liveable Penang is one where people not only make a living, but also live well; with financial security, good health, meaningful connections and a sense of fulfilment.



Overall life satisfaction score
7.06/10

Satisfied range
6–8

WHAT DOES A GOOD LIFE MEAN?

3

Financial security & cost of living (**61.3%**) emerged as respondents’ top priority, followed by health & healthcare (**48.6%**), and family & close relationships (**26.7%**). As for their further priorities, safety & security, environment & cleanliness and transport & accessibility are specifically valued. In other words, a good life is grounded in **security, health and connection**.

OVERALL LIFE PRIORITIES

1	2	3
Financial security & cost of living 61.3%	Health & healthcare 48.6%	Family & close relationships 26.7%
4	5	6
Safety & security 24.2%	Environment & cleanliness 15.7%	Transport & accessibility 15.5%

LIVEABILITY IS NOT ONE-SIZE-FITS-ALL

4

The foundations of a good life may be shared, but life satisfaction priorities differ across communities. **Financial security & cost of living** and health & healthcare are common concerns across ethnic groups, while **safety & security** is a particularly important criterion for Chinese and non-Malaysian respondents. These differences highlight how evaluations of liveability are shaped by the **different needs, experiences, and expectations** of Penang's diverse communities.

	 Financial security & cost of living	 Health & healthcare	 Safety & security
Malay/ Bumiputera	64.7%	43.6%	
Chinese	59.8%	54.2%	30.5%
Indian	55.3%	50.3%	
Other Malaysians	66.2%	53.4%	
Non- Malaysians	44.7%	57.3%	27.4%

A LIVEABLE PENANG AT EVERY STAGE OF LIFE^[1]

5

What makes Penang liveable **changes with one's age**. Generally, younger respondents place **greater emphasis** on financial security & cost of living, health & healthcare and family & close relationships. Safety & security and transport & accessibility emerge as **notable concerns** when respondents age, although housing and work-life balance matter too. Their health, financial security and safety become **increasingly important**, alongside familial and mental wellbeing. Again, while the foundations of a good life are shared, each life stage brings about its own priorities and challenges.

Age group	1	2	3
Youth 20–24	 Financial security & cost of living 53.4%	 Health & healthcare 39.2%	 Family & close relationships 53.4%
Young age 25–44	 Financial security & cost of living 65.1%	 Health & healthcare 46.3%	 Family & close relationships 53.4%
Middle age 45–59	 Financial security & cost of living 58.6%	 Health & healthcare 55.2%	 Family & close relationships 53.4%
Elderly age 60–69	 Health & healthcare 58.4%	 Financial security & cost of living 65.1%	 Safety & security 34.0%
Senior age >70	 Health & healthcare 50.4%	 Financial security & cost of living 65.1%	 Transport & accessibility 34.0%

WHEN MAKING A LIVING BECOMES A CHALLENGE

6

For many, making a living comes with **significant financial pressures**, differing according to one's employment status, which clearly shapes financial security and everyday affordability. Unemployed respondents looking for work report the **highest dissatisfaction** with their financial situation (**72.7%**), savings (**71.8%**), and cost of living (**65.1%**), while self-employed respondents also express notable dissatisfaction with their ability to save money (**67.6%**).

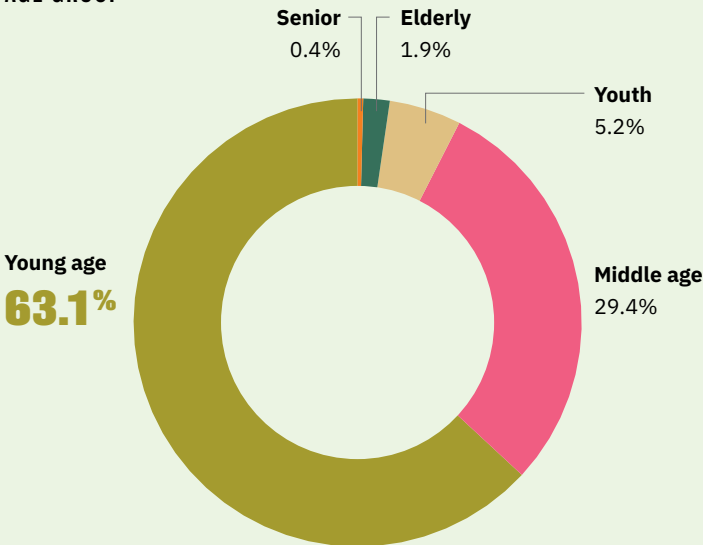
FINANCIAL PRESSURES BY EMPLOYMENT STATUS

Measure	Highest group	Lowest group
Current financial situation	Unemployed/Looking for a job 72.7%	Retired 23.4%
Current level of savings	Unemployed/Looking for a job 71.8%	Retired 35.4%
Cost of living	Unemployed/Looking for a job 65.1%	Homemakers/Caregivers 24.4%
Ability to save	Unemployed/Looking for a job 67.6%	Studying 39.5%

WHO MAKES UP PENANG'S WORKFORCE?*

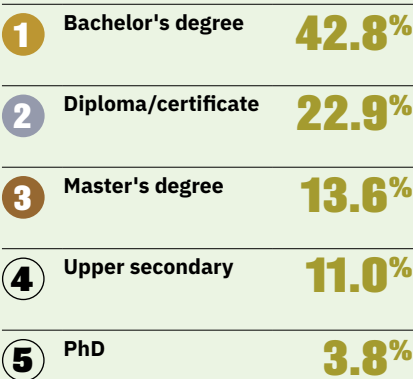
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BY AGE GROUP

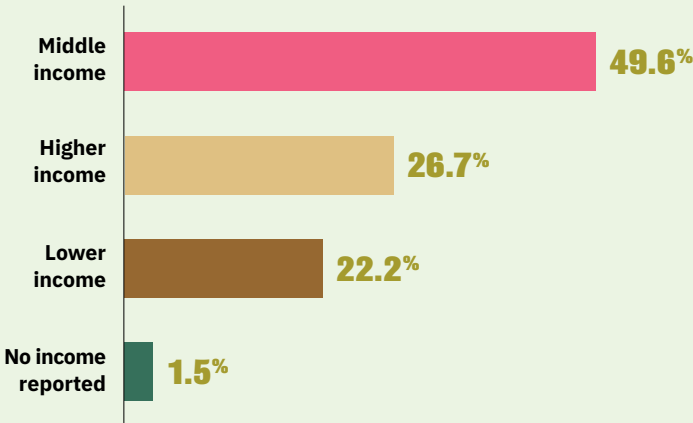


The workforce is predominantly **young, educated, and made up of middle-income earners**. Nearly **two-thirds** of employed respondents are aged 25–44, almost half of them falling in the middle-income group (**49.6%**). Most hold a bachelor's degree (**42.8%**), while the total percentage of those with a bachelor's degree and above adds up to **60.2%**. This profile provides important context for understanding the financial pressures, workplace experiences and career aspirations of Penang's working population.

BY EDUCATION LEVEL



BY INCOME GROUP



IT IS NOT JUST ABOUT HAVING A JOB*

8

Satisfaction is also about having a job that fits the person, and being satisfied with one’s income. **70.6%** of respondents who felt that their skills and work did not match were **dissatisfied** with their income, compared with just **15.1%** who felt that they were very well matched. Satisfaction moves in the opposite direction—rising from **29.4% to 84.9%**—as one’s job–skill alignment **improves**.

JOB-SKILL MATCH AND SATISFACTION WITH CURRENT INCOME

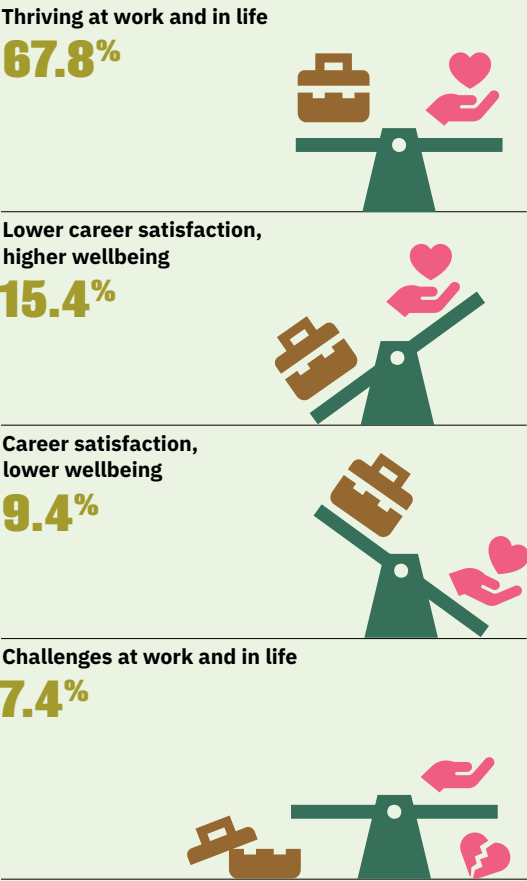


9

BEYOND CAREER SUCCESS*

Career success matters, but it is not the whole story; **advancement and wellbeing** are intimately connected. For nearly **70%** of employed respondents, career satisfaction and quality of life align. Yet **15.4%** report higher wellbeing despite lower career satisfaction, thus highlighting that a fulfilling life is shaped by more than professional success alone.

CAREER SATISFACTION AND WELLBEING



*The findings in these sections reflect the views of employed individuals who responded to the survey.

SOURCE
Penang Satisfaction Survey 2026, Penang Institute

ENDNOTE
1. The typology of age cohorts here is taken from: Dyussenbayev, A. (2017). Age Periods of Human Life. *Advances in Social Sciences Research Journal*, 4(6), 258–63.

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IS PENANG
LIVEABLE AND
LOVEABLE?



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I HAVE YET to meet a Penangite who is not proud of their state (I've met some who are borderline *obsessed*). While pride is tied to identity and status (being a Penangite offers that), it does not always translate to affection. Is Penang truly liveable, let alone loveable? *Penang Monthly* sits down with Associate Professor TPr Dr. Khoo Suet Leng, from the Development Studies Programme at Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM), to explore what it takes for a state to serve not just the logistical needs of its people, but also their hearts and sense of belonging.

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BY
RACHEL
YEOH

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Rachel Yeoh (RY): Dr. Khoo, tell me about yourself and your relationship with Penang.

Khoo Suet Leng (KSL): I'm a Penangite, born and bred here, except for the three-and-a-half years that I was away for my PhD at the University of Melbourne, Australia. I got a scholarship under the academic staff training scheme from USM and the Ministry of Higher Education. It was fully funded by the government. I came back to Penang in 2010, and I've been serving USM ever since. I have completed my seven-year bond, but I like being an academic, so I am still here with USM.

Before my PhD, I was with the corporate sector for close to six years. I was working with an architectural firm doing historic building conservation, project management and research.

I had offers to stay back in Australia, but I came back to serve my own state. I *really* love Penang. I love my city, and work a lot on city planning. Those who know me know that I actually walk the city. Every weekend—to clock my steps—I do my morning walk in the World Heritage Site. I can modestly say *lah*, I know the site like the back of my palm. My new passion is Penang Hill.

RY: You hike Penang Hill?

KSL: No... I'll take the train up, do my morning walk there. I need about half an hour to walk to Kopi Hutan, have my breakfast, and then walk another 30 minutes.

RY: George Town changes so fast. Every few weeks there is something new up. I suppose when walking so often at the site, you know exactly what changes.

KSL: Part of the reason is due to my ongoing research. I write about the heritage site, understanding the urban transformations. It's not static. It's so fluid, as you say, it is changing as we speak. There's always something new for me to see, to smell, to hear.

RY: During our previous conversation, you introduced the term “lovable city” when we were on the topic of a liveable city. Could you define both terms and explain their differences?

KSL: In contemporary urban planning lingo and parlance, there's this shift in rhetoric from liveable city to lovable city. When you talk about a liveable city, it means meeting the basic needs of the city from a logistical and functional sense. This notion of a liveable city has existed since the birth of modern town planning, which started after

the Industrial Revolution in the UK. There was a massive rural-to-urban migration, and obviously the city boundaries couldn't contain it. It strained the carrying capacity of the city, especially in terms of urban hygiene, sanitation, amenities and such. That's why you needed good town planning at that point in time. To make a liveable city, essentially, is about function.

Once you have your city up, you pivot to a lovable city, which is more emotional. You're now talking about a relationship with your city. You'll be repeatedly calling out for human centricity and life between buildings—the intangibles, the immaterial, the stories behind the place. And nowadays people like to ask, “What is the soul of the city?” In Malay, the “*roh*”.

My current work, which I've been doing for 16 years with USM, is the “Creative City”. It actually ties both elements: human creativity and the city. A Creative City basically means the culture and creativity of human beings in the city.

It is all interrelated: liveable city, loveable city, creative city ... If you look at it holistically—if you want to talk about developing an inclusive, sustainable creative city—you need to have a very vibrant creative econ-

omy and creative industries... down to your creative districts and your creative hubs.

RY: What areas do you think Penang excels in when it comes to liveable cities? And why?

KSL: As I walk the city, I think I love the city even more. There is so much to see. We actually boast two UNESCO accolades^[1] and designations. In 2008, George Town was inscribed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site together with Malacca. Then in 2021, Penang Hill got the UNESCO Biosphere designation, which is attributable to its nature aspect. We have the beach, the hills, very rich and thick cultural heritage, both tangible as well as intangible. We have that uniqueness, distinctiveness and niche.

RY: Do you have a favourite enclave in George Town?

KSL: Oh, it changes every week! Our World Heritage Site is actually quite big. We have a core zone and buffer zone. The adjoining areas are hidden gems too. Currently, it would be that back lane connecting Jalan Gurdwara, from Gama supermarket to Jalan Magazine. There is an arch towards the Granite Luxury Hotel. You have to walk to see it, you won't notice it if you are in a car.

There is this road, Jalan Pintal Tali, that runs parallel to Lebuhraya Cintra—the People's Court is in that area; when I was walking, I discovered that there is a small orchid nursery run by the local community. Now, I must applaud the City Council of Penang Island (MBPP) as well as Think City for upgrading the side and back lanes. It has made walking feasible because it is cleaner and safer now. You wouldn't imagine walking in these lanes 30 years ago because they were so smelly, filthy and dark; especially for ladies, it wasn't safe. But nowadays, walking through these lanes is like being in a labyrinth, where you discover pockets of interesting hidden gems in the city.

RY: Some cities rank at the very top of global liveability indices but are described by residents as clinical. Conversely, cities with lower liveability scores are often fiercely loved. Why is there sometimes a disconnect between how well a city functions and how deeply it is loved?

KSL: If the city is just functional—very clean, very clinical, but with no human connections, no real understanding of its history or collective

memory—then it may not be loveable. When you go back to the literature on town planning, all these basic concepts—a sense of belonging, sense of place, sense of identity—have been advocated for a long time already. But to what extent are they being implemented?

In the early days, people were thinking so much about improving the city physically or constructing the city from nothing—it was very physical in nature, and those bits on social and cultural aspects were faint in the equation.

RY: Looking at the development of Penang, sometimes I fear that some parts of Penang may be too functional, and lack soul.

KSL: You are right to point to that fact. High-rises are increasing, particularly on Penang Island. We are becoming like a mini-Singapore or Hong Kong. Another aspect of the loveable city is whether you really can call it a place you want to be attached to, a place you have a sense of belonging towards, a sense of pride, rather than a space to house you and your children.

When we talk about urban design, we cannot just design a box and say, "Okay, I have given you affordable housing." No, you need to factor in mixed-use development, walkability, place-making, green networks and nurture human connections.

Yesterday morning, I was walking around the Queens Waterfront area with nice pedestrian walkways. There were strangers who greet you, and you do the same in return. Just imagine, if you didn't have pathways for walking, you wouldn't have those little encounters. Jane Jacobs, an urban theorist, argued that urban dwellers and those in their neighbourhoods need a chance to meet, greet and encounter each other.

Let's say, if you're living in a condo, you'll meet your neighbours once in a while, and it is just "hi" and "bye". That's it. Contrast this to those living in landed housing or the kampong, where you actually know your neighbours and there is a sense of community.





Liveability is, in its most basic sense, measured by how well we solve the small, everyday problems that people encounter. Consequently, in the pursuit of satisfaction, it is not enough to treat citizens as passive actors, but to encourage a substantial degree of citizen engagement in governance.”

RY: Penangites are often blamed for being too insular, like an echo chamber that magnifies their superiority. Do you agree? And does that give any points to Penang as a loveable city?

KSL: This is a very interesting question. You are right to say that about us being insular. Sadly, there’s this disconnect and uneven development in thought between the island and the mainland. But we islanders tend to think that we’re better off than the mainland, or even better off than some other states in Peninsular Malaysia or even Borneo.

But having said that, we have a heritage side; our very rich cultural diversity; and the hills. In some sense, we have that bit of entitlement also—what youngsters would term “bragging rights”. I wrote about this in an article about the

islanders’ perspective, but at the same time, it is our asset. I wouldn’t like to use a very binary framework *lah*, but then again, many a time it is a framing of “rural versus urban”, or “rich versus poor”, even though Seberang Perai Utara and Selatan are now very developed. You know, Think City is doing a lot of good work levelling up Seberang Perai (see *Penang Monthly* August 2026). I am very amazed by all the new developments and placemaking projects there.

RY: Could the island’s documented history be what makes us feel that our culture is richer?

KSL: True. Very little is known about the mainland because of how little is documented. I wrote an article on the disparity between the island and mainland. I wouldn’t rule out the fact that some Penang people think very highly about themselves—like you said, “superior”—partly because of the history of being a Straits Settlement... the old rich *lah*, and it is undeniable that Johor, Selangor and Penang are the wealthier states, and socioeconomically and culturally more “advanced”. However, it is important to foster a more balanced approach to development that addresses the socio-spatial disparities between Penang Island and Seberang Perai, ensuring that both sides progress in a complementary and inclusive manner.

RY: How do urban planners move beyond functional requirements (for example, zoning and traffic flow) to intentionally design for emotional outcomes like affection, comfort and pride?

KSL: I’m actually walking my talk by injecting socioeconomic and cultural aspects more distinctively into urban planning. As a town planner, I was trained to draw plans that are very physical and spatial in nature—you know, doing zoning or conceptual master plans, and all those things. Slowly and surely, we’re now getting the whole team of town planners, architects and urban designers to see value in harnessing culture and creativity in the city. It is already happening. That is why we have a lot of these placemaking exercises and culture-led urban regeneration initiatives going on.





5

CAPTIONS

1. (Cover photo) Khoo Suet Leng in her office.
2. The funicular train up to Penang Hill.
3. The back lane that runs parallel to Jalan Pintal Tali and Lebuhraya Cintra leading to the People's Court.
- 4–5. The back lane connecting Jalan Gurdwara (from Gama supermarket) to Jalan Magazine is framed by bougainvillea arches.

ENDNOTE

1. Penang won the UNESCO Asia-Pacific Awards for Cultural Heritage Conservation for Cheong Fatt Tze Mansion (The Blue Mansion) in 2000, and the Esplanade Seawall & Promenade was honoured under the New Design in Heritage Contexts category, with Special Recognition for Sustainable Development, in 2025.



RACHEL YEOH is a former journalist who traded her on-the-go job for a life behind the desk. For the sake of work-life balance, she participates in Penang's performing arts scene after hours.

RY: Do you think it's more bottom-up or top-down?

KSL: That is a very pertinent matter. It differs from city to city. In some cities, it can be very top-down.

Nowadays, the top-down approach by many local authorities has to be revisited. There is a new term called "co-creation". How do you co-create actionable urban solutions with stakeholders: the public, private sector, civil society, nongovernmental and non-profit organisations, and local communities? At the end of the day, I want to bring in an understanding of multiscalarities—from macro to meso, and then micro—and different units of analysis within the city setting that need to be involved as a collective.

I'm sure you are also very familiar with the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDG), of which SDG11 is related to the city: to make cities safe, inclusive, sustainable and resilient. I always say those are really very huge statements. During our ASEAN-German Urban Network, four years ago in Bangkok, we actually argued that [the SDGs] are very elitist. Laypeople wouldn't understand all this. How are you going to translate that big vision for them? We have Penang2030, the New Urban Agenda with a tagline that says "to leave no one behind" ... gradually all this will have to flow down to the people. You need to really know your population, your shifting demographics; who is being excluded and who is being included. Sorry to say this, but sometimes urban managers or policymakers don't quite fathom that.

When you look at *Development as Freedom* by Amartya Sen, development is not just physical development or the measurable indicators and indices of gross domestic product, but the expansion of people's substantive freedoms. It also looks at non-measurables, the intangible and the immaterial. Now, there is a slow shift—which I'm currently very interested in—in urban psychology, which relates very much to people's emotions.

RY: Penang Institute released the Happiness in Penang Index 2020/21 and recently concluded the Penang Satisfaction Survey 2026.

KSL: Yes! If you want to say that you're satisfied, place-based rootedness is important *lah*. Let's say that if you moved out from your family house, but you'll still visit it. You know the memories, the stories

... that historic layering is important. It is different for everyone. Some people are constrained by certain systemic or structural barriers. Not everyone is starting on a level playing ground.

RY: If you were to plan your own township in Penang, what would a liveable and loveable city look like in your books?

KSL: One that fosters emotional and informational connections through its aesthetics and cultural aspects. As I said, how you can now relook and revisit your city's cultural endowments and resources, both tangible and intangible? We have the tangible—heritage buildings, for instance—and we are reactivating spaces, such as through adaptive reuse projects like Hin Bus Depot and Jetty 35. Then, of course, the intangible aspect would be cultural resources like the stories and memories of individuals or communities. That's why it's important to get people to come back to live in the city. It shouldn't just be a city for tourists *lah*. It should be a city for our own people. It involves building and planning a city for local people, or else it's just a shell.

No doubt, tourism is an important revenue generator. But more importantly, you should also take care of your own people.

The moment you're inscribed as a UNESCO Heritage Site, you're on the global radar, you're on people's bucket lists. Everybody wants to visit your city. But local authorities will need to have certain mechanisms in place, like limiting tourist footfalls or charging fees. It can be done, and it's happening already in certain places, even in China. Otherwise, over-tourism will be very disruptive.

There are also new mechanisms like regenerative tourism and creative tourism, whereby you bring in tourists to mingle with the community to see how they can give back.

This UNESCO listing is a double-edged sword. The original intent was good for conserving and preserving heritage buildings and safeguarding its intangibles. But if you don't know how to manage it well, you will risk the commodification of culture or cultural gentrification, and it's going to push out local communities. It's a vicious cycle.

RY: Thank you Dr. Khoo. What an insightful conversation.

KSL: A pleasure!

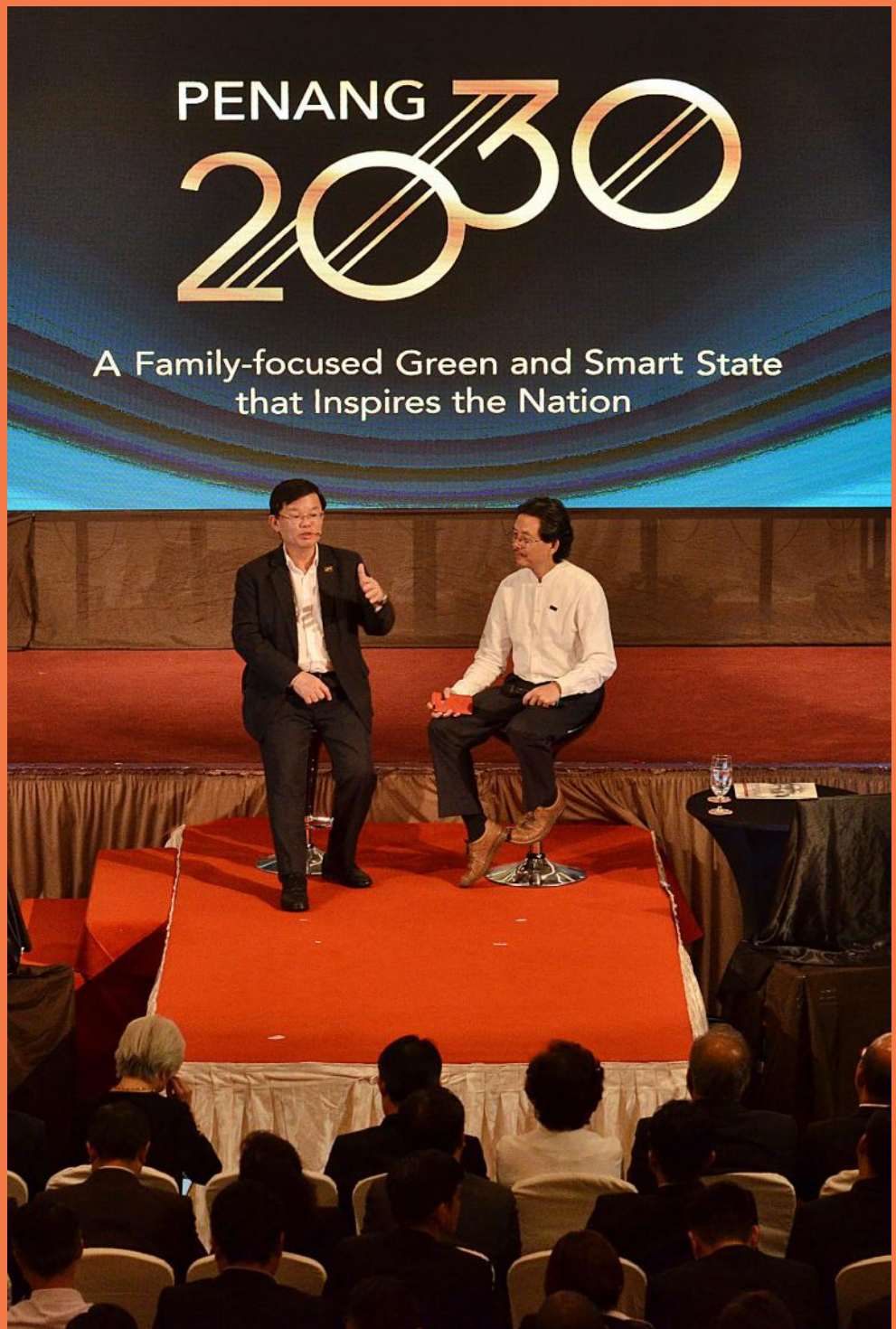
MANAGING SUCCESS

KEEPING PENANG LIVEABLE AND ITS PEOPLE SATISFIED

BY OOI KEE BENG



DATO' DR. OOI KEE BENG picks on the past to reference the present, and picks on the present to situate the past.



WHAT DOES IT mean to be liveable? How should it be distinguished from satisfiability? Does it encourage us to think about what retirement looks like? And what will governance in Penang look like as a result? These are some of the questions that Penang Institute sets out to ask in this article.

RETIREMENT, MOBILITY AND INVESTMENT

Malaysia is widely ranked as one of the world's best places to retire. This may surprise many who read local political news and wonder about its stability. But the truth is that the country is attractive to many people—local and foreign alike—seeking low costs of living, easy travel opportunities, good healthcare and friendly neighbours.

According to HSBC, only Panama and Ecuador are more attractive for retirement than Malaysia. Within Malaysia itself, the bank advertises Penang as the top spot for foreigners wishing to settle, followed by Kuching and Ipoh. Meanwhile, *Huffington Post* has been telling its readers that: "Tropical Penang [...] offers one of the best overseas retirement opportunities in the world."

But Penang also attracts other types of globally mobile people to its shores. Its universities bustle with foreign students, especially those from South Korea and the People's Republic of China; its private hospitals nurse foreign patients, particularly from Indonesia; and post-Covid-19 tourist arrivals have soared, exceeding 8.2mil visitors in 2024 (up by 13.3% from the year before).

Not only are foreigners being drawn to Penang for reliable healthcare, better education and serious cultural excitement (one must never forget the food and the living heritage of George Town and beyond), but foreign money cannot seem to keep away either. In fact, foreign direct investment in manufacturing reached RM15.2bil in 2025, constituting 68% of the RM22.4bil in investments approved that year (which jumped by 29%, up from 2024).

Penang's international reputation is definitely enviable, and getting better. Geopolitical uncertainties have presumably drawn a lot of attention to the state, from all sides of the spectrum. Earlier this year, it was announced that Penang now has 23 honorary consuls, alongside the four established consul-generals from Indonesia, Thailand, China and Japan.

Managing this upsurge in global attention on multiple fronts is quite a challenge, as one can imagine. This is a so-called "good problem", no doubt, but even a good problem still needs managing. And such management is, most essentially, about the local population.

How is this rise in global attention affecting them? And how well-prepared have the Penang state and the local governments—and not to mention the federal authorities based in the state—been in confronting these new times? Can Penang as a whole handle its own success over time?

QUANTIFYING LOCAL SATISFACTION

Getting to the point, how liveable is Penang, where its own population is concerned?

Luckily, there are two ways of approaching this question: the first through proactive policymaking, and the second through measurement. The Penang 2030 Guide, launched in 2018 by Chief Minister Chow Kon Yeow, envisions: "A family-focused green and smart state that inspires the nation." Much has been discussed about Penang2030 since. But what is significant is that it articulates the general, and necessary, direction of policymaking in the 2020s. As the chief minister phrased it:

[...] the Penang2030 discourse has [...] paved the way for an increased sense of common purpose in society as a whole. Businesses are now cognizant of the priorities of the state, and foreign investors have taken notice of the serious intent captured in the documents propounding the Penang2030 vision. [...] Liveability has definitely increased over the last decade.

Penang2030 and the policymaking discourse it has implanted into governance has been off to an exemplary start. At the street level, where policies matter the most, the situation seems positive, eight years into its implementation.

As luck would have it, Penang Institute has just completed a survey that was once envisioned in the Penang2030 blueprint. Originally titled the "Happiness in Penang" Index, that serial survey is now retitled the "Penang Satisfaction Survey". The 2026 version has just been concluded and is being processed for publication.

So, how liveable is Penang to its local population, according to this survey? How satisfied are they with their general situation?

SOME INTERESTING FINDINGS

First off, we see a strong attachment to Penang. As many as 87.6% of respondents are happy staying on in Penang. They score high on "overall life satisfaction", express

"high satisfaction" with health, family and community relationships" and are clearly more positive about their state government than with the federal government. Where "Liveability & Social Wellbeing", "Economic Wellbeing" and "Freedom & Governance" are concerned, their average scores all fall on the "Satisfied" side.

Worth noting are three interesting findings. The first is that the Indian community shows the largest increase in satisfaction. The second is that those below 24 are the most satisfied age group. Given that Penang has been notorious for its "brain drain" of talented people and students for decades, this finding is highly substantive, speaking volumes about the future of liveability in Penang. The third is the high level of satisfaction among homemakers and caregivers: they feel sufficiently supported by society and the state in going about their duties and satisfying personal needs. Even those who expressed political dissatisfaction expressed a high intention of staying on in Penang. Only 12.4% of respondents wish to move elsewhere. The rest—87.6%—plan to stay on.

With regard to "Environmental wellbeing", however, respondents show notable dissatisfaction. Some relevant issues from this category, and others, include traffic congestion and road conditions, coastal erosion, housing affordability and urban planning as well as financial resilience.

What decision-makers will need to do, going forward, is to take seriously the problematic issues raised in the survey. The three levels of government involved will need to hold more common discussions to improve the delivery of public goods, while the vision for Penang moving into the 2030s should build on what has been achieved in our current decade's public discourse and policy direction. Serious engagement between the top, middle and bottom layers of society remains key for maintaining and raising liveability in Penang, as it does elsewhere.

New times require not only new thinking, but also new synergies and tactical innovations.

***Note:** The Penang Satisfaction Survey 2026 is due to be published in the coming weeks by the Penang Institute.

CASHLESS



CONVENIENCE AND CHALLENGES

A YOUNG LADY slips into a George Town café and scans the QR code, where the payment is logged in her e-wallet history. Then an elderly uncle arrives, carefully counting out notes from his used leather wallet. Half-joking, half-worried, he asks: “Can still use cash here?” Two wallets meet at the same counter as Penang races towards a cashless future, but everyday encounters with that future remain uneven and deeply socially mediated.

BY **CHLOE LAU**



CHLOE LAU is a PhD student at Universiti Sains Malaysia who researches how trust and culture shape technology adoption. With family roots in Penang and having grown up in Europe, her professional experience and love of travel have taken her worldwide.

IN

PENANG

A NATIONAL FRONTRUNNER?

Nationally, Bank Negara Malaysia logged 18.4bil e-payment transactions in 2025 (about 538 e-payments per Malaysian) cumulatively worth RM831bil.^[4] In this context, Penang looks like a national front-runner. Indeed, with Touch 'n Go QR codes appearing in George Town's hawker and heritage streets as early as in 2018, Penang can reasonably claim to have entered the cashless game ahead of most other states. By mid-2021, Digital Penang already reckoned that about 70% of Penangites (roughly 1.4mil people) had downloaded at least one e-wallet application.^[2] Today, state agencies report that more than 95% of payments at their counters are cashless: local councils cite 97–98% cashless transactions, while running “Cashless Fridays” to normalise such payments. Digital Penang, the government-linked company tasked with driving this agenda, has primarily done so through partnerships with e-wallet providers and merchant onboarding.

But numbers alone do not tell us how Penangites are living through this shift. For many younger, urban-oriented individuals, cashless payments have become indispensable. Kelly, who runs Chapel Street Cafe, said: “E-wallets are much more convenient especially during busy hours, as they simplify record-keeping and reduce the need to handle large volumes of cash.” Furthermore, the mix of local and foreign customers whom she serves expect to use QR codes and card terminals: “For them, Penang feels comfortably aligned with global payment norms.”

This experience, however, is not universal, considering that Penang has one of the oldest age profiles among Malaysia's states. The Department of Statistics Malaysia (DOSM) estimates that 7.7–8% of Penang's population (143,805 people) are aged 65 and above, with several of the state's districts placed in the “ageing” category.^[3] Here, enthusiasm for cashless systems often sits alongside caution. At the Pulau Tikus wet market, a seafood seller, Mr. Lim, recalled how his grandson helped him install an e-wallet application. “Sometimes customers pay that way and it is okay,” he said. “But I still feel safer with cash. If my phone spoils or the app changes, I don't know what to do.” His concerns are not abstract and are only compounded by media coverage around scams—which are more salient than messaging about consumer protection. The thought of pressing the wrong button carries real weight when household budgets are measured on a day-to-day basis.

HUMAN INFRASTRUCTURE AND BLIND SPOTS

Between these systems lies a quiet, intermediary layer of “human adapters”. Mr. Lim's grandson is one of the many younger relatives, frontline staff and sometimes strangers who help older people adjust. They are sometimes organised in institutional form. Since 2020, programmes by Digital Penang (e.g., DahDigital, Digital Promoter Outreach Programme) have delivered hundreds of classes and outreach sessions, training more than 10,000 participants directly. Promoters set up tables in markets and residential areas, helping residents to download apps, create accounts and attempt their first supervised QR payments.

But informal adapters also exist. At a serviced apartment in Tanjung Tokong, Ahmad, the front desk and facilities manager, also offers unofficial tech support. “Many of our elderly residents ask for help with Grab bookings, Shopee orders or completing online payments,” he said. “It's become such a normal part of the job that I don't even think twice about it anymore.” Café owners, cashiers, security guards and family members now offer crucial support by answering questions about QR payments, online shopping and banking apps.



1

A different perspective emerges at the entrance of this complex from a Bangladeshi security guard, who serves as another touchpoint for residents. “My salary goes into a bank account,” he explained, “but for sending money home, I still use cash remittance [services]. Near my place, some stalls use QR, some only cash. Different apps, different languages in Malaysia ... sometimes I feel lost.” His comments reveal a blind spot in current outreach programmes; furthermore, material on e-wallet safety and scam avoid-

ance is seldom available in migrant workers' languages, even though they also live in the Malaysian digital environment.

These stories show us that Penang's cashless system runs not only on technology and policy, but also on everyday trust. Yet this trust is increasingly being tested by digital fraud, as Penang Institute has found. Official records documented 35,368 reported online scam cases in 2024, involving *total losses* exceeding RM1.5bil.^[4] A broader estimate placed the *economic cost* of scams in Malaysia at RM54.02bil that year, equivalent to around 3% of GDP.^[5] The difference illustrates how the scale of scams can vary, depending on whether reported cases or broader economic estimates are measured.

UNDOING HESITATION

For seniors like Mr. Lim and migrant workers juggling remittances, multiple apps and multilingual interfaces, hesitation around cashless systems is rational. Adoption and protection cannot be separated: one without the other will not build durable confidence. Making sure no one is left behind requires the expansion of digital literacy where it is needed the most. Programmes like Digital Penang's Digital Clinics already teach e-wallet safely while raising awareness about online scams, according to representative Preyitishaa Ramanathan.

The next step is bringing this support more directly into neighbourhoods with older or digitally vulnerable populations, while creating clearer community-level pathways for assistance. Rather than leaving family members, frontline workers and other “human adapters” to provide informal help alone, they could be supported through the provision of simple multilingual guides and clear referral points when questions or problems arise.

Regardless, there is little harm in keeping some cash on hand to pay for essential services, while people continue to adapt. For many, it is less about resisting technology than about having a familiar and reliable backup. Beyond statistics alone, the real measure of the success of adaptation to the digital economy is whether everyone feels confident about taking part.

CAPTION

1. Preyitishaa Ramanathan.

ENDNOTES

1. Bank Negara. (2026). *Annual report 2025*.

2. Information and statistics on cashless payment initiatives, adoption figures and digital literacy programmes courtesy of Digital Penang.

3. DOSM. (2025). *Current population estimates by administrative district, Malaysia, 2025*.

4. Rahida Aini Mohd Ismail and Muhammad Farhan Yaumil Ramadhan. (2026, Mar. 5). *Caught in the Web: Understanding the Profile of Scam Victims*. Penang Institute.

5. Beh, M.T. (2025, Mar. 19). *Combating scam syndicates in Malaysia and Southeast Asia*. Penang Institute



中央玩具

中央玩具各號

中央玩具

鈴布玩具

時裝

時裝時裝行

合興
花邊
布匹
鞋帽

REVITALISING A VANISHING TONGUE



AND THE POLITICS OF TEOCHEW HERITAGE

BY CHEW
KOK LIANG

IN A MALAYSIAN cinema hall, the silence is heavy as the credits roll on Lan Hongchun's 2026 Teochew-dialect film, *Dear You* (给阿嬷的情书).^[1] Among older viewers, the emotional reaction is visceral; tears pool quietly as they confront a cinematic mirror of their own family histories.

Dear You, produced on a modest budget, became an astronomical sleeper hit in China and the region historically known as “Nanyang” (loosely, Southeast Asia) among the Chinese. Crowds gathered in Kuala Lumpur to meet its cast and director, eager to connect with a story that felt intimately theirs. There is even a Penang link in the film: its soundtrack features Teresa Teng's “Harapanku”, an adaptation of the classic “Nanyang Girl”—written by a Malaysian and inspired by a girl from Penang.

Meanwhile in Singapore, the film's arrival exposed deep-seated linguistic anxieties: initially, only a Mandarin-dubbed version was approved for commercial release, with the original Teochew version restricted to special screenings. This decision sparked public disappointment and even parliamentary questions about whether or not the rigid suppression of non-Mandarin films remained justifiable. To understand why a seemingly simple family drama has made such an impact across borders, this article unpacks the history of the Teochew diaspora in Southeast Asia more broadly.



3

A DIASPORIC JOURNEY

We begin with Teochew migration from the Chaoshan region of eastern Guangdong Province to the shores of British Malaya, Singapore and other parts of the Nanyang such as Siam (Thailand today, where *Dear You* is mainly set). This voyage, often termed *guofan* (“crossing the ocean”), was a brutal journey of desperate survival. Driven by rampant poverty, social chaos and civil conflict in China, thousands of young men boarded southbound junks with absolutely nothing. Many were classified as *sinker* (“new arrivals”) upon disembarkation, bound by exploitative indentured labour contracts to pay off the cost of passage. In Singapore, holding stations on Pagoda Street, the so-called “Coolie Quarter”, housed these labourers in squalid, overcrowded conditions.

In Malaya, kongsi (clan associations) houses and sprawling clan settlements dominated early colonial trade hubs like Kuala Lumpur, George Town and Ipoh (see *Penang Monthly*, July 2026). They housed, managed and controlled the indentured labourers who powered the regional tin-mining and port sectors, effectively functioning as self-governing communal hubs. Lodging, ancestral worship and financial lifelines for newly arrived immigrants were available here. Until the abolition of the “Kapitan Cina” system and the introduction of the Chinese Protectorate, the Chinese were effectively outside of colonial governance.

The Teochews too established their own kongsi, temples and mutual aid associations (*huay kuan*), which became essential safety nets for the migrants labouring

under an immense physical toll. Whether working as stevedores unloading heavy cargo, clearing malarial agricultural plots or pedalling trishaws, these isolated men pushed their bodies to the physical breaking point. Many smoked opium and gambled to cope with physical pain and psychological despair, a significant number dying in poverty. It is this collective history of hardship, grounded in specific ancestral journeys, which are mirrored in *Dear You*.

THE QIAOPI AS A SACRED CONTRACT

Before the outbreak of the World War II, my grandfather left Chaoshan for Penang, where he entered the lowest rung of its colonial economy, first as a manual coolie and later becoming a trishaw man. Surviving on extreme frugality, skipping meals or subsisting on rice gruel eaten quickly between fares meant that every cent saved could be hoarded. Decades of unrelenting labour and disciplined accumulation eventually allowed him to establish a small business, and acquire properties in both Penang and his hometown of Swatow. He was driven throughout by a long-distance obligation to his family in China, sustained through the fragile mechanics of the *qiaopi*. This was the logistical and emotional artery of the early Chinese diaspora, an economic lifeline for millions in coastal China, comparable to today’s digital wire transfers or remittance services.

The *qiaopi* was a single envelope containing both a personal letter and a financial remittance receipt; a bank transfer and love letter combined. Deliveries were managed by a highly specialised, community-based

network. In the early-19th century, independent couriers known as *shuike* (“water guests”) personally carried money and mail across the sea. By the 20th century, this informal practice evolved into a sophisticated private industry managed by *qiaopiju* (remittance firms), centred in commercial hubs like Singapore and Swatow. Once shipments arrived in China, local couriers, the *phoe-kha* (“feet of the letters”) travelled through remote villages to deliver cash and correspondence directly to families.

Because many labourers were illiterate, they relied on letter-writers stationed along the five-foot-ways of shophouses. For a few cents, these writers translated their raw, spoken dialect into formal, respectful Chinese calligraphy. They helped constitute the medium through which familial hierarchies were maintained and domestic duties fulfilled from thousands of miles away. These letters funded survival, repaired roofs and paid school fees, representing a profound, long-distance contract of love and duty. In recognition of this unique heritage, UNESCO inscribed the *qiaopi* archives into the Memory of the World Register in 2013.

I still remember these letter-writers populating the streets of Kuala Lumpur right up to the 1980s. Many a time, I saw labourers squatting or sitting beside them, trying their best to squeeze as much of their lives into a few mere words. Their wiry bodies were heavily tanned, their eyes having seen much hardship. Sadly, these letter-writers, as a profession, largely died out in the late-1980s and 1990s, as compulsory education improved literacy rates and direct telephone lines became common.

GAGINANG AND LANGUAGE POLITICS

As individual migrants established a footing, their focus shifted towards collective community-building, driven by the cultural ethos of *gaginang* (家己人, Teochew for “our own people”). Originally a defensive sentiment born of mutual suspicion between dialect groups under an indifferent colonial government, *gaginang* articulated a powerful blueprint for mutual aid and formal organisation. One key institution expressing this ethos is Singapore’s Ngee Ann Kongsi (est. 1845). Under the pioneering leadership of Seah Eu Chin, it initially focused on managing temples, like the Yueh Hai Ching Temple, and purchasing land for ancestral burial grounds. Similarly, the Penang Teochew Association (est. 1855) constructed the Han Jiang Teochew Ancestral Temple to serve as a religious, social and administrative anchor for immigrants to northern Malaya.



Over time, they became major civic institutions, utilising property revenue to fund community welfare, medical clinics and, crucially, vernacular education, having recognised language as the ultimate vehicle of cultural continuity. Through immense philanthropic coordination, the Ngee Ann Kongsi funded the Tuan Mong School and Ngee Ann Girls’ School in Singapore. In Penang, the Teochew Association and the philanthropist Lim Lean Teng pooled resources to establish Han Chiang Primary School and Han Chiang High School (see also *Penang Monthly*, “Diversity in education”, June 2026). Supporting Chinese-medium education was not simply about boosting academic performance, but also about preserving communal identity.

However, the independent governments of Singapore and Malaysia eventually pursued aggressive language policies to build national cohesion and participate in the global economy. Because the discussion is complex, this article only focuses on

the enforcement of standardised Mandarin among Chinese communities. In 1979, Singapore launched the “Speak Mandarin Campaign”, which systematically phased out dialects from radio, television and public spaces. Dialect advertisements were banned, popular television programmes were dubbed into Mandarin and parents were strongly encouraged to speak only English or standard Mandarin to their children. In Malaysia, vernacular Chinese educators implemented strict rules to enforce the use of Mandarin, often fining or punishing students for speaking their own dialects on school grounds.

Paradoxically, while community pioneers formalised Chinese education, their own dialects were eventually marginalised in the process. Today, the use of the Teochew dialect is rapidly fading and it is nearly obsolete among Malaysian and Singaporean youths. Consequently, a painful

generational gap has emerged within families. Grandparents who are fluent only in their dialect struggle to communicate with English- or Mandarin-speaking grandchildren, for instance, thus fracturing the transmission of oral history and family heritage.

A SHIFT IN SOCIOCULTURAL CAPITAL

A striking historical irony emerges from *Dear You*’s commercial success. For over a century, the economic flow was unidirectional: vital remittances to China supported families and built local infrastructure in Chaoshan. Today, this dynamic has completely reversed. China’s massive sociocultural capital is now exported to Southeast Asia, reminding diasporic viewers of their specific heritage, amidst the enforcement of Mandarin usage. A commentary in the *Lianhe Zaobao* even depicted the film as a highly effective piece of Chinese “united front work”: it appealed directly to ancestral emotions and shared family sacrifices while subtly encouraging global Chinese

communities to align with China’s contemporary rise. However, many viewers and Overseas Chinese groups strongly reject this political framing, asserting that the film’s appeal lies in its universal themes of love, duty and endurance.

Political debate aside, a critical vulnerability among the diaspora has emerged. When a community must rely on media from another nation-state to access and appreciate its own heritage, it has effectively outsourced the preservation of its collective memory. The immense popularity of *Dear You* in Malaysia and Singapore makes it clear that such preservation cannot be left solely to historical institutions, museums or state-approved archives. While organisations like the Ngee Ann Kongsi and the Penang Teochew Association continue to manage properties and fund schools, they cannot save a dying language on their own.

If the Teochew dialect disappears from daily life, then an essential, irreplaceable part of the community’s identity dies with it. A language preserved only in archives is a museum piece, not a living culture. Younger generations must move beyond passive appreciation and actively bring their ancestral tongue back into their homes, by ensuring that the voices of their grandparents do not fade into silence.

My grandfather, if he were alive today, would be bewildered. He sent *qiaopi* across an ocean to keep his family intact. He built a life amidst languages and landscapes that were foreign to him. He maintained connections—to Chaoshan, to his people, to his dialect—across decades and at considerable personal cost. What would he make of a great-grandchild who cannot say a word of Teochew? I do not think he would rage; I think he simply would not understand. The thread he spent his life maintaining ... how did it come apart so quietly, and so fast?

Dear You is in Teochew, so is the obligation.

CAPTIONS

1. (Left cover photo) Grandfather’s (Chew Ming Kuang) shop house in Swatow. Circa 1990s.
2. (Right cover photo) A portrait photo of Chew Ming Kuang. Image is AI-coloured and enhanced.
3. Photo of the Chew family (late 1940s). Image is AI-coloured and enhanced.
4. Malaysian relatives meeting China relatives in Xin’an Village, Puning, Guangdong (1997).

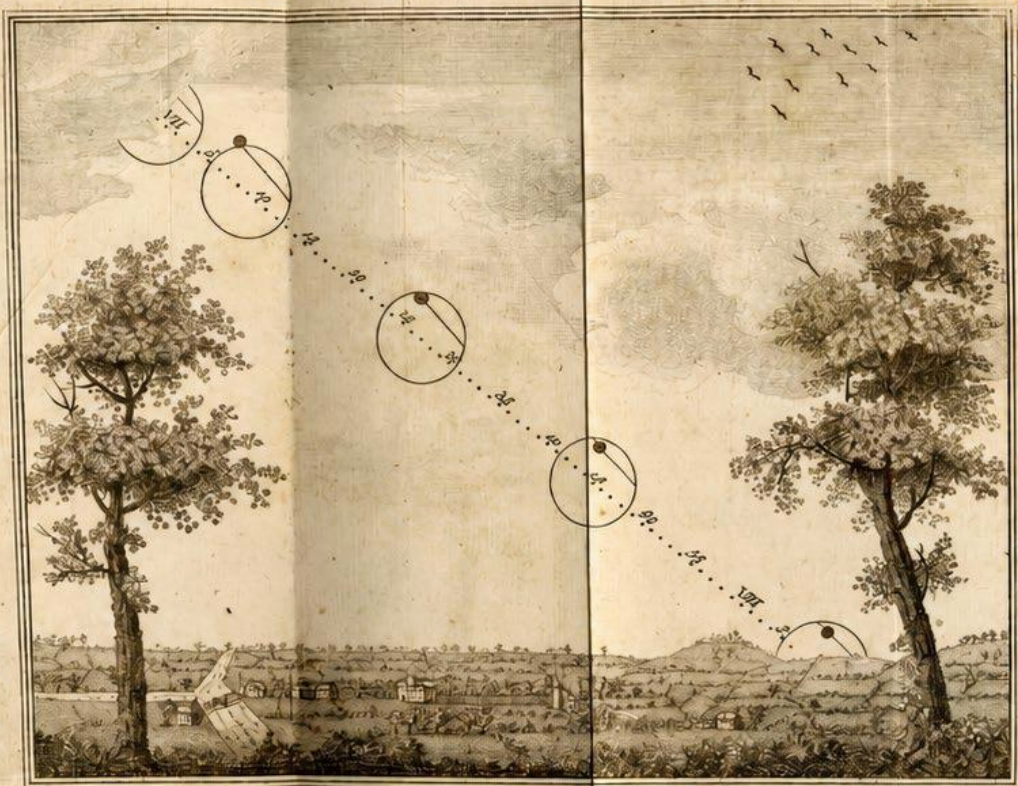
ENDNOTE

1. The term “dialect” is used here, although Teochew, like Hokkien, Cantonese, or other “dialects”, can also be considered a Sinitic language.



CHEW KOK LIANG is a retired lawyer and military officer, currently living in Petaling Jaya after almost a lifetime abroad.

THE SULKING PILOT



*An Artificial VIEW of the TRANSIT of VENUS June 3^d 1769
at LONDON, in a large CELESTIAL LANDSCAPE.*

AND THE SEA-DEVIL

BY
EUGENE
QUAH

A FRENCH ASTRONOMER'S ACCOUNT OF PENANG IN 1768

"MY SYSTEM," writes Guillaume Le Gentil, "is never to quit my ship when she is not in a port or in a sure roadstead." It was a modest rule, and on the night of Thursday, 10 March 1768, off the sandy coves of "Pulo Pinang"—Pulau Pinang, in archaic spelling—it may well have saved his life.

The man who set down that rule was no ordinary passenger. Guillaume-Joseph-Hyacinthe-Jean-Baptiste Le Gentil de la Galaisière was a member of the Royal Academy of Sciences and one of the most tragic figures in the history of astronomy. He had been dispatched from France in 1760 to observe the transit of Venus, a rare celestial event that would, for the first time, allow astronomers to accurately calculate the distance from the Earth to the sun, with the promise of making great improvements to the navigational sciences and mapmaking. Having arrived too late, he watched the planet cross the sun from the deck of a rocking ship, but could take no useful measurements.

Rather than return home, he resolved to wait for the next transit in 1769, wandering the shores of the Indian Ocean in the interval. In 1766, he judged that Manila would afford the finest station of all and sailed there to prepare—only to find the Spanish governor half-convinced that he was a spy, leaving his position untenable. In early 1768, having learnt that Pondicherry (Puducherry) had been restored by the British to French rule and was being rebuilt, Le Gentil resolved at once to depart for India. The narrative of Le Gentil's flight from Manila survives in the form of an intimate and lengthy letter to his friend Don Estevan Roxas y Melo, a canon of the Cathedral of Manila. Translated in full for the first time, it charts his journey eastwards; passing by Penang at a hinge of history, he would produce the earliest known pictorial view of its island.

INSTITUTIONS OF ASTRONOMICAL CALCULATIONS; CONTAINING A SURVEY OF THE SOLAR SYSTEM,

WHEREIN

All its DIMENSIONS of the DISTANCES, DIAMETERS, MAGNITUDES and VELOCITIES of the SUN, the EARTH, the Primary and Secondary PLANETS, the COMETS and the STARS are computed in *English* MILES from the late discovered

PARALLAX of the SUN,

BY THE TWO LAST

TRANSITS of VENUS.

WITH A

Description of two New Pieces of MECHANISM for exhibiting *Artificial* VIEWS of such TRANSITS.

Embellished with two COPPER-PLATES.

By BENJAMIN MARTIN.

L O N D O N :

Printed for the AUTHOR, at N^o 171, in Fleet-Street, 1773.

[Price *One Shilling*.]



EUGENE QUAH is an independent researcher and writer who is working on a book tentatively called "Illustrated Guide to the North Coast of Penang". He rediscovered the joys of writing after moving back to Penang from abroad.



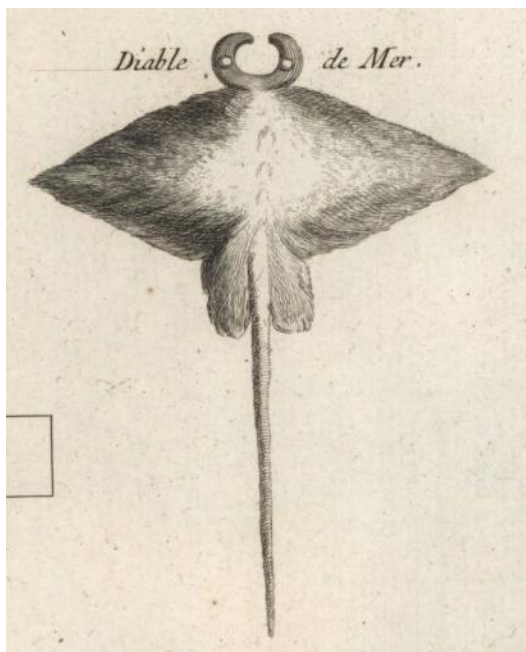
2

EXCERPTS FROM A LETTER TO A CANON OF MANILA

"You have taken too great an interest in my fate, sir and dear friend," Le Gentil's letter to the canon begins, "for me not to render unto you an exact and detailed account of all that hath befallen me since I departed Manila." Don Estevan, who had seen the astronomer off "only with sorrow and regret," had promised to remember him at the holy sacrifice of the mass until word came that he had safely arrived.

Le Gentil sailed on the *Saint-Antoine*, "a vessel somewhat ill-ballasted, and which had neither surgeon nor chaplain," on 5 February. This "beautiful fluyt of about 500 tons," built at Surat and outfitted by the Armenian merchants of Madras, was homeward-bound with a cargo of Manila piastres. From experience, Le Gentil found that in "the [India-bound] ships of Macao, ... the chief pilot alone is charged with the conduct of the vessel," while the captain "is a species of man of straw for that part," who, remarkably, knew next to nothing of the sea.

The first sign of trouble came in the narrows near Pulo Panjang (as Singapore's main island was known on French charts). By night, as the *Saint-Antoine* sailed past a rock the charts called Violle (Pulau Biola, a viola-shaped islet), Le Gentil recalled: "Unhappily for us, our captain and our chief pilot were not in too good a union." From the poop deck, the captain called down an order for some manoeuvre that the pilot disliked. The pilot answered "rather abruptly that he would do naught of it," insisting that he alone knew how the vessel must be navigated. The captain pressed on, and the pilot, "a brusque and gross man" quick to take offence, grew heated and at last "went to shut himself up in his cabin, abandoning his ship to the pleasure of the wind."

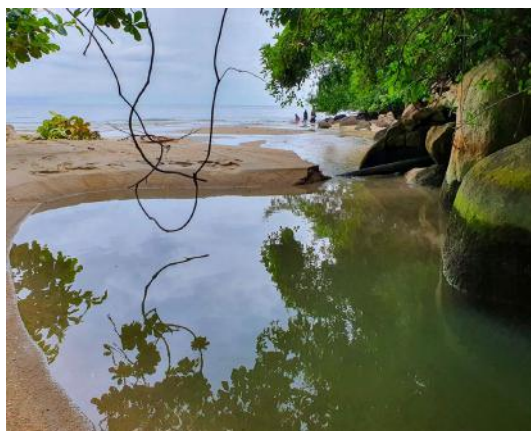


3

The astronomer found himself literally in dire straits, between the Viole and a tree-crowned sandbank a league-and-a-half away, with no one directing the helmsman. “I performed here, for the first time, the office of pilot,” he writes, going by himself to the rudder “to see if the helmsman deviated not from the course.” He roused the Armenian merchants and set them to plead with the sulking mariner. It was the Armenian supercargo (the overseer of the cargo), “the lord Melchizedek, with that great phlegmatic air,” who found the key. “*Hombre,*” he said, “*tiene usted conciencia!*” (Are you a man who hath conscience?) At this admonition in Spanish, the pilot surrendered his obstinacy and resumed the helm. Vindicated, he spread out the sea-chart and traced his course while the Armenians “looked upon me [Le Gentil] instead of the chart, as though they had expected a decree from my mouth.” He duly delivered it: “we had naught to fear ... we were upon a good route, and ... we might sleep in repose.” To prove it, he went to bed first.

WATERING AT PULO PINANG

The *Saint-Antoine* reached Malacca on 18 February, where Le Gentil went ashore to lodge with Monsieur Bertelin, an old friend of Don Estevan’s, and to deliver a letter to the Dutch governor. His verdict on the old emporium is unsentimental. Malacca “passes, as you know, for a rather considerable place; but ... in its present state, this city is very inconsiderable, it scarcely merits that one speak of it.” He allows that “the place, albeit small, is very pretty,” with three streets parallel to the shore. The seafront one was “very clean,” shaded by trees, “a most agreeable abode,” and a roadstead “almost always garnished with a quantity of vessels from all parts of India” (15 lay there when he passed). Le Gentil regretted only the mangosteens, in season not until July; he offered the Chinese a whole piastre for a single ripe fruit and got none.



He sailed away from Malacca on 28 February, and after the tedious business of threading the two great banks forming the Strait of Malacca—and of taking on a contraband cargo of alum and arrack from a consort brigantine, sending logwood back in exchange, far out of sight of the Dutch custom-house—the *Saint-Antoine* turned north. “We had need of water,” Le Gentil writes. “The usage of the ships of Macao is to go take it at Pulo-Pinang,” for water at Malacca was reckoned too troublesome to fetch.

On the morning of 10 March, he was “struck by a most agreeable spectacle.” The high lands of the Malay Peninsula lay half-drowned in a fog “so thick that it was a true cloud, and nevertheless very little elevated,” while the shore beneath “resembles a border of horn-beam [hardwood trees grown as hedges] clipped by the hand of man.” Then the sky turned. By afternoon, the thunder was in the north and north-west, but the wind shifted completely around in an hour, his thermometer fell nine degrees, and the ship had to ride out a tropical squall on two anchors “a third of a league from Pol-Pinang.”

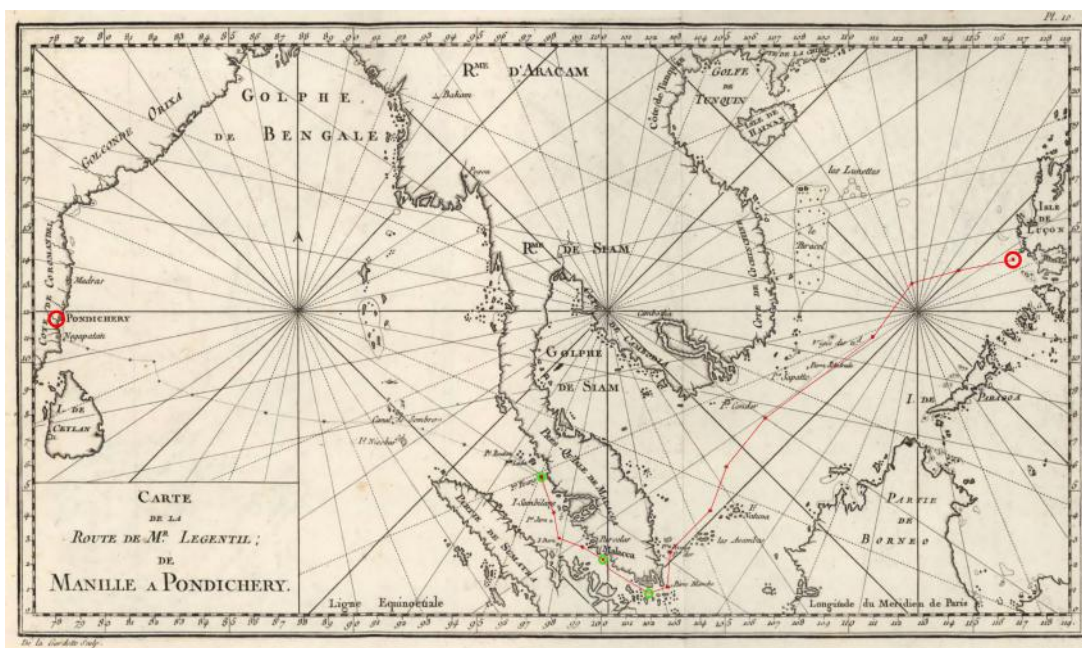
The watering-place lay between two sandy coves, where fresh water was found “among the trees in little hollows which, seen from afar, seem to be the mouths of ravines.” I have seen streams at Tanjung Gemuruh matching Le Gentil’s description, and, to add to the intrigue, a nearby cove is curiously named Pasir Belanda (lit., “Dutch Sands”), alluding to having once been a watering place for the “Hollanders.”

It was here, at the great bay of Teluk Kumbar, that Le Gentil’s rule earned its keep. “Our two chief pilots and a passenger were gone ashore in the boat,” he writes, “pushed by the sole curiosity of seeing the isle.” They pressed him to join them; he refused, and “congratulated” himself when the weather broke and he “conceived all the horror of the state to which my voyag-

CAPTIONS

1. (Cover photo) The transit of Venus in 1769. Le Gentil was thwarted by a cloud, having waited eight years after he missed the earlier one. Source: Martin (1773).
2. In the narrows near Singapore, the *Saint-Antoine* sailed past Pulau Biola. Source: Bellin (1755).
3. The sea-devil caught off the south coast of Penang by the crew of the *Saint-Antoine*. Source: Le Gentil (1779).
4. British-controlled Pondicherry in the late-18th century. The British captured it again at the start of the Napoleonic Wars, which was likely when this painting was made. Source: Bibliothèque nationale de France.
5. The southern watering-place which Le Gentil found is likely the mouth of Sungai Gemuruh (shown here) or Tanjung Asam, not far from a stretch of coast curiously named Pasir Belanda. Source: Remy Prakash Chacko.





ers would be reduced.” Twice, the boat was driven back in “the darkest night and a most heavy rain,” the men “illuminated only by the waves of the sea which appeared all on fire.” On the third attempt, they clawed their way to the ship, crying to be thrown a cable. “Their redoubled cries in the middle of the night ... all this represented to me the image of shipwrecked men.” They came aboard bearing, absurdly, a “monstrous fish, which the Portuguese name sea-devil”—the *diable de mer*—snagged under their grapnel. Based on Le Gentil’s drawing, it appears to be a devil ray, a harmless plankton-eating relative of the manta ray.

Le Gentil’s exasperation was magnificent. “I have never heard speak of a European ship anchored in an open roadstead, wherein there is so little police that the two chief pilots abandon thus their ship for a party of pleasure. There remained to us but the captain, as little in state to conduct his ship, as I am to lead an army, and for pilots two old automatons to whom I would not have confided the conduct of a longboat.” And Pulo Pinang was no place to be marooned: he had been assured by other sailors “that there are upon this isle tigers and other noxious beasts.”

AN ISLAND ON THE EDGE OF EMPIRE

Between fits of foul weather, Le Gentil, ever a man of science, found time to observe the island with a surveyor’s eye. “Almost all in length; it may have in this sense three leagues, upon one and a half of breadth,” its spine of mountains rising “four to five hundred *toises* of perpendicular height above the level of the sea,” as estimated by the base of the clouds.^[4] And he drew it. His sketch of Pulo Pinang, made from the deck of the *Saint-Antoine* during those few days in March 1768, is the earliest known pictorial view of the island which, 18 years later, would become Britain’s first foothold in the Strait of Malacca.

Le Gentil was, however, far from the first mariner to make a record of the place. Five years earlier, the East India Company ship *London*, captained by Walter Alves, had also watered here, en route to Balambangan, a small island off the north coast of Borneo. A rough

chart of Pulo Pinang upon which Alves marked a town survives his voyage: proof that the island Le Gentil watered at was already inhabited.

Indeed, these very waters had become theatres of Anglo–French and Anglo–Dutch rivalry after the Seven Years’ War, and the Company was casting about for a station of its own, east of the Bay of Bengal. In 1762, Alexander Dalrymple—Company servant and gifted hydrographer—had secured from the Sultan of Sulu the cession of Balambangan, hoping to plant a free port to break into the China and Sulu trades. That scheme would end in disaster when the settlement was sacked in 1775, but its driving impulse—a British harbour commanding the eastern approaches—would be the very island where Le Gentil’s careless pilots went sightseeing.

The *Saint-Antoine* sailed away from Pulo Pinang on 12 March, the wind at last fair from the west-south-west. Le Gentil reached Negapatnam on 25 March, after thirty-two days’ sailing from Manila, on the finest passage he had known. On the morning of 27 March, he “set foot upon land ... which was marked out for me by destiny”: Pondicherry, where the governor received him with a feast, but where, a little more than a year later, clouds would rob him of the sight of the transit of Venus.

The heavens he had crossed the world to measure eluded him to the last, and when he reached France at last, his fortune was as unkind as ever. He found himself declared dead, his wife remarried and his estate carved up among his heirs. Yet in sheltering from the squalls off Penang’s sandy coves, he had done something no one had done before: produced the first sketch of the island. The unluckiest astronomer who ever lived gave Penang its earliest known likeness.

CAPTIONS

6. This view of Pulau Kendi and the southwest side of “Pulo Pinang” form the earliest known sketch of the island. Source: Le Gentil (1779).

7. This annotated map shows the routes of the *Saint-Antoine*, where I have circled the places mentioned in the article in green. Source: Le Gentil (1779).

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ENDNOTE

1. A *toise* is an old French unit of length referring to the span of a person’s outstretched arms, much like the Malay *depa*.



MEETING MICHELLE GRIMSLEY THE QUINTESSENTIAL CONNECTOR

BY
CAROLYN
KHOR

WITHIN MINUTES OF Michelle Grimsley sending out her Spiral Synergy newsletter, a bicycle might be accounted for, a dining set claimed or a sofa matched with a new owner. Joining her mailing list is “a bit like a lottery. You never know what you will find,” said Michelle. But for thousands of subscribers across Penang and beyond, her newsletter is far more than a list of items for sale. Some even stay on the mailing list to remain connected with a place they once called, or even hope to call, home. With short grey hair, an easy smile and a manner that puts people at ease almost immediately, Michelle’s friendly demeanour makes it easy to understand why so many trust her to manage or clear the contents of their homes. Interestingly, this is a specialisation she fell into by accident.

FROM ORGANISING EVENTS TO AN ACCIDENTAL MARKETPLACE

Ask Michelle what she loves most about Penang, and she does not mention the food or the tropical climate. Instead, she speaks about how easily strangers become acquaintances, who then become friends. “Somewhere on the island, you will run into that same person again, in a restaurant, on the street. And the friendship grows.”

Michelle arrived here from the UK in January 2006, when her husband was posted to the island with the Royal Air Force. Through the International Women’s Association, where she later served as president, she met people from all walks of life and discovered corners of Penang that even residents might never encounter. When her husband’s posting came to an end, Michelle realised that she was not ready to leave. “I’m really sorry, darling, but I don’t really want to go back to England,” she recalled telling him.

Instead, she chose to stay and build a business around the community she had come to love. Event management seemed the obvious choice of work at first, but the reality proved less appealing. Clients would negotiate prices downwards and then expand their wish lists. Michelle decided that she would rather create events she enjoyed, instead of managing other people’s guest lists and budgets for diminishing returns.

And so, Spiral Synergy was incorporated in December 2008. Two years later, Michelle began organising excursions that she wanted to go on herself, including trips to places rarely found in guidebooks. As word spread of her work, people began asking whether they could be added to her mailing list, so that they would not miss future activities.

The newsletter grew from there, albeit in a rather surprising way. One subscriber asked whether they could advertise a television set for sale. She posted a photo, not quite sure what would come of it. Within half an hour, someone called to buy it. A few weeks later, another subscriber asked her to help sell a dining set. She suggested selling it for RM1,500, or RM900 for a quick sale. He chose to wait. 45 minutes later, it was sold to a local buyer furnishing a rental apartment for expatriates. Michelle had not planned to set up a marketplace, but the newsletter evolved into one anyway.

“Marie Kondo does all the nice stuff, and I end up sorting out what gets cleared,” Michelle said with a laugh. But her work is about more than just clearing homes. Through Spiral Synergy, she connects people, opportunities and communities, often building relationships that continue long after a sale. To many, she is simply “Michelle Spiral”: a brand in her own right.



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A SALE IN ACTION

On 22–23 May, Michelle ran a sale at Penang Institute, which was unlike most of the sales she usually organises (see *Penang Monthly*, cover story, August 2026). The pieces on offer were part of a collection of textiles—comprising ikat, batik, patola and shibori, among others—largely acquired between 1991 and 2005. Among them was a Sumba funeral cloth woven in two panels, with motifs of skull trees, ancestral figures and cockerels telling stories which would once have been known to every villager on the island. Such a cloth could take close to two years to weave, according to Michelle.

These were part of a collection assembled by Kim and Michael Saunders, a British couple who had made their way to Asia around 1990. The Saunders had been based in Jakarta and Singapore; Kim volunteered at museums in both cities, before retiring to Penang under the “Malaysia My Second Home” programme. Kim specialised in contemporary Indonesian ikat, documented for instance in her book, *Contemporary Tie and Dye Textiles of Indonesia*. Most of the collection was bought directly from weavers, local shops and markets in countries that the Saunders travelled to, and occasionally from international exhibitions or antique shops back in the UK. The collection also included contemporary tribal clothing from many of those countries, which are considered vintage today.

After Kim’s passing, her estate asked Michelle to help find the collection new and appreciative homes, a task at which she largely succeeded. “The response came not only from collectors in Penang but from around the world,” said Michelle, adding that one of the pieces sold for RM10,000. The Saunders’ library, built up over a lifetime of research in history, geography and politics, has already found a home as part of the Bon Ton Locale Community Library in Langkawi. But there are still lots of pieces left, including large-scale works from Sumba. More textile sales are being planned, with the next scheduled for October 2026.

BUILT ON TRUST

Today, her newsletter is sent to around 6,000 email addresses, and another 2,500 WhatsApp contacts, although both lists do overlap. Some subscribers are former residents while others subscribe before relocating to Penang, wanting a glimpse of the community that awaits them.

Indeed, such connections would not have materialised without Michelle’s approachable personality and the trust she has gained over the years. Unlike Facebook Marketplace or Carousell, Michelle has built her own little corner from the ground up, based on personal relationships. “The whole thing is built on trust,” she reflected. Buyers and sellers know that there is someone at the other end of the conversation, who can offer advice on pricing, manage enquiries and introduce one to another. This is why Kim’s estate turned to her rather than an auction house, and why the newsletter’s opening rate runs above 50%: a figure any email marketer would envy.

There is no bidding or haggling here. Prices are set with her advice, and buyers either commit or do not. “Fastest fingers first,” as she put it. Through experience, she has noticed a recurring pattern. “A buyer who asks for extra photos is rarely a buyer at all, but someone hunting for a reason to say no.” In many ways, she has earned her reputation as “the quintessential connector”. In slightly dated parlance, an earlier generation might have called her the “BBC” for exactly this reason.

It has been 20 years since Michelle arrived in Penang, intending to stay for only three years. The newsletter still goes out, without a fixed schedule—only when there are, in her words, “enough” items or when she has “enough” time to answer enquiries. Sooner or later, another edition will arrive, beginning with two familiar words: “Hi Friends.”



6

CAPTIONS

1. (Cover photo) Michelle Grimsley of Spiral Synergy.
2. Warp ikat with continuous supplementary weave panels from East Sumba, Indonesia.
3. A museum-quality ikat from Sumba, hand-woven in two symmetrical panels and joined. The flawless alignment of its complex motifs across both sections demonstrates extraordinary technical mastery and symmetry. This fabric is approximately 35 years old.
4. Ikat hinggi kombu from East Sumba, Indonesia.
5. Ikat sarongs from Savu, Indonesia.
6. Ikats from Sumba, Indonesia.



CAROLYN KHOR is a former ministerial press secretary, a former United Nations volunteer and an independent researcher/writer.

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FOOD WASTE, HOUSEHOLD COMPOSTING AND MISSING LINKS IN MALAYSIA'S SUSTAINABILITY JOURNEY

BY THING SIEW SHUEN

FOOD WASTE IS one of our most pressing waste management challenges, with Malaysians discarding approximately 17,000 tonnes of food daily.^[1] While discussions often focus on reducing wastage at the consumer level, far less attention is given to what happens *after* food is thrown away. Such organic waste is not merely a problem of disposal or wasted resources: when it decomposes in landfills under anaerobic conditions, methane, a significantly more potent greenhouse gas than carbon dioxide, is released. Effective solutions therefore require not only consumer awareness but also policy interventions, infrastructure investment and institutional coordination. How might composting offer a helpful intervention at the household level?

ENDNOTES

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A CASE FOR DIVERSION

To be clear, food waste is not simply an individual behavioural issue, but rather, a systemic challenge involving consumers, businesses and public institutions. Regardless, households still contribute up to 38.2% of the country's food waste, as research by Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia has found. Households are followed by wet and night markets (24.5%), food courts and restaurants (23.4%), and hotels (6.9%).^[2] As a result, some have advocated for a Food Waste Reduction Act, arguing that food waste should be treated as a governance crisis, rather than merely a waste management problem. Here, household composting provides an intermediary solution, even if it cannot solve the problem alone.

As a conscious consumer living in an apartment, I have always found it challenging to manage food waste responsibly. Over the years, I have experimented with two common methods of home composting. The first is making eco-enzyme by fermenting fruit peels and vegetable dregs, which requires a steady supply of starting material. Sometimes I do not generate enough peels and scraps to fill a container, so I learnt a method from a Taiwanese friend: now, I store them in the freezer until I have enough material to begin a batch. The second is a relatively simple traditional composting process using flower pots. I start with a layer of soil mixed with dry leaves, add a layer of food scraps and then cover it with another layer of soil, repeating the process until the pot is full. Over time, microorganisms break down organic matter and transform it into nutrient-rich compost. However, cooked leftovers, especially those containing oil, meat or dairy products, are generally unsuitable for simple home composting methods and often end up in landfills.

Meanwhile, residents of landed properties enjoy greater flexibility. They can allocate a section of their garden for composting, where they can bury both raw and certain types of cooked food waste. When properly managed, these organic materials eventually become valuable inputs which improve garden health and reduce dependency on chemical fertilisers.



DR. THING SIEW SHUEN is a lecturer and sustainability consultant with over 20 years of experience in sustainability practice, environmental governance and public engagement.



For households interested in composting, choosing the right system depends largely on housing type, lifestyle and available space. Urban high-rise residents often favour electric composters and food waste dehydrators because these are compact, fast and produce largely odourless outputs. They are also highly incentivised by the Malaysian government, which offers individual income tax relief of up to RM2,500 for purchases of environmental sustainability equipment, including household food composting machines and food waste grinders.^[3] However, these machines come with relatively high upfront costs and consume electricity; besides, their outputs are not readily usable for gardening or planting.

COMMON MISCONCEPTIONS AND COMPOSTING GONE WRONG

A common misconception about home composting is that what comes out of a composter is automatically fertiliser. This is incorrect, especially since most household electric units are actually dehydrators and grinders, rather than true composters. They use heat to dry food waste and blades to slice it to fine powder. Although the volume of waste is significantly reduced, the output is essentially sterilised biomass. Nutrients remain locked within organic compounds and are not immediately available to plants.

Neither are outputs of popular Bokashi systems readily usable. Here, food waste is mixed with specialised microbial bran and ferments in an airtight container. Even at the end of the process, nutrients are still not yet bioavailable to plants, and worse, the highly acidic material could kill them. Both dehydrated biomass and Bokashi material must first be buried in soil, where microorganisms, fungi and earthworms can complete the decomposition process. Depending on local conditions, it may take two to four weeks before nutrients become available to plants.

Traditional outdoor composting works differently. Bacteria, fungi and insects gradually transform food scraps and garden waste into stable humus through natural aerobic decomposition. The ideal result

is a dark, crumbly material with an earthy smell, which should resemble the scent of a tropical rainforest after rain, rather than a kitchen bin. At this stage, nutrients such as nitrogen, phosphorus and potassium are readily available to support plant growth.

Nevertheless, composting is not without its risks, particularly when large amounts of cooked food are added to backyard compost. Meat, dairy products, oily gravies and fried foods generate strong odours that attract animals such as rats, cockroaches and stray cats. Oil also creates a physical barrier around organic matter, preventing oxygen and moisture from reaching beneficial microorganisms. When aerobic decomposition slows down, the resulting anaerobic conditions often produce foul, sewage-like smells. Furthermore, if a compost pile does not get hot enough (a common problem in small household bins or passive tumblers), harmful pathogens like *E. coli* or *Salmonella* from raw meat scraps can survive decomposition.

Poorly managed composting also harms plants and soil in other ways. If compost is applied before it has fully decomposed, soil microorganisms may consume the available nitrogen while continuing to break down organic matter. This process deprives plants of essential nutrients, resulting in yellow leaves and stunted growth. Immature compost may also generate excess heat and release organic acids which are highly toxic to roots. Since our food waste is heavily laced with salt, the resulting high soil salinity may degrade soil structure, making it harder, more compact and less capable of retaining water.

Several precautions can reduce these risks. If leftovers are heavily coated with sauces or oils, a quick rinse can remove excess grease and salt. Cooked food—which should not exceed 10% of the total volume of a traditional compost pile—should be buried deep within the centre of the compost pile and covered with a thick layer of carbon-rich materials such as dry leaves, shredded paper or sawdust. Perhaps another simple rule, which composting enthusiasts often follow, may help: if it still looks like food, it is not yet food for your plants.

INFRASTRUCTURE, BELIEF AND BEHAVIOUR

Given the amount of food wastage, we still need large-scale composting and food waste recovery facilities capable of diverting organic waste from landfills at industrial scale. Beyond encouraging households to compost, local governments should invest in centralised food waste treatment facilities, including waste-to-biogas plants capable of converting organic waste into a renewable energy source and also organic fertiliser. Restaurants, food courts, markets and other food businesses should also be encouraged to separate food waste at source and compost them at dedicated sites. Over the last 11 years, Juru Auto-City Penang has been actively composting food waste generated by its restaurants. This commercial centre thus offers a successful ongoing model for community food waste management and urban greening.

Resolving the food wastage challenge does not merely require technical solutions, but also engagement with cultural and religious norms. When I was promoting food composting at work, one concern frequently raised by Muslim participants was whether or not plants grown using compost derived from impure materials would themselves become impure (a concept sometimes associated with *al-jallah* in Islamic jurisprudence). Fortunately, several state mufti departments have clarified that fruits and vegetables grown in soil fertilised with compost remain permissible for consumption, arguing that compost functions merely as an external agent which enriches soil. Plants derive their growth from multiple pure sources, including water, sunlight, air and soil nutrients. Furthermore, compost does not alter the natural characteristics of produce, such as taste, colour or smell.

By combining household efforts with sufficient infrastructure, supportive policies, business participation and cultural sensitivities, Malaysia can significantly reduce the amount of organic waste sent to landfills, while turning food waste into a valuable resource for a sustainable economy.

JUDY CHENG-HOPKINS : A LIFE OF SERVICE ACROSS THE UNITED NATIONS

BY MARY SYMMONDS

BORN IN PENANG in 1951, just six years after the creation of the United Nations (UN), Judy Cheng-Hopkins could hardly have imagined that the organisation would become such a defining part of her life. Over several decades, she rose through its ranks, serving across its development, humanitarian, refugee and peacebuilding institutions in some of the world's most challenging environments.

Her career was remarkable. Through wars, famines, political upheavals and humanitarian crises, Judy showed a rare combination of strength, wisdom and compassion. She made difficult decisions without ever losing sight of the human beings behind the statistics.

In doing so, Judy did not just serve the UN—she embodied it. She brought its architecture down to human scale: a living institution of diplomacy, moral clarity and empathy. Just as the organisation was built to bridge a fractured world, Judy served as a steady, unifying force. She lived the UN Charter daily, translating its high principles—development, dignity and peace—into quiet, ground-level action.



Her journey began in 1982 with the UN Development Programme (UNDP) in Zambia, where she served first as a programme officer and later as deputy resident representative. Confronting severe economic difficulties as a young nation-state, Zambia was also a sanctuary for liberation movements across southern Africa. There, Judy partnered with government-building programmes in support of agricultural development, economic planning and national institution-building. It was an early expression of a principle that would define her life's work: sustainable progress takes root when people and institutions are empowered to shape their own destinies.

In 1988, Judy moved to Kenya as deputy resident representative during a turbulent transition away from one-party rule. Amid political violence and economic pressure, and refugee arrivals when neighbouring Somalia crumbled, she guided the development and implementation of programmes that strengthened decentralisation and public administration at the district level. This period placed her squarely at the intersection of long-term institution-building and immediate humanitarian needs: two worlds that could no longer be treated separately.

From 1993 to 1997, Judy served in New York as deputy executive secretary with the UN Capital Development Fund, which focused on finance, local governance and poverty reduction. The role sharpened her focus on effectively managing and directing resources where they could directly ignite local economies and reach communities beyond the scope of conventional finance.

A dramatic shift towards high-stakes humanitarian action followed. From 1997 to 2000, as a senior regional leader with the World Food Programme, Judy oversaw emergency operations across Asia and Eastern Europe. She managed relief during North Korea's devastating famine, conflict and drought in Afghanistan as well as the massive displacement of the Kosovo War. These operations provided life-saving food assistance to millions of women and children. During this time, she also helped manage support for China's transition away from being a major recipient of food aid to a partner and donor country—a testament to how assistance ultimately aims to make itself unnecessary.

Returning to the UNDP in 2002 as deputy assistant administrator of the Regional Bureau for Africa, Judy brought her dual background in development and crisis response to a continent in transition. As countries emerged from conflict while grappling with the devastating HIV/AIDS epidemic, adversely affecting South Africa in particular, she helped mobilise and guide the direction of vital resources towards rebuilding institutions, economic opportunities and public trust.

That experience paved the way for one of the most consequential chapters of her career, at the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). Serving as assistant high commissioner for refugees from 2006 to 2009, she oversaw global field operations, leading missions to complex environments including Afghanistan, Iran, Pakistan, Iraq, Uganda, Sudan and Darfur. At the heart of her work was a simple, profound truth: refugees are not numbers on a ledger, but human beings whose lives have been upended by forces beyond their control. Her approach echoed the words of former High Commissioner Poul Hartling upon accepting the 1981 Nobel Peace Prize for the UNHCR: "Let us never cease to feel compassion for those in want. Let us never tire of helping the victims of injustice and oppression."



In 2009, Judy took on another major responsibility as assistant secretary-general for peacebuilding support. Unifying every strand of her career—development, humanitarian response, refugee protection and governance—she led the Peacebuilding Support Office, worked with the Peacebuilding Commission and oversaw the Peacebuilding Fund. From Sri Lanka and Nepal to South Sudan and Côte d'Ivoire, she helped fragile nation-states transform delicate peace into long-term stability.

Whether in a rural village, a government office, a refugee camp or the UN headquarters in New York, she returned to one underlying question: how can international service make life better for people facing circumstances they did not choose? Judy answered not with grand declarations, but through thoughtful, disciplined and compassionate leadership.

Her career reminds us that leadership needs not be loud to be powerful. Judy carried immense responsibility with extraordinary grace, while preserving enduring friendships, staying deeply connected to family and maintaining her warmth through every trial.

From Penang to global leadership across continents, Judy Cheng-Hopkins rose through the ranks and lived a life of unwavering purpose. Following her retirement in 2013, Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon appointed her as his special adviser on the University for Peace in 2014—a fitting continuation of a lifetime dedicated to bridging human divides.

Across decades and continents, she carried a simple, unwavering promise to the world: that even in its most difficult corners, no person would ever be forgotten, and no life would be left behind.

Her husband Tom, her daughters Fiona and Tara, and their families remain blessed to have lived in the warmth of her care—a devotion she gave just as generously at home as she did to the world.

CAPTIONS

1. Judy with UN colleagues at Mary's year-end gathering in December 2015.
2. At "Anatomy of Failed States", a panel discussion featuring (from left) discussant Liew Chin Tong, moderator Ooi Kee Beng, and Judy and her husband, Dr. Thomas J. Hopkins, held at Penang Institute in March 2020.



MARY SYMMONDS,

born in Barbados, is a lifetime friend of Judy Cheng-Hopkins and a former colleague. A retired senior UN official, she also founded the Global Leadership Coalition.

PHOR TAY'S

A CUP OF Chinese herbal tea will reduce body heat and soothe a sore throat, according to southern Chinese tradition. That is the inspiration behind “Brewing a Pot”, a dance number performed by students from SMJK Phor Tay in Sungai Dua at the penultimate Malaysia He Yue Arts Festival. This competition took place on 3–5 June at Phor Tay, the auditorium hosting national, private and independent schools, some from as far away as Sabah and Sarawak. The school’s own students eventually clinched the Gold Award for their performance.



DANCE TROUPE

A
BREWING
SUCCESS

BY
LIM
WAN PHING





2

ADAPTING A CHINESE FOLK DANCE

Leung cha (“cooling tea”) has long been used in traditional Chinese medicine to treat a wide range of ailments, on top of quenching thirst in the humid southern provinces like Guangdong. This provided inspiration for Grace Ooi, when she was tasked to choreograph a number for Phor Tay’s dance club. “I was pregnant at the time and I was always thirsty,” said Ooi, a full-time dance instructor. “I was spending a lot of time in cafés too, and I thought, how about a dance about brewing a pot of herbal tea?”

As founder of Arts in Motion Dance Studio in Penang, Ooi specialises in training kindergarten, primary and secondary school dance troupes for competitions. Her specialty is Chinese folk dances from ethnic minority tribes in Xinjiang, Yunnan and Mongolia, among others. This herbal tea dance comes from the ancient Lingnan region in Guangdong, where tea- and rice-farming were a huge part of daily life. “We did a lot of research and study online, understanding the historical context and incorporating a simple storyline as well,” said Ooi.

This happy and playful herbal tea dance tells the story of a master brewer who teaches his apprentices the perfect tea recipe. One day, he falls sick, and his cough is healed only when they serve him the tea. Performed with

swift and light steps, the dance incorporates acrobatic movements like somersaults and splits. The dancers are dressed in colourful farm clothes, reminiscent of rural life in a traditional Hakka village. Their aprons, wide brown culotte pants and kerchiefs are custom-made to fit this agricultural theme.

Two props, a mud-clay charcoal stove—modelled after the Chaozhou tea stove, traditionally used to slow-brew medicinal teas—and a large teapot with a side handle, are rolled onstage, made of Styrofoam and with amber LED lights installed. But the simple palm-leaf fan that each dancer carries is their most important prop, which they use to fan the flames of the stove with skilful wrist movements. As the brew readsies, the fans are replaced by “chicken” bowls. Towards the end, the “master” arrives on his “horse” and sits on a stool to take a sip of tea, performed to an emotional tune played on the *erhu*, the Chinese fiddle.

TRAINING FOR GOLD

The 23 dancers from Phor Tay’s dance club, aged between 13 and 17, had been practising for a year. They previously won gold with the same dance at the 36th Penang Chinese Dance Festival, held at Dewan Sri Pinang in November 2025. That win was a significant milestone, paving the way for them to compete at the national level. Their participation in this hobby club, which is one of the school’s extracurricular offerings, was no simple task. Those selected to compete committed to a gruelling schedule of three-hour practice sessions daily, including on Saturdays.

As Assistant Headmaster Tan Poh Hoon said: “We’re so proud of the girls [and the one boy in the club] because they’ve worked so hard for so long. They’ve waited so many years for gold and it’s finally happened. We’re very happy for them, and we’re grateful to the parent-teacher association and school board for funds to tailor the costumes and hire external coaches.”

“I’m really happy and touched that we won,” said 15-year-old Ho Eu Jing. “I like all kinds of dance in general, but for this we had to train a lot. The training was athlete-level!” In fact, “[o]ne day before the competition, I dreamt that we had won the gold,” said 16-year-old Lim Angie. “We were definitely not aiming for silver, but it was still quite unexpected.” The girls credited their instructor, Ooi, and an assistant who had taken over during her maternity leave, for their success. “Thank you coach Grace and Chia Shien for all your hard work.”

BREWING THE PERFECT POT OF TEA

“When I was first approached to choreograph for Phor Tay, I had to think about what was suitable for their group and their skill level, with the aim to win gold as well,” said Ooi. “Many ethnic folk dances are female-only, but because of the boy in the group, we adapted accordingly and came up with this master-and-apprentice storyline.

“In folk dances, the hand movements and steps are all different. For example, the Mongolian dances utilise the horse, while the Dai tribe from Yunnan uses the peacock pattern. So we put a lot of effort into studying the moves, especially the hand movements, to get them right.”

Ooi had been teaching in SJKC Kwang Hwa and already knew some of the dancers from their primary school years. “They are a bunch of polite and respectful girls,” she said. “They were a strong and united team, putting aside their differences to represent the school. I’m so proud of them.”

Next year, the He Yue Festival will be putting on its final edition. Organised by Persatuan Seni dan Budaya He Yue—a Chinese arts and cultural association based in Alor Setar, Kedah—this annual competition for Malaysian secondary schools has aimed to promote Chinese art and culture via three categories (Chinese orchestra, choir and dance) over the years. The competition secretariat thanked all participants and hopes to “bring this artistic journey spanning more than ten years to a beautiful close”.

In the meantime, we wish Phor Tay’s troupe every success in upcoming competitions.

CAPTIONS

1. (Cover photo)
Finale pose for the “Brewing a Pot” dance performance by the students of SMJK Phor Tay.

2. Har Yang Sit Teik
Tong Yeoh Kongsi 190th anniversary celebration dinner.

3. Tan Poh Hoon,
Assistant Headmaster at SMJK Phor Tay.

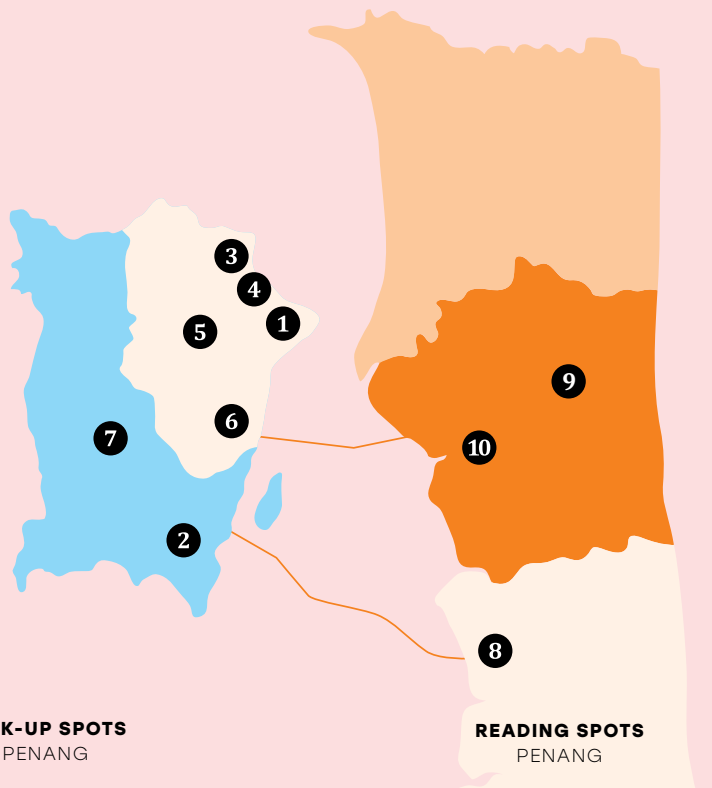


LIM WAN PHING is a freelance writer based in Penang. She has a short story collection, *Two Figures in a Car*, published by Penguin SEA.



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HERE'S WHERE YOU CAN FIND PENANG MONTHLY



PICK-UP SPOTS KL/SELANGOR

○	Kuala Lumpur
Hubba Hubba Mont Kiara The Godown Arts Centre	
○	Petaling Jaya
Temu House Yin's Sourdough Bakery and Café	
○	Subang Jaya
Sunway University (Students Study Area)	

PICK-UP SPOTS PENANG

1	George Town
Areca Books Book Island @ COEX Infinity 8 Black Kettle BookXcess Gurney Paragon ChinaHouse Cheong Fatt Tze Mansion (Blue Mansion) Gerakbudaya Bookshop @ Hikayat Gurney Plaza (Information Counter) Hin Bus Depot Art Centre Huey & Wah Café Le Petit Four Patisserie More by Arang Coffee Penang Institute Penang Island City Council (Komtar Level 3) Pusat Harmoni (Harmonico)—Reception Ren I Tang Heritage Inn Sin Seh Kai Artisan Bakery Tourist Information Centre	
2	Bayan Lepas
Arang Coffee InvestPenang Penang Development Corporation (PDC) Penang Skills Development Centre (PSDC) Urban Republic	

3	Tanjung Bungah
Gusto Café Straits Mini Mart Tenby International School Yin's WholeFood Manufactory (Lembah Permai)	
4	Tanjung Tokong
Blue Reef Straits Quay	
5	Air Itam
Coffee Elements Penang Hill—Lower Station Sunshine Central	
6	Gelugor
E-Gate (Security Desk located at the building's middle span) Penang Youth Development Corporation (PYDC) Universiti Sains Malaysia, Hamzah Sendut Library 1 (Main Entrance Foyer)	
8	Batu Kawan
IKEA Batu Kawan	
9	Bukit Mertajam
Seberang Perai City Council	
10	Juru
AUTO CITY Shop-In D'Park	

READING SPOTS PENANG

1	George Town
Bricklin Café Bar Consumers' Association of Penang Forward College G Hotel Kim Haus Komichi Tea House Mugshot Café Narrow Marrow Penang Public Library USM Library Wheeler's Café	
4	Tanjung Tokong
Leo Books	
7	Balik Pulau
Botanica Mansion Nada Natural Farming	
8	Batu Kawan
Peninsula College	



WORKING TODAY FOR TOMORROW

History shows that water demand in Penang increases with population growth and socio-economic development.

As we march on towards 2030 and beyond, PBAPP has to invest billions of ringgit to upgrade Penang's water infrastructure for the future.

These investments will inevitably impact water rates in Penang in the future.

Water-wise, we cannot wait until there is a crisis before acting or reacting.

As such, PBAPP is planning and acting ahead of time. In 2030, 2040 and 2050, we must supply enough water to meet all of Penang's water needs.

Please think about Penang's future and your future. Please use water wisely at home and at work.

