

PENANG MONTHLY

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COLLECTIONS: OBSESSION OR INVESTMENT?

COVER STORY

LIVING IS COLLECTING:
OF KNOWLEDGE,
MEMORIES AND THINGS

FEATURE

KOE EWE TEIK AND THE
ORIGINS OF FOOTBALL'S
RED- AND YELLOW-
CARD SYSTEM

PEAKS AND PARKS

BUKIT TANGGA BATU:
EXPLORING THE HILLY
HINTERLAND OF
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WHO WE ARE

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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Got a story to tell? We are accepting pitches on arts and culture, science and technology, heritage and history, and national or regional trends and developments concerning Penang.

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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.

LIVING is COLLECTING

NEXT MONTH ON PENANG MONTHLY

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... A lot of people, amateur and proper historians alike, believe that they need to preserve history from another. We're not in danger of being obliterated, we're in danger of people not caring."

—CALEB GOH IN

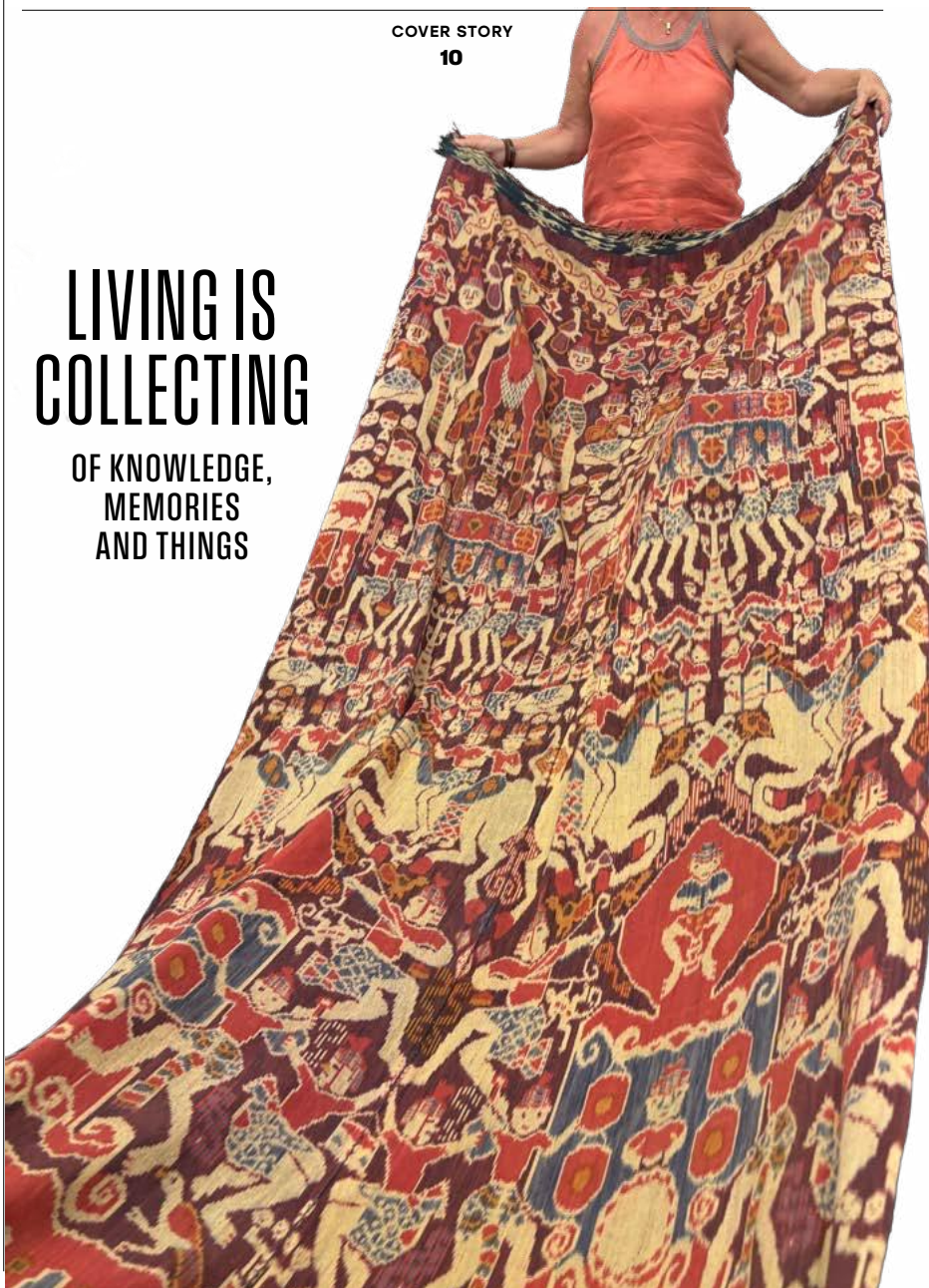
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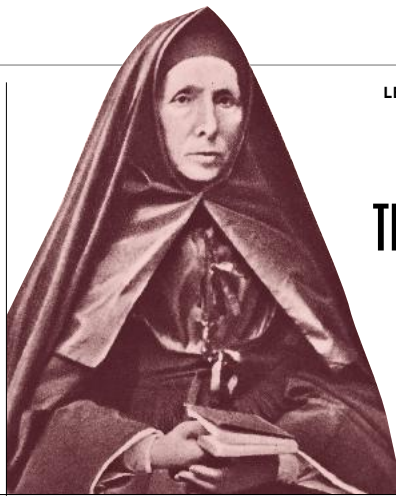
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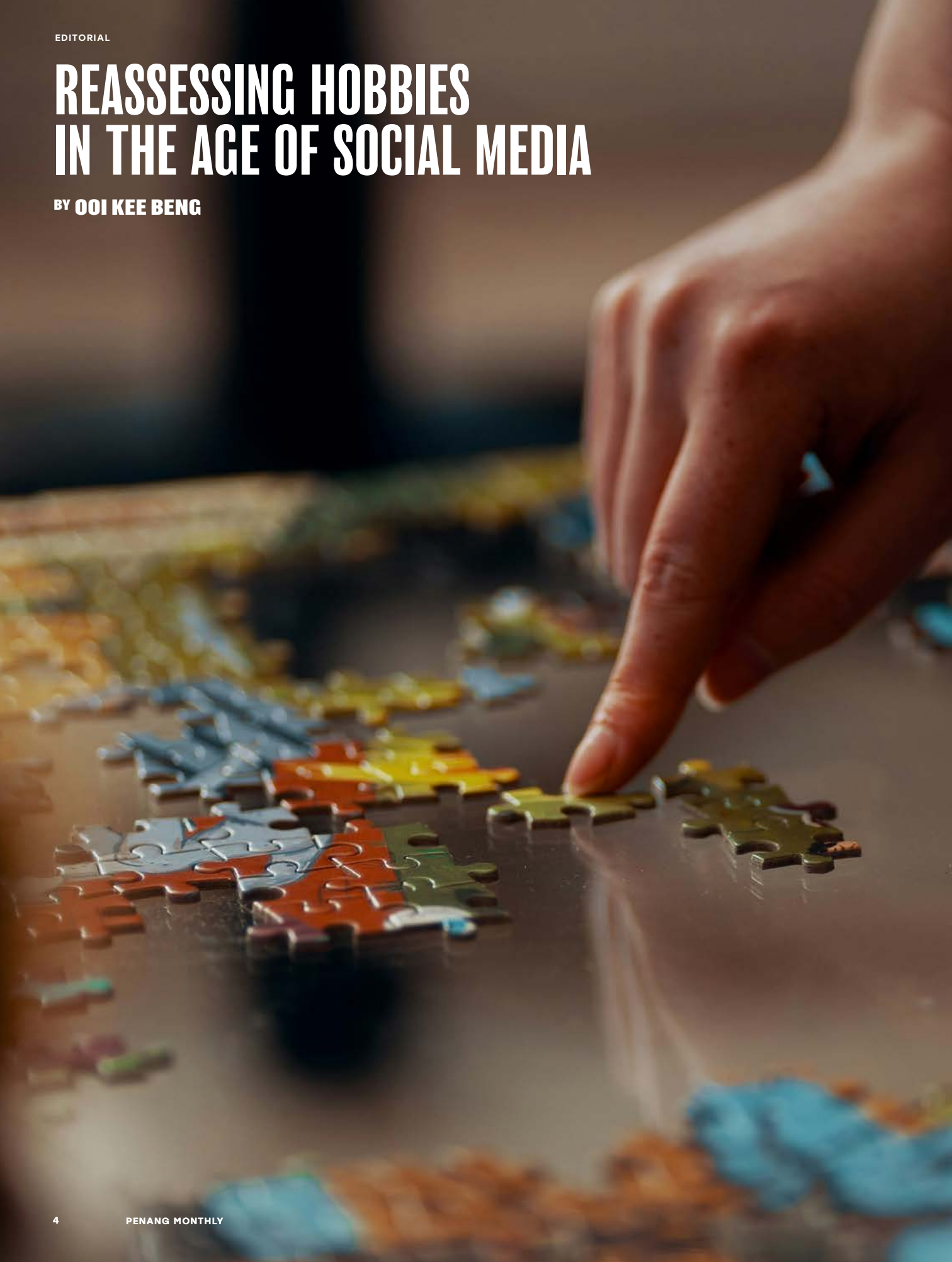
WE NEED TO TALK

**ARTISTS' RIGHTS AND
THE QUEST FOR INTELLECTUAL
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EDITORIAL

REASSESSING HOBBIES IN THE AGE OF SOCIAL MEDIA

BY OOI KEE BENG





WRITING DURING THE middle of my writer's retreat at the Rimbun Dahan arts centre, near Sungai Buloh, I was inspired by its peaceful environment to adopt some generous perspectives about the world. I turn to a seemingly innocuous subject: the hobby. How much time do you need to spend on an interest, and what proportion of your earnings and savings do you have to be willing to spend (not invest) on that interest, before you can honestly call it a hobby?

It is a difficult question, deciding what a hobby is, and what is not. But let us ponder further.

I like doing some gardening on my big balcony. But when I consider the little time and money I spend on it, I would not claim that gardening is really a hobby of mine. What I really like is having a green and luxuriant balcony.

I have more books at home than most people do nowadays. But they are, in the final account, just potential reading material. I shelve them more or less meticulously by subject, as a way of reminding myself of my intellectual pursuits, lest I forget what I was once excited about. Well, I suppose collecting books can be considered a hobby.

I used to spend a lot of time watching television—almost every evening. I doubt it helped me sleep, but it did entertain me. Was that a hobby? I do not think of it as such.

Now, when screen time on cellphones or computers is ravenously eating away at the limited hours we have per day, are we able to have a hobby at all that does not involve swiping and clicking?

Maybe the more interesting questions are as follows: does everyone have a hobby? Why do we have hobbies? Why do we want to have hobbies, yet brush off their importance by dismissing them as “just hobbies”? Are hobbies a modern phenomenon? Or is this discussion actually much ado about nothing, since humans beings are necessarily interested in many things at the same time?

The very concept of hobbies, if the term's contemporary usage is anything to go by, most likely emerged in the context of the all-consuming modern working week, or was at least deeply configured by it.

It de-stresses us and is also supposed to be fun—in contradistinction to Work, which stresses us and is not meant to be fun. By these metrics, if a hobby brings forth anxieties or becomes a necessary source of income, then it has transformed into a “chore”, or even a “second job”. Sigh.

Defining hobbies is turning out to be more complex a matter than I had assumed at the start. Let us browse through the relevant literature; from it, I glean the following points of departure for understanding what a hobby is:

1. **A psychological need.** A hobby can be a search for an “experience of mastery”. This endeavour can function as a buffer against burnout, or anchor a sense of personal identity heedless of what the world likes and rewards.
2. **A sociological response.** Hobbies can be a form of “conspicuous leisure” to signal wealth and privilege. Conversely, they can offer a way for people to gather over uncontroversial activities, like knitting, reading books or pottery.
3. **High-end consumption.** A hobby can also be the consumption of goods, through wine-tasting or film-watching, for instance. Interestingly, a hobby can be a process for producing something that is clearly less valuable than the investment of time and money would otherwise suggest.
4. **A research laboratory.** Traditionally, if your hobby brings in substantive income, then you would in fact be working. However, with the advent of the gig economy, the choice to work (or not) in this sense has become a personal and immediate undertaking. A “First World problem”, in fact. This slippage challenges the very concept of the “hobby” itself, revealing the artificiality of the separation of professional from regular personal activities. Since there must have been countless cases where hobbies developed into successful businesses, a hobby can clearly be tantamount to a laboratory for creative research and development.
5. **A moral corrective.** Hobbies may involve what many would consider frivolous and childish pursuits, which serious adults should be mature enough to not indulge. The common admonishment “to take up a hobby” is thus meant as a disparaging directive to procrastinators and lazy people to stop idling away their lives.
6. **An emotional regulator.** Among neurodivergent communities, hobbies become deeply immersive, dopamine-controlling activities.
7. **A philosophical occupation.** Most of you would probably like this viewpoint. A hobby can be a so-called autotelic activity, wherein the doing is the point. Hobbies are not means to ends; the goal is intrinsic to the doing. The journey is what matters, as a radical act of existential defiance against the utilitarianism pervading modern life.

On a simpler plane, one could look directly at the activities involved in a hobby. This approach makes a hobby several possible things, such as: (1) an act of creativity, of producing something novel, of nurturing something, like gardening or painting; (2) collecting or curating classes of objects, like coins or antiques; (3) an intellectual but not utilitarian pursuit of knowledge, like amateur astronomy or genealogy; and, finally, (4) a physical activity like jogging, climbing or dancing.

In weary conclusion, I venture that the term denotes too much. In fact, I wonder if hobbies really represent the pursuit of the many lives we wish for, but which are not for us to properly live. Humans have countless capabilities and therefore suffer a strong need to feel and exercise agency. We are individually in constant struggle with society's norms, demands and judgements. That is life, and a hobby, in short, is our silent act of defiant self-definition.



THE OLD AND THE NEW IN HARMONIOUS JUXTAPOSITION

BY **LUCILLE DASS**

This poem is inspired by and
builds upon *Penang Monthly's*
June 2026 editorial.

A little isle with bits of everything
Paradoxes a-plenty! Come and see ...
Feel and wonder at Penang's appeal
Where old-world charm in its present BE-ING
Dwells in spirit with its onward BE-COMING
A brave new world for you and me

Mainland, port, and settlement
Leisurely; also, lively!
Hilly-watery-sunny-sandy ...
Solidly standing with buildings
Majestic and modernist
Commercial and residential properties
Alongside humble mid-rise and low-rise places

We, its people: Local-ish—an inrush from near
and glob-ish—an influx from abroad
Of assorted ages and races
A unique and fascinating blend
Its history: Valued 'cos we know the worth
Newness in deals, programmes, events...
All studied with care before Penang acts to host
Thus, earning UNESCO's listing:
George Town, Penang ~ A World Heritage Site
Whoa! A heraldry we happily toast and boast

Our relationship with the isle as Penangites
may at times seem fragile ... but not fractured

Hark! The quietly continuing call of the isle:
Unite; keep it whole; with love—ignite!
Engage from an inner sense of belonging and caring
Make little worthy acts to mark our beloved isle's thriving

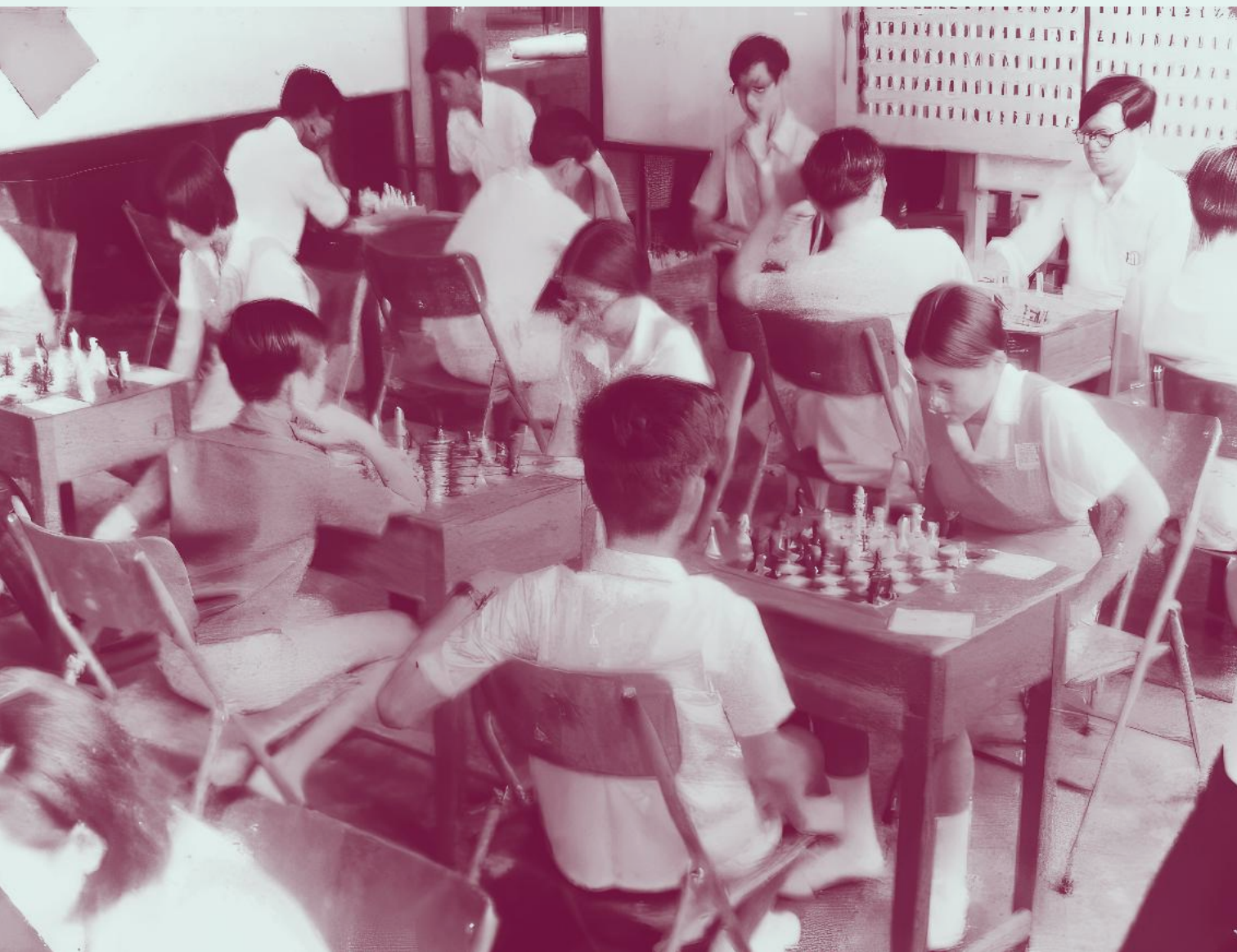
In truth: Our core bears the non-erasable Penang stamp
As is often said: *You can take a person out of Penang*
But not Penang out of the person

Calling all Penangites: Let's keep adding shine and charm
To our prized Pearl of the Orient.

FARSIGHTED ORGANISATION BEHIND PENANG'S PROWESS IN CHESS COMPETITIONS

BY **QUAH SENG SUN**

IF SUCCESS IS measured in titles, then Penangites have a reputation for prowess in chess. The state can proudly point to its roll of International Masters, FIDE Masters and Candidate Masters, all titles bestowed by the World Chess Federation (FIDE). Their ranks are growing with each passing generation. But Penang's chess story is not just told through 64 squares and 32 pieces. It is also about the generations of students, teachers and enthusiasts who have transformed the game into one of the state's most vibrant youth activities. What began with scattered school clubs and occasional competitions almost a century ago has evolved into a thriving ecosystem supported by schools, parents, coaches and volunteers—one which has always had students at its core.



DISSOLVED CHESS BODY HANDS OVER TROPHIES



R. TAN YAM SAN (second from left) after presenting the Penang Schools Chess Council trophies to Mr. Fang Ewe Churh (second from right), Mr. Quah Seng Sun (left) and Mr. Khoo Chuan Keat (right) are representatives of the Council.

2

THE BIRTH OF SCHOOL CHESS

The earliest traces of organised gameplay in Penang are difficult to pinpoint, but the Penang Free School magazine provides a starting point. Throughout the 1930s, chess matches were reported in a way that suggested scattered pockets of enthusiasm among students. During the Japanese Occupation, however, organised chess largely vanished from public view. Following the war, it gradually re-emerged, but only in 1964 did student chess establish a significant presence. A major catalyst was the Penang Schools Students' Chess Council, which was formed by leading school chess clubs to organise annual competitions among themselves. No longer confined to individual institutions, students had a platform upon which to compete against peers from other schools, creating rivalries, friendships and also a growing sense of community in the process.

Although the Council played a pioneering role, a more comprehensive organisational framework was necessary to institutionalise the game. In the pivotal year of 1972, the Council voluntarily dissolved itself following the establishment of the Penang Chess Association, which assumed responsibility for the game's state-wide development and administration (as well as keeping the trophies accumulated by the erstwhile Council). That year also saw the introduction of the first team chess championship under Majlis Sukan Sekolah-sekolah Pulau Pinang (MSSPP, Penang Schools Sports Council) at Han Chiang Primary School; an individual championship was introduced the following year. Finally, in December 1972, Majlis Sukan Sekolah-sekolah Malaysia (MSSM, Malaysia School Sports Council) organised its inaugural team chess championship at Dewan Sri Pinang, officiated by then-education minister, Hussein Onn. Four players represented Penang in this event, which marked the beginning of national-level school chess competitions. It sent a clear signal that chess was now recognised as a legitimate school sport.

These competitions provided a regular, structured and enduring pathway for student participation and talent development. Even when the MSSM chess competition was suspended after the 1997 edition, being a casualty of the Asian Financial Crisis, Penang continued organising MSSPP championships uninterrupted, ensuring that young players continued having opportunities to compete and develop.



[C]hess is a story of students who have embraced the game, and who ensure that it remains not merely a pastime from an earlier era, but a relevant activity for the 21st century."

A GENERATIONAL DIVIDE?

Despite these advances, chess remained widely perceived as a game for adults as reflected in the demographics of competitive chess circles. When the Malaysian Chess Federation (established 1974) organised its first National Closed Championship that same year, none of the Penang Chess Association's representatives were students. These youths remained in school competitions, while the strongest state representatives were generally expected to be adults.

Although this distinction persisted for many years, the foundations laid by the MSSPP were quietly producing results. In the 1970s and 1980s, students gained tournament experience and developed stronger competitive skills at increasingly younger ages. By the 1990s, student players had the strength and confidence to compete successfully against experienced adults. When the Penang Chess Association selected teams for major events, such as the Merdeka Team Chess Championships, talented students increasingly found themselves earning places on the senior team through merit.



3

Since then, the student-adult balance has shifted decisively. Today, it is normal for student players to dominate Penang's (and Malaysia's) chess scene. In most open tournaments, students typically make up around 75% of the field. A thriving calendar of junior tournaments encompassing various age cohorts ensures a steady stream of opportunities for young players to develop skills and gain competitive experience.

Fascinatingly, the growing presence of young people in chess circles persists despite the dominance of smartphones, social media and digital entertainment, all of which foster fragmented attention spans. For many youths, chess appears to offer something that the online world does not: a reward for sustained focus and careful thought. Competitions themselves provide experiences that cannot be replicated entirely through screens: students travel to tournaments within and beyond Penang, meet friends from other schools, test their skills against unfamiliar opponents and cope with victory and defeat. Friendships are formed, rivalries emerge and memories are created across tournament halls.

This growth did not happen by accident. Many students who took up chess in the 1970s–90s have since become parents themselves. Having experienced the game's benefits first-hand, they introduced it to their own children. It is not uncommon to see parents waiting outside tournament halls for their children to finish playing. Occasionally, coaches are present to provide immediate post-match failure analysis.



CAPTIONS

1. (Cover photo) The first MSSPP team chess tournament at Han Chiang Primary School in 1972.
2. The pioneering Penang Schools Students' Chess Council wound up in 1972, and handed over its trophies to the Penang Chess Association to ensure continuity.
3. Parental support is vital for the game to grow, and it is not uncommon to see parents waiting outside tournament halls.
4. The Penang Chess Association's annual Penang Chess Festival.
5. The Penang Chess Association marked its 50th anniversary during the Penang Chess Festival's 2022 edition. See Swee Sie (far left), the incumbent president, stands with former president Dr Choong Sim Poey (second from right), who is chatting with Akhramsyah Muammar Ubaidah Sanusi (right), president of the Malaysian Chess Federation. This writer is listening in.

4

As a result of the game's re-emerging popularity, chess clinics and coaching programmes mushroomed nationwide, where experienced adult players become coaches, either on a part-time or full-time basis. Initially, coaching was logistically constrained. Coaches often travelled between students' homes, limiting the number of children whom they could reach. But with the Covid-19 pandemic lockdowns, online coaching quickly became practical, and even unexpectedly advantageous. Coaches could teach larger groups simultaneously without spending hours on the road, while students could attend lessons from the comfort of home. Online platforms allowed students to play, learn and analyse games at any time of the day. Coaching became more accessible and competitive opportunities multiplied. Further, a timely popular culture boost—Netflix's *The Queen's Gambit* series—introduced the game to a worldwide captive audience. For perhaps the first time in generations, chess became fashionable. Across Malaysia, tournament participation increased, coaching programmes expanded and a new generation of young players emerged.

Rather than being overwhelmed by the digital revolution, chess has adapted strategically. If anything, the game's ability to cultivate focus, patience and thoughtful decision-making would explain why it continues to attract young players.



5

LESSONS BEYOND THE CHESSBOARD

Despite technological changes, the essence of chess still revolves around two players sitting across from one another, each attempting to outthink the other. Beyond mental discipline, chess develops pattern-recognition and structures thinking ability. Students learn to identify recurring ideas and anticipate likely outcomes. Their decision-making ability under uncertainty is strengthened, where they learn to weigh imperfect options and accept that every choice involves trade-offs.

The game also nurtures calculated patience and delayed gratification. Students learn that short-term sacrifices can lead to long-term rewards. Working memory and concentration are strengthened when players hold multiple possibilities in mind while planning ahead. Every defeat becomes an opportunity for failure analysis. Chess also promotes creativity within constraints, with players constantly challenged to discover original solutions within a structured framework. This skill transfers naturally into many professional and academic fields. Equally important are social and emotional lessons. Learning to remain composed after a blunder, manage time pressures and display good sportsmanship contribute to emotional resilience.

Today, chess in Penang continues to be organised and regulated by the Penang Chess Association, which is among the relatively small number of sporting organisations classified as Category One—the highest—by Majlis Sukan Negeri Pulau Pinang (Penang State Sports Council). Since the mid-2000s, this Association has organised its annual year-end flagship Penang Chess Festival, which continues to attract hundreds of players from across Malaysia and neighbouring countries. Such recognition reflects the breadth and consistency of its activities, both nationally and internationally.

Above all, chess is a story of students who have embraced the game, and who ensure that it remains not merely a pastime from an earlier era, but a relevant activity for the 21st century.



QUAH SENG SUN

is a Penang-based writer and former chess columnist for *The Star*. A founding member of the Penang Chess Association and the Dr Wu Lien-Teh Society, he has authored several publications on chess, heritage and local history.

LIVING

OF KNOWLEDGE, MEMORIES AND THINGS

BY
**ONG
SIOU
WOON**

HAVE YOU EVER found anyone without a collection? I find it difficult to do so. Even at home, my two sons, aged twelve and four, have collections that they would like to call their own. For starters, one has a series of toy cars of all sizes, while the other has toy military trucks lined up along every corner of their room. There is also a collection of comic books that one hopes the other never touches. A collection thus takes many forms, being a group of objects, ideas or almost anything else, really. A collection of objects can be assembled as a hobby for personal interest, as an investment opportunity or for further research. But what does a collection mean over the different stages of one's lifetime?



IS COLLECTING





1

THE HUMAN NEED TO COLLECT

Since I am much older than my sons, I have more collections than they do, but these do not necessarily impress them. Pretty much every former primary classmate of mine had at least one stamp album, so we could exchange stamps or show off to each other. And we had cassette albums by specific artists—not so much CDs, because those were a lot more expensive and difficult to get, growing up as we did in a small town in northern Johor. My sons have no idea what these are. I believe that at one point, I had yarn of different colours, bought from the local handicraft store for a crochet project. I have a small collection of favourite anime merchandise sitting in one corner of my house, which my spouse claims is now collecting dust and doing nothing else. Not to forget the ever-nostalgic McDonald's Happy Meal toys, which caused long weekly queues of buyers attempting to collect Snoopy toys dressed in different countries' costumes. During a recent spring cleaning exercise, I found my parents' old collection of coins and notes sitting in a corner that nobody ever thought of touching. A treasure to one, an unimaginable waste of money and effort to the other.

My bigger question is this: why does one start collecting? And why continue or

stop doing so? A quick search on this topic found a lot of studies asking why exactly we collect things. Other than humans, many other animals engage in collecting, like penguins with their rocks and pebbles. Is the desire to possess stuff simply human, or is there another explanation?

Collecting is, by nature, a fairly leisurely pursuit today. But in a prehistoric environment, having the ability to collect and store items was presumably crucial to survival. Early hunter-gatherers would have foraged, hunted and collected food to ensure their survival through unsuccessful hunts. With food stocked up, they could probably spend time making and storing weapons and tools, firewood and flint and the like, for survival. Times may have changed, but the urge to collect has not disappeared. Indeed, we have expanded the range of things that can be collected today. After the essentials come collectibles, which are needed for flexing. Meanwhile, a recent study from the Eller College of Management at the University of Arizona suggests that collecting is driven by the desire for control. There is a psychological need to manage one's environment, especially during chaotic times. The urge to complete a collection is strong among

those who score highly in their desire for control. This simply means that such individuals have a higher likelihood of spending more money or time to try expanding their collections.

The Happy Meals have long been part of a business strategy that, among other things, exploits such desires and is cleverly deployed to build a returning customer base. As part of a 2014 strategic marketing campaign, McDonald's was celebrating its 1955 deal with Coca-Cola, and released a recurring promotion featuring giveaways of collectible Coca-Cola glasses. It claimed that consumers in the Asia-Pacific region alone had collected close to 200 million glasses in various designs by November 2014 (such as the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games contour glasses, the 2010 FIFA World Cup model and the 2011 model shaped like a Coca-Cola can). It is understandable that its upfront sales were not small. The secondary market for these collectible glasses, surprisingly, was equally impressive. On eBay, one of these glasses with its packaging intact can cost up to USD8.75 (approx. RM36), excluding shipping charges. For comparison, a Value Meal, which includes the latest collectible cup, only costs onwards of RM18.95.



Every collector and collection are part of distinct industries, each with their own ecosystems and market value. ... How ‘complete’ a collection ends up becoming determines its market value.”



4

THE BOOMING COLLECTIBLES MARKET

These fast-food chain collectibles are only part of many types one finds on the billion-dollar global collectibles market, which includes art and antiques, trading cards and memorabilia, and more. Every collector and collection are part of distinct industries, each with their own ecosystems and market value. You cannot stop the market from capitalising on collectors’ behaviours, and neither can you stop collectors from willingly “investing” in their collections. How “complete” a collection ends up becoming determines its market value.

Collectible toys are probably one of the most common items that one finds worldwide, given their accessibility and appeal to a wide range of age groups. The value of this market alone was estimated at USD24.9bil in 2024, and projected to reach USD40.2bil by 2030. I guess this is not impossible. Driven by popular culture memorabilia and popular franchises like Star Wars, Marvel and Harry Potter, as well as manga titles such as One Piece, Dragon Ball and Gundam, they take diverse forms: action figures, plush toys, LEGO sets, card games, keyboards, computer mice, charms and apparel. The list goes on.

Another collectible wonder that many fail to notice is the anime merchandising market, which is expanding at a compound annual growth rate of roughly 9.5%. Valued at USD13.2bil in 2026, as reported by Fortune Business Insights, it monetises anime intellectual properties through sales of consumer products, including collectibles and beyond. The long-running One Piece—

first serialised as a manga in July 1997 in Japan, with the anime on air since October 1999—is one of the largest anchors of the anime merchandise economy. Its total lifetime revenue is estimated to be reaching USD30bil today, not including the value of counterfeited products. With the rise of online communities, access to digital platforms and the availability of digital marketplaces for authenticated/licensed collectibles, purchasing and trading these objects grows easier. In addition to social media flexing and a “fear of missing out” (colloquially, “FOMO”), One Piece collectibles have become a trend not to be missed among its original, and possibly extended, fan base.

Another example of trending collectibles in this region is Pop Mart’s Labubu figures, popularised by BLACKPINK’s Lisa and sold in blind boxes. “Unboxing” these boxes became a social media trend that has not stopped since. At least 100 million units were reportedly sold worldwide in 2025. On that note, a blind-buying antique or art collector is totally unimaginable, but it is totally acceptable for collectors to buy untreated, uncut stones blind. Who would have thought that the original blind-buying concept from Japan, which first took the form of coin-operated gashapon (also spelled gachapon) capsule machines in 1965, would evolve into today’s blind box frenzy (see “Of Blind Boxes and Trading Cards”, in this issue)?



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THE AFTERLIFE OF A COLLECTION

Whether a collectible is an investment or is just collecting dust in one corner, one thing is certain. Not every collection is necessarily curated, but many may incur significant investments in cost and time. These may be worth being displayed in art galleries, are pursued by private collectors, be used as materials for studies and research or get kept in museums for others to peek at. Whichever is the case, they signal their collector's dedication. It requires careful thought, planning and passion—if not grit as well—to see through a curated collection. With such collections, the possibilities are endless.

Some collections are so rare that they end up needing protection at national museums or galleries. But not all curated collections are rare, and they do not necessarily end up that way. When an item is widely available, like Labubu or One Piece merchandise, we may very well see galleries numbering in their hundreds, including those run from home, each easily exhibiting the same sets given the millions of collectibles sold each year.

But one type of curated collection often falls through the cracks in this discussion, going unnoticed, underappreciated, undervalued or unacknowledged. That is the dedicated and passionate scholar's collection. By chance, thanks to the work that I was involved in when I was with Penang Institute, word of the book collection once belonging to the late academician and writer, Ghulam-Sarwar Yousof, reached Pan Yi Chieh, Penang Studies Resource Centre's chief collections curator, in 2023. We were asked if we would like to house Prof. Ghulam's impressive collection. It included more than books: there were also recordings, masks and cultural collections tracing how regional folklore was transformed into, or became the inspiration for, traditional performing arts. He used this collection to develop teaching materials, and continued building it even after his retirement. Through his collection, it was as though we were peeking into his world, where he sought to understand and appreciate regional cultural heritage. We could see the effort that he had poured into growing his collection to this point, but it was sad to see it being broken into several segments by different institutions could house them.

The most meaningful way of keeping and honouring any book collection is by keeping it intact, because researchers in the same field will benefit greatly from having a specially curated set of publications in print (and in Ghulam's collection's case, also in audiovisual form). However, the number of libraries housing physical books is shrinking. One difficulty in getting a book collection sorted is having sufficient space. Keeping books in good condition is another costly endeavour. Ensuring low humidity and keeping pests in check is a must, or else you feed a sea of knowledge to termites and silverfish instead. Therefore, some libraries have begun digitising their records. Wawasan Open University is one of the many institutions which transformed their physical libraries into digital-only form. We now have a public library without a single book on its shelves, namely the Penang Digital Library. Besides that, the number of libraries in Malaysia is decreasing as well. From 3,002 physical library facilities in 2019, there were only 2,654 left in 2023. It is an uphill task for anyone, or any institution, to house an extensive collection intact.



The afterlife of a collection is one which most collectors do not consider. After all, in the thrill of collecting, what happens to the collection when they are gone is easily forgotten."

Earlier this year, Michelle Grimsly, the owner of Spiral Synergy Sdn. Bhd., was allowed by Penang Institute to process the sale of a massive collection of textiles belonging to the late Kim Saunders. The collection was more than just fabric: it included weaving tools, books, apparel and more, gathered over decades of travelling and collecting in the region. Some fabrics tell the story of a village, while others, including some skirts, are no longer made using traditional weaving techniques. Some were picked up to support artists in the outskirts or rural places, while others were bought simply because they were in the collector's favourite colour. Once again, a carefully curated collection was being broken down into segments.

A conversation with Michelle revealed a more serious pattern among the estates of late collectors. She had started off as an event planner, but slowly started connecting quality items—such as furniture and decorative displays that owners could not bring along when they moved homes—with serious buyers. She also sold off collections, which usually came her way when their collectors passed away and left behind a whole collection to family members who did not share their passion, or were without heirs. Those left with these collections often had no clue what to do with them. This is rarely an issue, however, when collections are small in terms of quantity and volume.

Everyone is a collector. Some collectors are curators as well, whether they view their collections as an investment for monetary gain or extensions of personal identity, reflecting their tastes, histories and values. Some find a sense of structure and completion during chaotic and stressful times, such as the Covid-19 pandemic, through the act of collecting. Others seek dopamine thrills in the pursuit of blind boxes, collect keepsakes out of nostalgia or to connect to a particular past, or just experience FOMO.

Whatever the reason, every collector should consider doing their part by at least thinking about what will happen to their collection(s) when they pass on. The afterlife of a collection is one which most collectors do not consider. After all, in the thrill of collecting, what happens to the collection when they are gone is easily forgotten.

CAPTIONS

1. Stamps cut out from envelopes.
2. The author's parents' collection of old banknotes.
3. The 2011 McDonald's Coca-Cola "can" collectible glasses.
4. Part of the late Kim Saunders's collection: matching traditional loom pulleys.
5. A tie-dyed textile from the Saunders collection.



ONG SIOU WOON
20 years (and counting) in Penang, and more than a decade with Penang Institute—she is a YSEALI alumnus trained in urban planning. She finds learning about nature and food a never-ending journey.

KOE EWE TEIK

THE ORIGINS OF FOOTBALL'S RED- AND YELLOW- CARD SYSTEM

BY
SURESRAJ
THERAMBARAJOO

ZINEDINE ZIDANE'S LEGENDARY footballing career came to its close when he received his infamous red card at the 2006 World Cup. Red and yellow cards need little introduction: they are part of the disciplinary system regulating permissible play and accountability on the pitch.

Before the system became our universal language for footballing accountability, someone, somewhere, had to invent it. He was a Malayan schoolmaster: Koe Ewe Teik. Every time a referee reaches for the cards in their pockets, they are speaking a language born from a former student of Penang Free School.





FROM MIGRANT TO EDUCATOR

In 1912, in the coastal town of Songkhla, Siam, the Koe family knew the unpredictable, violent fortunes of immigrant life. Ewe Teik's father, Wan Toh, had journeyed there from Fujian Province. His mother, Guat Choo, possessed an entrepreneurial spirit but also a weakness for gambling tables. When the family's wealth vanished, young Ewe Teik watched his mother peddle homemade cakes from a sampan, and the family had to survive on rice porridge and fermented tofu.

In 1924, they moved south to Penang. It was not an easy transition. Enrolled in a Chinese school, Ewe Teik was mocked as a "Siamese devil" and forced to fight his way out of corners. Fortunately, his eventual move to the English-medium Penang Free School proved timely. He worked part-time as a clerical assistant just to afford his own clothes and tobacco. Once, while collecting homework in his capacity as class monitor, his metal cigarette case slipped from his pocket and crashed to the floor, spilling its contents under the teacher's stern gaze. He did not panic. Instead, he calmly gathered up his cigarettes, closed the case, and carried on.

By the time he graduated in 1929, he had internalised a code of discipline and resilience. Denied a university education by financial circumstances, he entered the Education Service, serving as a trainee teacher in Batu Pahat. He kept snakes and insects in glass jars to encourage the study of nature, and he would demand that students speak with clarity and correctness. In 1939, the authorities appointed him the first headmaster of the Government English School in Kluang. He was just 26.

He was more than just an administrator, however, and even designed the school's flying fox emblem and motto: "On and Onwards". He cared deeply about the dignity of the young people in his charge. When he saw his boys spending money they did not have on imported hair pomade, he did not issue a ban. Instead, he led them to the tuck-shop, gathered up aluminium pots, and taught them how to manufacture

their own hair cream. In 1941, an inexperienced English doctor sought to transfer him to Johor Bahru for an operation. Ewe Teik, knowing that the journey might kill him, looked the doctor in the eye and commanded him to operate right there. He was the author of his own fate.

THE EMBODIMENT OF RESPONSIBILITY

When the war reached Malaya in 1942, the retreating British authorities handed Ewe Teik the keys to the local food stores. He became the anchor for an extended family of 20, retreating to flimsy shelters in the Mengkibol jungle to escape the horrors of forced labour. Under the Japanese occupation, he managed Ma Tai, a licensed food shop. In the process, he engineered a brilliant system of ropes and finger-loops to maintain orderly queues.

His most courageous act was exercised subtly. He played ping-pong with Japanese officers because he understood that one needed to build bridges to save lives. When a friend of his, See Keng Hong, was marked for execution by hooded informants, Ewe Teik marched into the Kempeitai head-

quarters, pledging his own life as a guarantee of his friend's innocence. In this way, he successfully walked See away from the jaws of death. He navigated various horrors, including a massacre of prominent citizens by Communist insurgents that he narrowly avoided, with collected calm.

When the war ended, he moved his family into a bungalow that had once been used as a Kempeitai torture chamber. Instead of fleeing the ghosts of the past, he threw open the home's doors, hosted dances and let music and laughter reclaim space for the living. He did not simply rest on the laurels of youth; instead, he eventually returned to his alma mater, where he was handpicked to lead the lower school's English department from 1952 to 1954. Recognising that education extended far beyond the classroom, he breathed new life into the School Debating Society to ensure wider participation, all while serving as the school's football coach. In fact, his own son addressed him as "Sir" on the pitch to avoid any hint of favouritism. He also pioneered an Extra Games Programme that built fundamen-



CAPTIONS

1. (Cover photo)
Koe Ewe Teik during his time as a teacher.
2. A family photo.
Ewe Teik is seated in the second row, fifth from the right.
3. Ewe Teik with Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra Al-Haj at an Asian Football Confederation event.
4. FIFA referees at the 5th Merdeka Games (2–13 August 1961). Ewe Teik was the chairman.
5. Ewe Teik visited the Indian football team in India during his time with FIFA.
6. A keepsake photo taken during the Merdeka Football Festival, which Ewe Teik was a part of.



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**MERDEKA FOOTBALL FESTIVAL,
FEDERATION OF MALAYA.
Meeting of National Delegates of Eight Countries at Kuala Lumpur,
5th September, 1957.**



Standing (Left to Right):—Mr. Wang Yuan-Cheng (Malaya), Lt.-Col. Bo Win (Burma), Mr. Huyen-Vu (Vietnam), Mr. Kwak Kin Keng (Malaya), Mr. Koe Ewe Teik (Malaya), Mr. P. H. Galeong (Indonesia) and Maj. Pak Sam An (Cambodia).
Sitting (Left to Right):—Pol. Col. Vichit Rotnabhorn (Thailand), Mr. Soh Ghee Soon (Singapore), Mr. A. J. Hussain (Hongkong), Col. Khin Nya (Burma), Mr. Lim Kee Siong, J.P. (Malaya), Mr. Chuop Hell (Cambodia), Tuan Abdul Wahab Djelohadikusuma (Indonesia), Mr. Tran-Van-Ngoc (Vietnam) and Mr. Lee Wai Tong (Asian Football Confederation).

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tal athletic skills for everyone. In 1957, he took on the role of registrar-bursar at the Malayan Teachers' College. He fought for those without a voice, establishing a Youth Club for disadvantaged children and building a Community Hall for the college's manual laborers.

Throughout his teaching career, he operated on the fundamental belief that one's greatest responsibility was to shape the character and integrity of the next generation. Yet it was through the universal language of football that he would leave his most indelible mark.

AT THE HEIGHT OF GLOBAL FOOTBALL

In 1958, a fateful meeting in Tokyo with the International Association Football Federation (FIFA) president, Stanley Rous, ignited a partnership built upon shared values. This marked Ewe Teik's transition from educator to sporting authority. As former schoolmasters, both men believed that sport was fundamentally about edifying human character, despite the creeping rot of commercialisation. International football was then fraught with linguistic chaos. Matches frequently devolved into confusion because players and referees possessed no common language to communicate with one another. Ewe Teik considered this global problem and offered a solution of breathtaking simplicity, borrowing from the logic of the traffic light. He proposed a colour-coded card system: red for a warning, green for an expulsion. This proposal was refined by the International Football Associations Board—the sport's supreme legislative body—into the yellow-

and red-card system that we know today, which made its global debut in 1966.

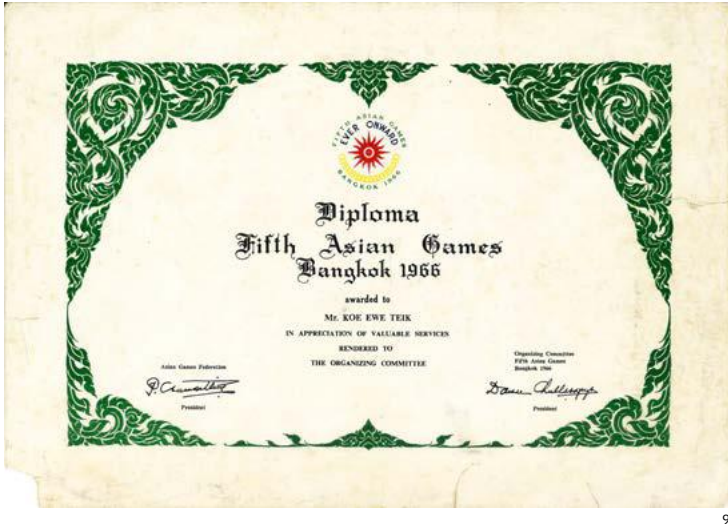
The year before its introduction, Ewe Teik broke a 70-year European monopoly to become the first non-European member of the Board. He served on the FIFA Referees' Committee for 17 unbroken years, eventually rising to the post of deputy chairman. This did not stop him from being completely disinterested in match outcomes, however. During the 1966 World Cup, when the underdog North Korean team took a shock 3–0 lead against Portugal, Ewe Teik went into their locker room at half-time. He urged them to temper their pride, play defensively and secure victory. Such a breach of protocol simply would not pass in contemporary football. But hubris won out. The North Koreans ignored the seasoned master, continued to attack, and lost 5–3. In such ways did Ewe Teik understand the geometry of winning and losing.

In sporting politics, his integrity remained absolute. When the 1974 FIFA presidency election descended into backroom politicking designed to oust Stanley, Ewe Teik was offered "generous incentives" to swing the vote. He rejected them with disgust, refusing to involve himself in such low politics. For him, winning through corrupt means was no victory at all. Decades later, a cynical rumour surfaced from a Russian referee, claiming that Ewe Teik had secured a linesman's appointment in the 1966 World Cup final, in exchange for two jars of caviar. But for those who knew a man who had stared down executioners, the notion that he would sell his honour for fish eggs was laughable.

Ewe Teik retired from the sporting world's stage in 1979 and passed away in 1981. He did not leave behind a political dynasty or massive fortune, but rather, a testament to the quiet, thankless work of keeping the world fair and just, whether on or off the pitch. As an Old Free myself, I consider him the ultimate embodiment of our traditions, and a reminder that true authority does not come from the loudness of a voice, but the weight of character. He was a sower who planted the seeds of organised sport across a continent, and a weaver who bound disparate nations together through shared respect for rules. His legacy continues to flash across the stadiums of the world.



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CAPTIONS

7. FIFA referees at the Third Youth Tournament in Bangkok (April 1961).

8. This photo was published by FIFA, accompanied by well-wishes for Ewe Teik's retirement and thanks for his services that spanned 16 years.

9. Diplomas for the Asian Games are issued to certified team officials for their services in making the Games a success.

10. Ewe Teik with Sir Stanley Rous (FIFA's sixth president, 1961–74, centre) and another FIFA official.

11. Ewe Teik (with hailer) conducting a training session with football referees in Australia.

12. Commemorative photo of the Asian Football Confederation which Ewe Teik was a part of.



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REFERENCE

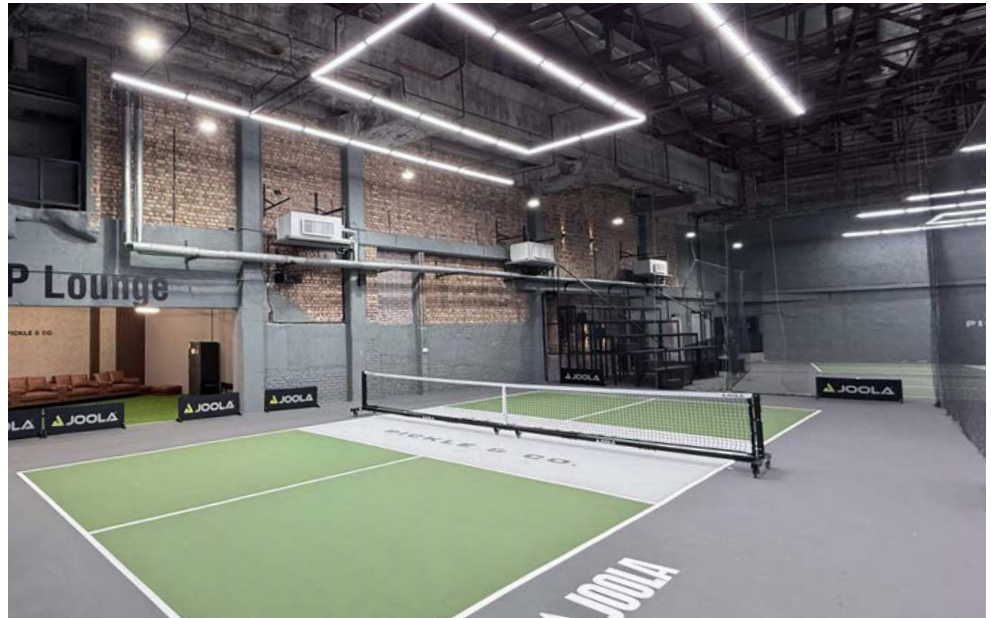
1. Koe, E.J. (2023). *Sower & weaver: The life of a man—Koe Ewe Teik*. Big Aim Resources.



DR. SURESH
THERAMBARAJOO is an educator and strategic policy analyst based in Spain. A curious traveller and avid reader, he values good conversation, shared laughter and the connections that bring people together.



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INSIDE PENANG'S PICKLEBALL BOOM

BY LIANI MK



Of mixed indigenous roots, **LIANI MK** is an independent writer, journalist and artist covering indigenous knowledge, migration, language, film and culture in Southeast Asia. With a background in history and Southeast Asian Studies, she also engages in media advocacy with a regional feminist organisation.

OF THE MANY fitness trends to hit Penang recently, pickleball, a North American racket sport invented in the mid-1960s, has unexpectedly taken hold. Gauging by the number of users of the Dynamic Universal Pickleball Rating (DUPR) system, Malaysians rank third-highest globally, and are also the fastest-growing market.^[1] Penang too is swept up in the sport's growth. Its surprising hosting of the World Pickleball Championship 2026 in April was coupled with the sprouting of new courts across island and mainland alike. From 2021 to 2025, more than 50 venues boasting over 300 courts were established.^[2] The Penang Pickleball Association cites this figure as evidence of how quickly the sport has embedded itself, and entrepreneurs are racing to capitalise accordingly. There are so many venues available; Pickle Lab, G.O.A.T. Pickle Club, Pickle by the Sea and Pickle Pan are among the 50-plus venues present locally.

So, what does it mean to be a player and entrepreneur in this growing sport?

BUILDING BUSINESS AROUND THE BOOM

Part of pickleball's appeal is how easily it is picked up. For 27-year-old Abdul Hakim M. Roslan, it offers an appealing mix of familiarity and newness. "It feels a lot more forgiving and easier to adapt to and learn," he said. Such factors matter for new sports, and pickleball shares similarities with tennis, badminton and table tennis. Its court dimensions borrow loosely from badminton doubles (20 by 44 ft) and its net height from tennis, yet it still has a unique feel. The solid paddles and perforated plastic ball offer a distinct tactile difference, while the presence of a non-volley zone encourages more delicate non-aggressive play closer to the net.

Timing also matters. When the Covid-19 pandemic lockdowns were lifted, people were hungry for something social, active and easy to try out. Pickleball offered an easy-to-follow format, as well as sociable and energetic movement without any prior training.

However, the sport has had to shake off a class perception. Its early association with "upper-class" tennis left it with a tinge of exclusivity, but this is changing, partly because of how cheaply facilities can be set up. Unlike in the US, where existing tennis courts are repurposed, Malaysian entrepreneurs have largely built dedicated facilities from scratch. Hakim notes how relatively easily and cheaply unused industrial space can be converted into courts, which keeps entry costs and barriers to accessibility down. "It's at least good for the growth of the sport, for changing the perspective that pickleball is only a so-called influential or rich man's game, to a proper sport that remains physically [good for] health," he said.

Then there are the entrepreneurs. Contractor Choo Wei Jin's path into this business was not planned. He started by helping clients set up their own pickleball venues, before getting hooked on the game himself. After trying mixed martial arts, badminton and basketball, pickleball offered him something unique: intensity without total exhaustion. "It is fast-paced, and at the same time, you are not too tired and can continue to play for several games," he said. "It's a good way to keep healthy, and it's not as simple as you think."

Thus Pickle & Co., the busy venue that Wei Jin co-owns with his wife, elder brother and sister-in-law, began operating in KOMTAR last December. Having surveyed the market, he offered a court with high-grade surface material, which he considers essential to how the game actually feels underfoot. This level of technical attention says as much about the maturity of the local scene as it does about his own standards. Notably, there is a wide age range of players present, ranging from those aged five to players in their 60s–70s. Some of them even return multiple times weekly. Running in-house coaching sessions—and even a full-day clinic with the US professional player, Will Shaffer—keeps newer players engaged past the initial learning curve. “For a lot of beginners, the breakthrough is the first two weeks. Once you are able to love the game in the first two weeks, you will definitely be addicted to it in the long run,” Wei Jin said, laughing.

THE SOCIAL PUSH BEHIND THE GROWTH

When asked why the sport has caught on so fast in Penang, enthusiasts keep circling back to the community, rather than just the sport itself. Wei Jin is direct about this point. “If you play with your friends only, you might, at one stage, feel that you cannot progress [since you are] playing with the same persons. So you start looking to play with other players.” Despite the competition, he noted that: “players are happy and love playing with each other. They tend to come back and invite more friends.”

Partaking in friendly interclub matches or social games, which typically cost around RM30–35 each, is a core element of what keeps players returning. Players accumulate points in teams, rather than as individuals, thus striking a balance between playfulness and competitiveness. “We get very good feedback. Players are able to play matches with other clubs, and it’s not too overly competitive because teams can accumulate overall points that they win together. It’s a friendly match, so it’s very good for the community,” Wei Jin noted.

Booking applications like Reclub and Sports We Play sustain this social infrastructure by also letting players find games, reserve court time and connect with other enthusiasts without relying on word-of-mouth alone. The result is a scene where competitive intensity and social warmth coexist. “You can see that intermediate games are always full,” Wei Jin said. “Even beginners come and play with intermediates to improve their games.” Players fight hard for every point, yet become friends again once the game ends.

For Hakim, this social dimension is one of the sport’s biggest unexpected rewards. Having already played in nine tournaments, he regularly seeks out different courts, specifically to test himself against stronger players. “That’s the best part. You have the opportunity to connect with a lot of people,” he reflected.

A GOOD VERSUS A GREAT COURT

Court quality, particularly flooring, has become a genuine differentiator in this crowded market. Wei Jin prides himself on Pickle & Co.’s quality surfaces, and Hakim agrees that these make a noticeable difference in comfort and play quality.

Location and lighting matter too. Hakim pays close attention to a facility’s overall setup, such as accessibility and how well it handles daytime glare.



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CAPTIONS

1. Choo Wei Jin, co-owner of Pickle & Co Penang. Photo courtesy of Choo Wei Jin.

2. The pickleball courts in Pickle & Co. Photo courtesy of Choo Wei Jin.

3. From seaside spots and mall rooftops to historic heritage sites, entrepreneurs are turning vacant venues into pickleball courts. This is one of the courts at Pickle by the Sea, located on the newly reclaimed land along Gurney Drive.

ENDNOTES

1. DUPR. (2025, April 24). DUPR Powers Malaysia’s Alliance Bank KL Open Pickleball Championship 2025. This system assesses global pickleball skills and ratings to track players’ rankings worldwide.

2. Lo, T.C. (2025, Dec 3). Pickleball fun hits Penang courts. *The Star*.

3. *The Star*. (2024, Nov 15). Pickleball to be introduced at Sukma 2026, says Selangor MB.

Meanwhile, gear—whether paddle technology, court shoes and even sun-conscious apparel—has become its own small ecosystem within the sport’s growth. “Pickleball is evolving every day, and so, gear matters very much. Manufacturers are coming with new paddles and different technology,” Hakim said. He has even started using tennis shoes on court, driven partly by advice from his playing partner.

Despite the competition, Wei Jin describes it as constructive rather than cut-throat. “There are new courts all the time,” he said with excitement, seeing them as a sign of a healthy, expanding market. Part of what keeps matters civil is how Penang’s pickleball business community is small and tightly connected. “[C]oincidentally, I know the owners as well [...] We are very open and do not do price wars to kill off anyone’s business. So everyone agrees on good terms.”

This notably cooperative posture suggests that operators see the sport’s overall growth as being more valuable than any single venue’s short-term advantage. But this does not mean that business is easy. Rental costs remain the biggest pressure point for operators, particularly for indoor air-conditioned venues built on premium flooring. Ultimately, Wei Jin believes that quality and reputation, and not price, are what will separate venues that last from those that do not.

For now, there is still room for optimism. Pickleball’s momentum in Penang and Malaysia shows little sign of slowing. There are already plans to include the sport in the 2026 Malaysia Games (Sukma), which would legitimise pickleball as a competitive discipline.^[3]

Reflecting on his first year in the sport, Hakim noted that it is now seen as “a proper sport that remains physically challenging and healthy”. The social aspect, which includes playing matches with people of different races, languages and cultural backgrounds, matters too. “It really gave me a reason to go out a lot more and be more active. And it surprises me that it’s very accessible, with many courts popping up.”

To anyone sitting on the fence about the sport, Hakim’s advice is simple. “Give pickleball a shot. Because you will never know, you may change your perspective,” he said firmly, before inviting me to try.

BETWEEN DREAM



AND



RESPONSIBILITY

BY CAMERON TJOE

**CALEB GOH
AND
THE NAM HOE,
SETAPAK**

THE SHRILL RING of a vintage doorbell fills the corridor before a small crack in the front door emerges, and Caleb Goh Hern-Ee invites me in. *Penang Monthly* is here to explore the collection of music, books and media artifacts within. These are the fruits of a personal journey into preserving the memory of how Malay(si)ans used to live. We join Caleb at his latest project—his flat, the Nam Hoe, Setapak, in Kuala Lumpur—a labour of love, toil and self-discovery nine years in the making.



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A MUAR BOYHOOD

"I'm in so much debt, I'll never have financial security," Caleb joked, partly to stave off the realisation that his beautiful post-war home has cost much more than what is appreciable at first glance. Yet it is impossible not to admire his Setapak flat, which has been home since 2025. "Dating it is hard, but from the research I've done, the building was built anytime between 1948 and 1953. It's one of only four examples of art deco townhouses in Kuala Lumpur. They didn't build them for that long, and the rest were all torn down."

Indeed, much of Malay(si)a's physical past is frequently left forgotten, replaced by all that is "modern". "I didn't want to live in boxes in the sky," Caleb explained. Thus, the refurbished flat, in both form and function, attempts to accurately represent the grounded, mid-century pursuit of a better life, while engaging with built heritage. When one first steps foot



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of material history could bloom. "My flat became a set, and the guests that would pop by were the audience. Jeffrey lived in the flat next to mine and he had, shall we say, eclectic visitors who would come and go." This "happy, unintended consequence" made what he called the Nam Hoe, Brickfields a "proof of concept. It showed that I didn't have to be a Penang millionaire, spending billions of dollars to renovate a shophouse and cover it in lace, gold and velvet." His intention seeps through every piece of the flat, making the Nam Hoe feel truly human. What emerges is a tasteful aspirational home, rather than a heritage-themed attraction. Here, a deeply human sense of awe emerges as one flips gingerly through historic books or gazes at the photos of long-forgotten families now on display.



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into the flat, their first impression is visceral: of laidback, peaceful domesticity, devoid of pomp or grandeur. It appeals to a warmer, more comforting human desire for a home truly fit for purpose.

Although prone to distraction, there is always a sparkle in Caleb's eyes, whether talking about video games or morning joggers. Born and bred in Muar, Caleb's earliest influences revolve around the very first Nam Hoe: his grandmother's shophouse in town. "My family returned the shophouse to the landlord in 2006, but it's definitely been an influence on the homes I've had since. I've always tried to recreate *that* shophouse: the way she lived."

A lawyer by profession and a former Penang Institute intern, this process of re-creation began when he moved to Kuala Lumpur at 23. A chance meeting with Jeffrey JC Lim of Kanta Studio led to his first shophouse flat in Brickfields in 2021, where he created a home and space where his love

FROM COLLECTION TO "GUERRILLA ARCHIVE"

"This is a modern home, not a museum. I have all the creature comforts. I have hot water, I have wi-fi, I have air-conditioning. Maybe I'll get a washing machine, if I feel like it", Caleb said. He further explained: "What you see are 'two components'. One's the house and the other is the 'archive'. They're two separate things even if they occupy the same space and serve the same function. The 'archive' is just a collection of media. It's basically data storage: photographs, books and records."

The "archive" sprawls across multiple rooms, from the den to the library and bedroom. From old photos in bento boxes to first editions of Dickens and rare *kron-cong* records, his efforts derive from both a passion for owning and preserving what he holds dear, along with a sense of social responsibility for preserving what is at risk of disappearing. "Collectors go for the

[records] from Shanghai or Hong Kong, but I don't think it's our duty to preserve those. I want to look after the early recorded sounds of Malaya that are in danger of disappearing."

As the strains of "玫瑰玫瑰我愛你" *Rose, Rose, I Love You* played from an original Malayan 78rpm recording on the turntable, he revealed: "I used to be way more gung-ho about records! Friends would phone up and say, 'Eh Caleb, someone just passed away in Kuala Pilah and they had tonnes of old opera records.' And I'd drive down in the dead of night just so I could beat the other collectors and still return to KL in time to turn up for work at 9am the next day."

Caleb associates his practice with the wider "guerilla archiving" movement, consisting of people who "aren't proper historians or archivists, they just like specific topics and 'archive' in an amateurish way. I guess that's me. I'm not a historian, I'm not an archivist, I'm not even home most of the time." Regardless, he has never shied away from allowing his collection to be at the service of others. "If somebody comes to me and says, 'Caleb, I am doing illustrations for a historical novel and I want to know the difference between women's saree styles from 1950 to 1970,' I would say, 'well, come in, this section of my archive is mainly Indian families, knock yourself out.'"

A MALAY(SI)AN VISION

"What I do is nothing more than 'a preservation of the memory of how we used to live,'" he humbly described. Sparse as this sentiment may be, his work recollects a sense of a more hopeful and peaceful past. "The Malaysia I want to preserve still exists, [...] It's the Muar of my upbringing, the Malaysia of my childhood. In the 1990s and 2000s, when I grew up, there were still snatches of the old Malaysia hanging on. There were



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shophouses in Muar where the interior looked like it was still 1955. They're all gone now. I know it's a vanishing world, so is it worth preserving?"

His ultimate vision, couched in the experiences of creating his home and making new friends throughout his journey, crystallised in this declaration. "I want to start a movement," he mused, although a potential name or manifesto escaped him. "I want to find likeminded people"—not wealthy collectors—"who'd want to do something similar and then I can guide them." He supposed that if there were ordinary people who, like him, believe in the "beautiful living" of past years, particularly the commitment to aesthetics and philosophy, then he could inspire them to get involved. That revelation carries with it a sincere desire to continue what the past has given us, and to ensure that those who will ultimately leave this world can help shape what will be inherited by those to come.

"I know that I don't have the experience or education to be a professional historian. That used to bother me, but it doesn't anymore. A lot of people, amateur and proper historians alike, believe that they need to preserve history from an Other. We're not in danger of being obliterated, we're in danger of people not caring. If, along the way, what I do helps people care more, then that's a happy unexpected result."

***Note:** Learn more about Caleb's work at the Instagram handle @thecollectorofworlds.

CAPTIONS

1. (Left cover photo) The *unfinished* library, whose armchair is a beloved piece of his Muar family home. An illustration of the original Nam Hoe in Muar, created by Lim Guo Jing (@guo.lim), is seen in the top-left.
2. (Right cover photo) A now-functional 111-year-old Malayan business typewriter, a piece of industrial history that injured two of Caleb's fingers during restoration.
3. The clock seen in the upper-left corner was the first he ever learned to repair, taken from an abandoned shop in Muar at 12.
4. The "archive" in action: historical wedding photos, a HMV 31A gramophone exported to colonial markets, a Gustav Becker clock. Photo courtesy of Lim Guo Jing.
5. Caleb's kitchen, the airiest part of the flat, sees adorable intruders: the neighbour's kittens.
6. Caleb's beautiful and supremely comfortable den, where he relaxes

after work with an old book from his library or just scrolling through Facebook.

7. Caleb in the Nam Hoe's storeroom, surrounded by his many pieces of history.

8. Some of Caleb's smaller, personal pieces include a pocket watch that he is fixing and a rangefinder camera.

9. Among the many photographs in Caleb's collection, a few are taken from his own family's collection. These include his parents and grandparents, as well as himself as an infant.



CAMERON TJOE is a reluctant storyteller, drawn to lived experiences and the voices of ordinary persons. The stories he tells are available online at @TreeAndPlants on X (formerly Twitter), Instagram, YouTube and Substack.



REVISITING LIM KEAN SIEW'S EXPERIMENT WITH CHINESE YIXING TEAPOTS

BY NURUL NATASHA AMIR

TODAY'S COLLECTOR CULTURE is largely driven by thrill, such as chasing after blind boxes and limited drops, or simply out of “fear of missing out” otherwise. Others may collect items as keepsakes or to pass these down to future generations. However, the reason why the late Penang lawyer and politician, Lim Kean Siew, began his collection of Chinese Yixing teapots is entirely different. Believe it or not, the only reason why he started collecting them was because of his curiosity about how Yixing (or Zisha) purple clay enhances tea preparation. This article introduces the finer details of Lim’s little-known work, as discussed in his book, *The Beauty of Chinese Yixing Teapots & The Finer Art of Tea Drinking*.^[1]

“... THE FINER ART OF TEA DRINKING”

It is funny to think that a man who ended up writing a book on Yixing teapots actually started out as a total sceptic. In fact, Lim’s interest in these vessels came about entirely by accident. As a student of ceramics with a fascination for Chinese porcelain, he was initially never impressed by naked Yixing teapots. Looking at their raw, unglazed surfaces, he assumed that they had been unceremoniously relegated to the kitchen with other unglazed earthenware after the advent of the Ming Dynasty, only to be further obscured by the elaborate, multicoloured Qing porcelain wares. Ming potters had “copied” the designs of the Yixing teapots but glazed them, a trend which then continued during the Qing period. As such, Lim assumed that unglazed teapots had long gone out of fashion.

Furthermore, he did not even realise that there was an art to drinking tea until he was old enough to be introduced to his father’s business friends. Watching them drink out of tiny, unglazed teapots—some of which were decorated, although he did not realise then that the interiors were not glazed—Lim privately thought of this method of drinking tea as being rather effeminate.

His opinion took a major turn one day in 1996, when he visited a friend’s teahouse and saw multiple rows of Yixing teapots on display. Curious, he decided to try the tea served out of one of these pots. Once he did, he knew for sure that there was something incredibly special about Yixing clay. He was intrigued and began asking around, but to his frustration, nobody could really explain why it was special. This mystery sparked his interest in finding out more about the powerful affinity between clay and tea, and so his research began.

THE PURSUIT OF STANDARDS

In order to find out how Yixing teapots became a flourishing art form despite their apparent ordinariness, Lim realised that he would have to conduct his own experiments, using his own teapots. He knew that the teapots needed to achieve proper standards in order to get the best results, and in this respect, he was lucky. The Yixing factories, which were under Mainland Chinese government control, already provided a proper classification system for potters and a proper supply of clay, all within a standardised production system.

Selected trainees were trained in purple clay teapot factories, where they were taught to produce commercial teapots from the factory’s stock of clay. To become masters, they first needed to make the grade, which meant reaching a certain standard of quality and approval. Under this strict system, every potter painstakingly perfected their skill at creating the right type of purple clay, while rigorously trying to obtain a perfect balance in form—between cover and spout, handle and embellishment—until all elements were in symmetry and harmony. This process continued as they slowly climbed the ladder to become masters. Potters were classified according to strict, assured ranks, such as National Grand Master, Grand Master, Senior Craft Master, Craft Master, Assistant Craft Master and Craftsman.

Guided by these standards and distinctions, Lim curated his teapot collection to only include those made by the Purple Clay Factory (or the First Factory), which possessed the best potters, trainees and qualities. By the time he was done, Lim’s personal collection had grown to include over 60 of the factory’s teapots, ranging from the cheapest to the most expensive varieties. It also covered most of the accepted “lines” of teapot design, including square forms, geometric designs and pieces made using the appliqué technique. There were



two prized ones which had belonged to the legendary Gu Jingzhou, the factory's master craftsman. Moreover, Lim had specifically collected teapots in a whole range of colours to test if this was a relevant variable.

Lim's systematically assembled personal collection was not only necessary to record his findings, but also to serve as a physical benchmark for others who wanted to verify the results that he claimed. Lim's reasoning for conducting an experiment in tea-tasting was as follows.

"Under such a stringent system the standards are assured. Since it was my intention to use my own teapots for tests, it was important that I standardise my collection and ensure a proper representation so that my tests would adequately cover a good range."

LET THE TESTS BEGIN

With his collection standardised, Lim conducted ten distinct tests across a spectrum of chosen teas: Green Queshe (Sparrow's tongue), Huangshan Mao Feng (Yellow Mountain), Longjing, Tie Guanyin, Huangjin Gui, Baimao Hou, Dancong, the famous Da Hongpao, the Wuyi teas (Rougui, Tie Luohan, Shuijin Gui, Bantian Yao, Jin Suoshi, Bujian Tian, Bai Jiguan, Da Hongmei, Buzhi Chun), Qianli Xiang, Shuixian as well as high-quality Beidou Yihao and Pu'er.

His initial findings completely shattered several long-held myths among the tea community. For his first test, Lim used an autumn Tie Guanyin tea, using a red clay teapot as his reference. He observed that the tea's natural oils actively brought out a richer colour from the teapot and a beautiful shine to the clay. When he tried using other teapots, he found similar results. However, he noted that due to the vagaries of nature, not all teapots with the right affinity to the same type of tea necessarily produce the exact same flavours or strengths. For instance, a larger Wang Yinxian teapot produced slightly more fragrant

tea, while Lim's reference teapot made a slightly better and sweeter tea. However, he personally preferred the more delicate taste of tea brewed in the former.

As the tests progressed, Lim's documentation moved deeper into the realm of organic chemistry, proving that you cannot judge a teapot's suitability by its surface aesthetics alone. In his second test, he disproved the popular belief that simply pouring tea over a teapot develops its shininess. If the teapot's material lacks affinity with a particular tea, it will actually become dry and pale instead, no matter how much tea is poured on it. As he noted in the conclusion to his fourth test, teapots are fully capable of "speaking for themselves": their affinity for tea changes their colour and shine, showcasing the unique physical and chemical interactions at play. To sum up briefly:

Correct affinity: Unglazed clay absorbs tea oils → Rich colour and deep shine.

Incorrect affinity: Clay rejects tea compounds → Dry, pale and chalky look.

His third and fifth tests proved that red clay teapots are not exclusively suited for Tie Guanyin. In fact, similar teapots made by the same potter at the same time, including those of the same colour, may not suit the same teas. Neither colour nor craftsmanship alone determine a teapot's suitability for a particular tea.

In Test Six, Lim achieved his grandest triumph by proving that the legendary character of Wuyi teas had not vanished over the centuries. Rather, merchants simply did not know how to match clay and leaf types, while failing to distinguish between the incredibly close after-taste of the different Wuyi teas (which they blended and sold as generic "Shuixian" tea). This led Lim to realise that the tea trade had entirely lost the art of teapot pairing. Here, he successfully used a highly responsive "miracle teapot" to isolate the baseline character of each tea and pair them with the right teapot.

Even as he was winding down by Test Nine, some teas had still not been matched with the right teapot yet. But he had some general observations. A more expensive teapot could produce a better flavour, but its physical size was irrelevant. Two teapots with a similar affinity for the same type of tea could yield nearly identical teas, although personal taste preferences could vary. Also, colour and craftsmanship alone do not ensure suitability of a teapot for a particular tea.

As a lawyer, Lim knew that a single person's subjective tasting notes do not equal undeniable proof. His personal collection of over 60 pots was not only necessary to record his own findings; it also served as an open library for others who wanted to verify his results for themselves. To ensure his credibility, Lim repeated some tests, sometimes with an inner circle of experienced teapot collectors. His book and teapots remain a testament to this rigorous pursuit.

***Note:** The late Lim Kean Siew (1922–2007) was part of a notable family of Penang politicians. He was, incidentally, the brother of Lim Phaik Gan and Lim Kean Chye.

CAPTIONS

(From left to right)
Lim's geometric design teapot, Lim's appliqué design teapot, geometric design teapot by Gu Jingzhou (second and third teapots from the right only).

ENDNOTE

1. Published in 2001 by Time Media Private Limited.



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BRINGING HOME OUR HERITAGE

CHRIS ONG'S QUEST TO REVIVE PENANG'S PERANAKAN CHINESE MATERIAL CULTURE

BY LIM WAN PHING

WALKING INTO HOTELIER

Chris Ong's home is like walking into one of his hotels. Lavish, opulent and ornate, it is reminiscent of an Edwardian Peranakan era. With its gilded doorframes, intricate wood carvings, mother-of-pearl rosewood chairs, teal and pink porcelain jars as well as gold-thread draperies, it is a maximalist's dream. Ong's journey as an antique collector began in his teens. Sparked by the desire to restore his grandmother's cherished possessions, which were lost during the Second World War and between moving houses, the young Ong eventually ventured into antique shops and attended auctions to look for lost treasures. We dive into his efforts to keep Penang's Peranakan Chinese material heritage alive, whether at home, in his hotels or through publications.







OF KAM CHENG AND TINGKAT

Growing up on Lebuhr Muntri, Ong attended St Xavier's Institution and subsequently moved to Melbourne for higher education. Throughout his time in Australia, Ong's passion for heritage, beauty and restoration never left him. After 20 years in banking, a career shift to hospitality brought him to Sri Lanka, where he restored a 300-year-old colonial Dutch mansion into the Galle Fort Hotel.

Four years later, he moved home to George Town. "I came back to Penang in 2006 and became one of the earliest collectors of Peranakan antiques," said Ong. The timing was serendipitous. In 2008, Penang received a joint UNESCO World Heritage Site inscription. That same year, Singapore's Peranakan Museum opened with a huge collection of artefacts, some of which, to Ong's chagrin, had come from many Penang families.

"The reason I collect is to save our heritage items from going abroad," he said, emphasising the importance of bringing pieces back to their rightful homes. "If no one helps keep them here, it'll go somewhere else. So it's up to individuals and the private sector to keep an archive of these collectibles." Today, Ong's extensive collection includes practically every domestic item: from spoons, bowls, plates, sauce dishes and tea paraphernalia, to spittoons, vases and furniture.

He is best known for his collection of *kam cheng*, the 2–13in diameter porcelain-lidded jars, used to store food for special occasions such as birthdays, weddings and funerals. At weddings, *kam cheng* contained longan and red date tea, and at a newborn's one-month celebration, Nasi Kuning and chicken curry. In true matriarchal fashion, they were traditionally gifted

to grooms and regarded as precious family heirlooms. The variety of sizes, colour combinations, artwork and detailing are proof of Peranakan material sophistication, with the largest *kam cheng* serving as status symbols of wealth. Ong's core collection also includes *tingkat* (stackable porcelain containers containing desserts, not unlike our contemporary stainless steel tiffin carriers) and Chinese *bonbonnières* (porcelain candy trays designed in the shape of lotus flowers or seed pods).

DOCUMENTING A COLLECTOR'S JOURNEY

His 2024 coffee table book, *The Chris Ong Collection*, documents some of his most valuable pieces. One of these is a large *kam cheng* pair belonging to the family of Lim Kek Chuan, of the Penang Chinese Chamber of Commerce, which was sourced separately from Singapore and Vancouver. Placed together, they resemble a mirror image of two phoenixes looking back at each other, surrounded by peonies.



As most collectors know, the compulsion to collect never stops with one or two things. One thing leads to another. As Ong reflected, “It’s always a buzz when I find something that fits into my collection. I feel grateful and lucky, thinking, ‘This piece has finally come to complete this set.’ I don’t go chasing after a specific item—it always comes to me.”

Many originals are displayed in his six hotels, grouped under the George Town Heritage Hotels portfolio: Seven Terraces, Muntri Grove, Muntri Mews, Jawi Peranakan Mansion, Argus Residences and the three units collectively composing the George Town Heritage Houses. “Thankfully, the people who love our hotels are very respectful of our items,” laughed Ong, when asked if he was worried about guests mishandling them. As per his life philosophy, such pieces are meant to be used and experienced, not just admired from afar like in a museum.

“I’m an Edwardian gentleman at heart, and I live in a very unusually lavish style from 100 years ago, surrounded by things that would’ve been here in my childhood,” he said. That lived experience is exactly what he wants for his guests, which is why he has written a second book, *Chris Ong’s Heritage Rituals*.

FROM TANGIBLE TO INTANGIBLE HERITAGE

Now that he has a sizeable collection and the material heritage has been largely restored, Ong is intent on reviving the “soul of the place”, that is, by actively preserving, celebrating and passing on intangibles instead. These include Straits Chinese rituals related to ancestral prayers, Lunar New Year, Pai Ti Kong (Jade Emperor’s Birthday), Cheng Beng (Tomb-sweeping Day) and Phor Thor (Hungry Ghost Festival), as practised in his childhood.

As he writes in his second book: “The most accurate versions of Chinese cultural and religious rituals are to be found among the overseas Chinese [... I feel] an urgent need to record my memory of these rituals.” Here, Ong focuses on ten rituals arranged chronologically, starting from the Winter Solstice in December and ending with the Mid-Autumn Festival in September.

It is in these rituals that his collections truly come to life: lotus plates reserved only for the gods (the purity of the lotus is ideal for spiritual offerings), blue-and-white plates used only for ancestral prayers (cobalt blue, specifically, which is closest to black) and colourful scalloped bowls for glutinous rice balls during the Winter Solstice.

After all, what is the point of having material items without the occasion to use them? “Many of our Peranakan treasures have been dispersed all over the world,” said Ong. “My collection is a way of bringing them back together. What’s even more fulfilling is the stories that come with them, and how they came into a family’s possession.”

For younger collectors, he had this advice. “Be curious, ask questions, travel a lot and be culturally exposed. Over time, you’ll learn to hone your taste and develop a keen eye for good craftsmanship.” And of his favourite piece, he laughed. “They’re like children, you have to love them all.”



CAPTIONS

1. (Cover photo) Chris Ong is a fifth-generation Baba and owner of Seven Terraces Hotel in George Town.
2. A collection of small *kam cheng* ranging from 4 to 5 inches, showcasing a variety of colour combinations and cartouche (“window”) designs.
3. Blue and white ceramics were traditionally used only for ancestral prayers because cobalt blue was closest to black.
4. The Stewart Suite in Seven Terraces Hotel. All of Ong’s hotel rooms are fitted with original Peranakan Chinese furniture and wares from his collection.

5. A sample offering table to ancestors includes the rice, tea and wine sets, a variety of Nyonya kuih, bowls of *lauk* (dishes), and the “three lives” offering (or *sam seng*, i.e., chicken, duck and pork).



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.

OF BLIND BOXES AND TRADING CARDS: GAMING THE ECONOMY OF DESIRE

BY YEONG PEY JUNG

IT WAS SUPPOSED to be an ordinary Friday morning. But the long queues outside a Pop Mart store said otherwise. There was an air of anticipation, with shoppers chattering excitedly and craning their necks as they awaited entry. Some were frantically scrolling on their phones and tapping their feet. As the doors opened, the crowd surged forward: less like casual shoppers, more like determined hunters chasing a prize. They were in search of the collectible toys-cum-accessories for which Pop Mart is particularly known, having developed a niche hobby into a notable segment of the consumer economy in its own right. What are the underlying economics of this boom, and what makes it more than a mere “obsession”?



GAMING THE SEGMENT'S UNCERTAINTY

You might have noticed adult men and women alike commonly clipping plush toys to their bags. This trend is significantly driven by Pop Mart—the Mainland Chinese company behind global phenomena such as Labubu, Skullpanda and Crybaby—which by extension has become the most visible face of this “obsession”.^[1] It is also a sign that the collectibles craze has moved beyond niche hobby territory to become a notable part of the consumer economy. Labubu are especially coveted, after being spotted clipped to the bags of the football celebrity David Beckham and BLACKPINK’s Lisa, among others. The furry little “ugly cute” monster has since become a must-have fashion accessory and is usually sold in “blind boxes”. Buyers never know exactly what design they are going to get. In fact, uncertainty is a huge part of the experience.

Pop Mart did not invent the blind box model. Its roots can be traced to the machines introduced by entrepreneur Ryuzo Shigeta in 1965, whose gachapon machines in Tokyo offered random prizes hidden in capsules. Players paid for a spin with coins or tokens, following which the machine dispensed a capsule.^[2] Bandai’s toy arm popularised the format in 1977 by expanding to sell capsule toys in the likeness of popular anime and manga characters. In fact, today’s blind box logic largely follows the gachapon machine model: low entry prices, random rewards and character appeal. But the scale and sophistication have changed as stores go digital, and social media keeps the frenzy alive.

As it stands, the economic figures are rather staggering. The company reported 37.1bil yuan in revenue in 2025—up 185% from the previous year—while annual profit rose by more than 300%.^[3] Currently, Pop Mart operates 630 stores globally and has 2,637 vending machines,^[4] showing how quickly the brand has expanded, and how far its reach has extended. In fact, Penang welcomed two Pop Mart stores in 2026: one in Sunway Carnival and the other in Gurney Plaza. The little boxes and toys may be small, but the economy around desire is not.

UNCERTAINTY, SCARCITY AND EXCLUSIVITY

This uncertainty around what exactly comes out of blind boxes lies at the heart of this economy. Besides that, *scarcity and exclusivity* are also a huge part of the appeal.

Blind boxes and similar collectibles are rarely released as single items, but as part of a series, ranging from common designs to super-secret editions, where the chance of getting a particular item is minuscule.

For some consumers, the “fear of missing out” (colloquially, FOMO), drives acquisitions. Amy, a Pop Mart enthusiast with an affinity for Labubu, was brought into the craze by a friend. She regularly tracks launches and sets alarms so that she can reserve collectibles on launch day, even enlisting her sister overseas to help secure them. “I find the toys really cute, but to be honest, it’s the fear of missing out [that drives me]. Seeing my friends’ adorable and rare Labubus really brought a twinge of jealousy,” she admitted. As such, a casual visit to Pop Mart could easily translate into purchases. “Even if Labubus are sold out, there are still many other cute characters.”

For Bobbi, a Pokémon trading card collector, the exhilaration of the gamble and the chase drive her purchasing behaviour. Each pack carries possibilities of disappointment but also chances to pull in something rare and covetable. “I’m also really drawn to the art of the cards. The hand-drawn cards are especially attractive but they’re also really rare.” She makes it her mission to eventually obtain the elusive “God Pack”, in which all the cards are holographic editions.

This is where the business model becomes particularly attractive, by selling the possibility of getting something rare. Consumers do not usually get the items that they want on their first try, which often leads them to purchase repeatedly. When desired items are rare or limited, the urge to try again becomes even stronger. Indeed, the elation of finally obtaining a dream collectible further influences purchasing patterns, rather than tempering them. Some buyers even scour resale markets to complete their collections, where rare collectibles are often sold for very high prices. At its peak, a secret blind box Labubu can go for 2,000% above its retail price.^[5] A rare Pokémon card can go for thousands of ringgit. In fact, there is also a speculative stock market of sorts for some collectors.^[6]

Even outside of the high-end resale market, building a collection can be quite expensive. One’s volume of spending is not always obvious at first. Both Amy and Bobbi think of themselves as casual collectors, rather than diehard fanatics, yet they estimate that they have spent around RM6,000 and RM8,000, respectively, since they started collecting. Among superfans, the sums spent can be much higher. “One of my friends has spent more than RM30,000 on Pop Mart products, including a few styles of the Mega characters,” Amy shared. These Mega Characters typically retail between RM909 and RM4,199, with prices going even higher on resale markets. Thus, what may begin as a fun, seemingly inexpensive hobby can gradually turn into a significant spending habit.

Yet it is too simplistic to reduce this craze to merely overspending or consumer manipulation. For many collectors, resale value is not their main consideration. As Bobbi put it: “It’s not a matter of toys or cards or how much they’ll be worth eventually. It’s something that sparks joy and provides moments of happiness.” For many, the appeal is more personal than profit-oriented.

EXTENDING TO THE BROADER MARKET

The logic of blind boxes has expanded beyond Pop Mart to local consumer brands, which have begun adopting similar strategies to turn everyday products into collectible experiences. ZUS Coffee, for instance, has released numerous versions of blind boxes, containing collectibles like plushies, keychains and straw caps within. Christy Ng, a fashion brand, curates blind box charms in conjunction with celebrations such as Hari Raya and Merdeka Day. Even arts and crafts shops in Penang have come up with their own versions. The products differ, but the formula is familiar: make something cute, make it collectible and drive sales.

Of course, hype can fade away. Despite its strong 2025 results, Pop Mart’s shares in Hong Kong trading fell nearly 23%, after earnings.^[7] This shows that consumer excitement is hard to sustain indefinitely. But the collectibles economy is not disappearing anytime soon. Rather, it has always evolved, from gachapon machines and Pokémon cards to its current form. Pop Mart may reign supreme for now, but another new company selling their own blind box collectibles, or another variation on the original gachapon model, will almost certainly emerge. In such ways does the business of the chase continue.

CAPTION

A pile of Pokémon cards after a typical trip to the card store.

ENDNOTES

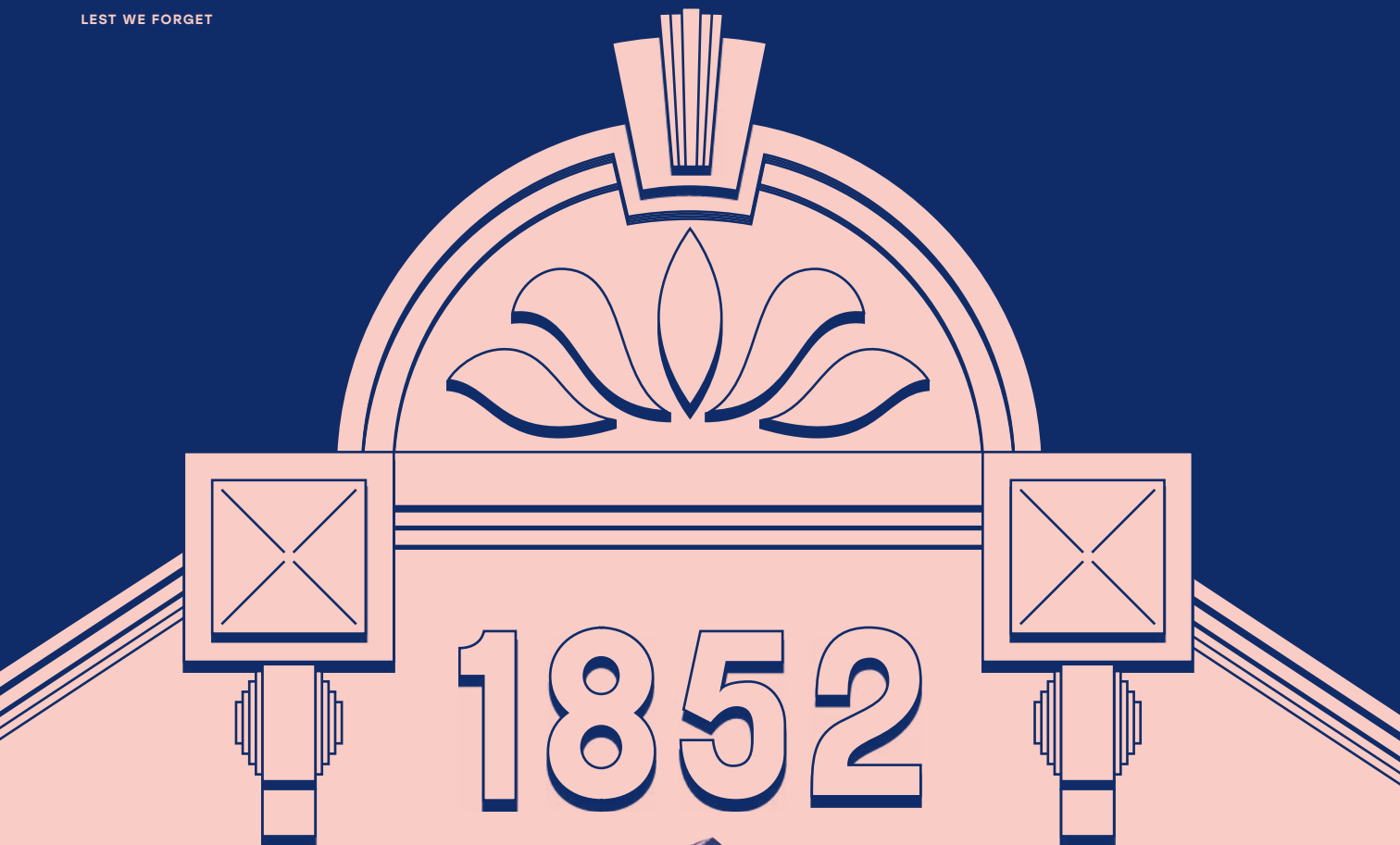
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A PENANG TALE OF SACRIFICE, RESILIENCE AND EDUCATION

BY
**CHEN
YEN LING**

THE INTREPID NUNS of the St Maur Sisters—presently called the Infant Jesus Sisters—laid the foundations for their maiden institute outside France in the mid-19th century. George Town was where the Convent St Maur Penang was established, operating as their main centre in the “Far East” until the end of the 20th century. The sisters opened their premises to educate girls, take care of orphans and shelter the weak and desolate. In fact, their intellectual influence would stretch beyond Malaysia to other parts of Asia. This article explores their early days in Penang, up until the pre-independence period.

THE ST MAUR SISTERS



2

JOURNEY TO THE EAST

In 1666, a Minim priest, Father Nicolas Barre, founded the Congregation of the Sisters of Charitable Instruction of the Holy Infant Jesus. This institution taught basic reading, writing and arithmetic for free to girls and young women from poor and broken families. They also trained them in making handicrafts and small business skills.

Their Mother House was, and still is, located at the historic Rue St Maur in Paris, where they were respectfully called the “Dames of Saint Maur”. Their schools’ academic content progressively increased and orphanages were added to their services. They expanded all over France and by the mid-19th century, were ready to look abroad.

Meanwhile, in the Straits Settlements territories—which included Penang, Singapore and Melaka—colonial governmental interests were limited to trading profits, and not investments in the educational needs of locals. However, expanding operations necessitated hiring locals for the lower ranks of administration. The authorities chose the Missions Etrangères de Paris (MEP, the Paris Foreign Mission Society) for the interesting challenge of producing English-literate young people.

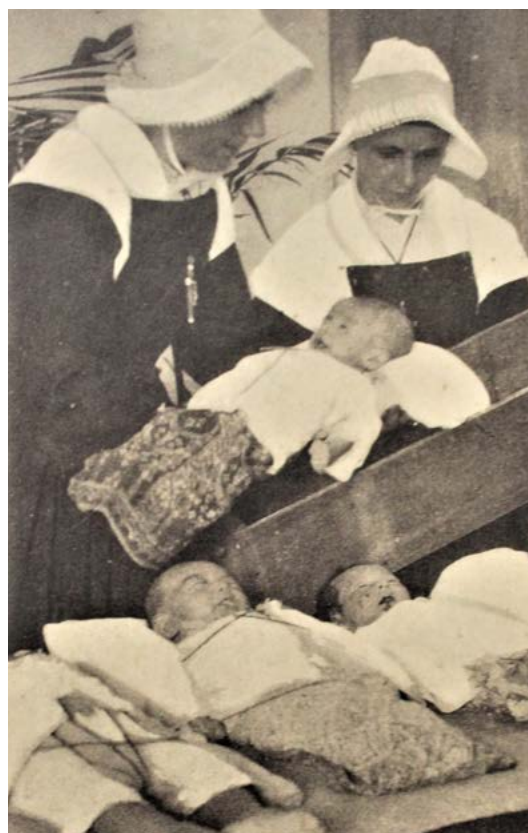
In turn, the MEP invited the Saint Maur Sisters to operate girls’ schools, while the La Salle Christian Brothers operated boys’ schools. Five young (and inexperienced) sisters were selected with the presumption that their youthfulness would provide greater physical resilience and mental ability to learn new languages expeditiously. However, fate dictated that they endured many tragedies to come.

Their voyage across the oceans was long and perilous. They suffered illness and accidents, and their leader even died of tuberculosis at sea. Further, the only English-proficient member capable of operating the English-medium school decided to leave their institute when they reached Singapore. The three remaining sisters were then redirected northwards by the bishop, who was based in Penang. Cumulatively, they endured a journey of four months at sea, after arriving there in April 1852.

CAPTIONS

1. (Cover photo) Mother St Mathilde founded the Infant Jesus Sisters’ institutes, schools and orphanages in Asia, beginning with Penang.
2. Mother St Tarcisius (seated, third from left) with other choir sisters and Cambridge examination candidates at CLS.
3. Lay sisters attending to orphaned babies, some of whom had special needs, at CLS (ca. late-19th century).
4. The gable with angel figurines top the roof of the former orphanage. Next to it, the baby house used to receive abandoned babies.
5. Memorial headstone shared by three sisters who died in the 19th century, and who were interred at the old Catholic Cemetery on Jalan Sultan Ahmad Shah.

But their sufferings did not end on arrival. The sister reassigned to operate the school became critically ill with encephalitis and was too fragile to proceed with duties, even though she miraculously survived. A rescue team of four nuns hurriedly left Paris and arrived through a shorter but more cumbersome route in October. It included a young Irish novice and a superior with steely resolve. Indeed, the indomitable Mother St Mathilde successfully planted the seeds of Convent St Maur Penang.



3



They struggled constantly with shortages of money, manpower, space, tropical diseases and early deaths. Most never reached their 40th birthdays. Yet their dedication and sacrifices continued.

FOUNDING THE CONVENT SCHOOLS

The sisters' new lives in a strange land with unfamiliar weather began at Church Street. They shared an attap house, which was already packed with more 20 orphans, carers and student boarders (originally from the parish girls' school). A wooden structure with a thatched roof became their school building. As speedily as they could, they learnt Malay to communicate with locals and English to teach in school.

utation for high-quality academic content, training in practical domestic skills and strict discipline for "good character moulding". It also attracted the attention of royalty from neighbouring sultanates and even other countries, drawn by the sisters' special brand of "holistic or wholesome education". One outstanding student, who later became a nun, teacher and principal in Malaysian and Singaporean convent schools, was Princess Rajawong Foobhol Jombunud.^[1]

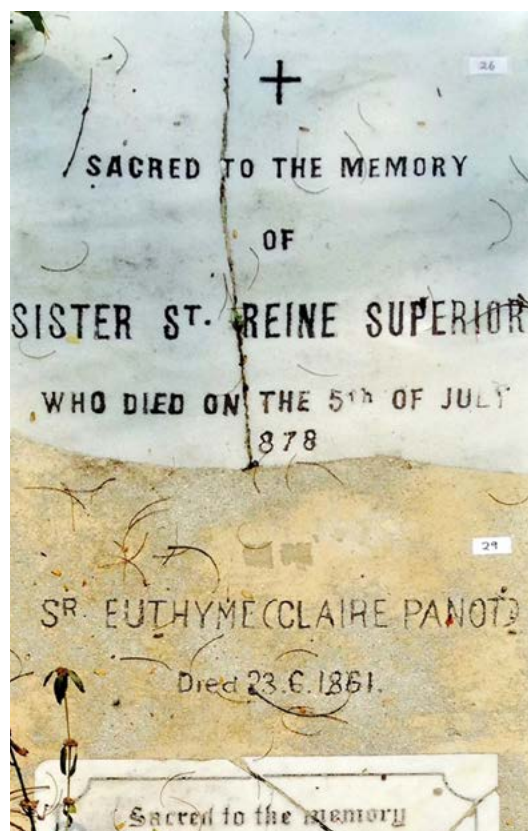


After Mother St Mathilde left for Singapore, succeeding superiors further strengthened and expanded their operations. They struggled constantly with shortages of money, manpower, space, tropical diseases and early deaths. Most never reached their 40th birthdays. Yet their dedication and sacrifices continued. In 1859, they raised enough funds to acquire the Government House property at Light Street. It had much-needed, ready-to-use buildings, and so increased activities took place within its vast grounds. Living spaces were constantly added to cater for increasing numbers of orphans and abandoned babies, of whom many had special needs.

The school grew steadily with mostly local Catholic, Eurasian and European students. But as more Chinese and Indian migrants arrived, student numbers increased at a fast pace. Parents became more willing to provide equal schooling opportunities for both their daughters and sons; after all, an English-medium education provided prospects of better pay and prestige in the civil service.

Helmed by the dynamic Mother Superior St Tarcisius, the expansion of their schools in Malaya in the 1930s was phenomenal. Within Penang itself, new establishments were set up at Balik Pulau to serve the less-urbanised southwestern part of the island, as well as at Bukit Mertajam on mainland Province Wellesley. Branch schools at Pulau Tikus, Penang Road and Datuk Kramat were managed by the Light Street institution.

Convent St Maur Penang was renamed Convent Light Street (CLS) to reflect its location. It had progressed into a centre for premier education with a rep-





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A LEGACY OF EDUCATION

By the end of the 1930s, the Second World War loomed over Southeast Asia, but the sisters were not deterred from opening new schools. When the Japanese bombarded George Town in December 1941, a few bombs landed on the CLS grounds. Fortunately, the whole community—including resident teachers, boarders, orphans and helpers—managed to make their timely escape to Balik Pulau Convent, in the remote hills. There, kind villagers helped keep everyone from going hungry. All schools were shut down.

When the situation calmed down sufficiently, the group made its way back to town. Its members trekked through the forested hills to Air Itam on foot, and travelled by bus to the College General in Pulau Tikus, where the MEP provided them with temporary lodging. The sisters contacted the parents of boarders and relatives of orphans to take them home. Those who were left behind continued onwards with the sisters to take refuge at Bukit Mertajam Convent. For a while, they were self-sufficient, by rearing poultry and growing vegetables in the large compound. But they were soon driven uphill by the Japanese military to the small, rocky space behind Saint Anne's Church (presently St Anne's Shrine), where they could not produce enough food. Meanwhile, a few brave sisters and orphans kept their "school opened", as directed by the Japanese administrators at the College General, and taught only the Japanese language.

As soon as the occupiers left, the sisters repaired the school premises and eagerly welcomed students again. Charging fees, including boarding charges, was critical to pay for expenses, subsidise poor students and feed orphans. They even knocked on doors to convince parents that it was safe for their daughters

to return to school. Conveniently, the resumption of the postwar British administration prompted parents to again recognise the importance of an English-language education. As the economy recovered, many students returned to catch up on lost time, including some who had been in the midst of sitting for their Cambridge examinations at the outbreak of war.

Throughout the Infant Jesus Sisters' long history, they have endured, and their convent schools soon became household names. When the sisters celebrated their centennial in 1952, the three convents collectively administered seven schools across state. (At that time, schools were a combination of kindergarten, primary and secondary divisions.) However, after the mid-20th century, changes in societal and government attitudes, as well as other practical issues, led them to focus only on their founding goal: education. The teaching nuns' faith in providence, perseverance through adversity, practical responses to changes and dedication to the cause of improving women's lives through education has enabled their institute to prevail into contemporary times.

***Note:** Not all the branch schools are mentioned here; these were operationally less significant or had not opened during the period covered above (for example, Convent Green Lane, est. 1961). Some small schools closed long ago, such as Penang Road and Tanjung Bungah Convent Schools. Pulau Tikus Primary was taken over by the state government in the 1990s, while the secondary school has closed. CLS has closed too, but is expected to reopen as a private school.

CAPTIONS

6. Present-day Maison Mere Mathilde (House of Mother Mathilde), named to commemorate the founder of the institute. It was housed in the former Government House building, built in 1805.
7. On the left side of Balik Pulau Convent (now closed) is the Sacred Heart Girls' School, while on the right is the residence of the sisters, boarders and orphans.
8. At Bukit Mertajam Convent, the school's name characteristically appears in French (St Marguerite's School). The sisters' modest private lodgings were located behind the school.

ENDNOTE

1. See the author's 21 July 2024 article on other such ties in *The Star*, "Missionary schools: Thai-Penang ties".



CHEN YEN LING

was an accountant by profession who now focusses on research writing. She undertook a short study in anthropology and holds a certificate in freelance journalism.



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PERANAKAN BAROQUE READING THE COMPLEXITY OF NYONYA PORCELAIN WARE

BY ANNE TAN

TUCKED AWAY IN cupboards, largely forgotten by younger generations, collections of Peranakan Chinese porcelain (or Nyonya ware)—including plates, dessert bowls, dishes, teacups, spoons and spoon rests—still have plenty to say. Resplendent in vibrant colours and auspicious symbols, these deserve to be brought into the spotlight. Some items from a collection belonging to my late husband, a Penang Baba who migrated to Australia, offer a good starting place for exploration. Through careful observations and wide readings, the stories contained within these ceramics emerge, akin to reading a text. What are the provenance and cultural significance of these artifacts, and what can this collection tell us about their cultural roots?



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SYMBOLS AND THEIR RICHNESS OF MEANING

Peranakan porcelain was produced for the Chinese community in the Straits Settlements, circa the 1800s to mid-1900s. This community commissioned ceramic ware via traders dealing in commodities such as tin and rubber, who acted as middlemen by placing orders at the kilns in Jingdezhen, in northeast Jiangxi province. Famous for its unique kaolin, Jingdezhen was known as the porcelain capital of China, having produced and exported Chinese ceramics for at least a millennium.

Coming to these items with a Westerner's eye and sensibility meant that I had much research to do. Seeing how my husband valued and cared for his collection, it was obvious that these objects held a special place in cultural memory. Indeed, the highly structured designs tied the Peranakan Chinese firmly to their ethnic heritage. As such, understanding the symbolism of the resulting Nyonya ware is like cracking a secret code.

Image 1 shows both the obverse and reverse faces of two 22cm-diameter serving plates, each with sloping sides, shallow centres and short footings. A fine, if typical, example of Nyonya ware, their tightly packed floral and bird motifs, among other auspicious forms, come in bright, vibrant colours. A stylised chrysanthemum—which is considered to be one of the Four Noble Plants and symbol of longevity, steadfast friendship and intellectual pursuits—rests at the centre, while the phoenix and peony, two leitmotifs of Peranakan iconography, occupy the middle space.

The peony, grandest of all flowers with its large and showy blooms, is an emblem of love, affection and feminine beauty, as well as wealth and distinction. The phoenix, seen as the bird of the south for Chinese migrants to Southeast Asia, signifies auspiciousness. Being the second of the four miraculous creatures, it is the ruler of all feathered beings. Its body parts symbolise five human qualities: head (virtue); wings (duty); back (ritually correct behaviour); breast (humanity); and stomach (reliability). Meanwhile, its five-coloured feathers signify the pure qualities of justice, politeness, wisdom, humility and sincerity.

Supplementing these symbols are others drawn from Buddhist tradition. These plates and a bowl (see Image 2) display the single most important border decoration on Nyonya ware: the Eight Buddhist Emblems (*Bajixiang*), or the auspicious signs found on the sole of the Buddha's foot. These are the Wheel of Law (symbolising the Buddha's teaching of the path to enlightenment), a conch shell (the Buddha's call to his disciples to follow his precepts), umbrella (a protective shield from evil and disease), a banner or canopy (signifying victory over evil), lotus (the triumph of purity over the murkiness of life), vase (a repository of treasure), a pair of fish (marital bliss and fidelity) and an endless knot (eternity). These emblems are used in combination with floral sprays and energetic trailing ribbons.

One small and graceful piece is a 12cm spoon fashioned from a single piece of clay. Used to transfer gravy-based food to dinner plates, it comprises an oval-shaped scoop which tapers off in a grooved handle. The inside well is similarly decorated with phoenix and peony motifs, while the outside rim contains the Eight Buddhist Emblems. The rim is gilt-edged, and the bottom side of the scoop painted with three iron red bats (symbolising abundant good fortune). Its accompanying spoon rest is pictured here, showing both the obverse and reverse faces (Image 3). This ogi-

val, gilt-edged object contains four symmetrical petal patterns. The inner section of the medallion displays floral motifs, including the peony, while the outer rim contains a scaled down selection of Buddhist emblems with trailing ribbons. The reverse face features four iron red bats together with a reign mark. Now, what can such marks tell us?

INSCRIPTIONS AND THEIR MEANINGS

Close observations of the undersides of other Nyonya ware reveal a variety of inscriptions, marked in overglaze iron red enamel. They include imperial reign marks, manufacturers' marks and other marks expressing good wishes and commendations, all of which provide evidence for precise dating. Reign and factory marks usually come in two forms: seal script (*zhuan*shu, placed within a single or double square) and standard Chinese script (*kaishu*, comprising four or six characters). Factory marks allow us to trace the private kilns engaged in making export ware.

I have been able to discern and decipher some of the reign, factory and personal marks inscribed on the artifacts in my possession. There are reign marks for three distinct periods: the rule of the Tongzhi Emperor (1862–75); the Guangxu Emperor (1875–1908); and *Zhonghua Minguo* (the Republic of China, 1912–49). Based on the factory marks, these items originate from the Jingqingzhen zhi and Wangshengshu zao kilns. Additionally, several items are marked “Jin Qing Zhen Cang”, a personal name meaning “Precious Treasure”. This aspect of my research, while forensic and taxing, afforded great pleasure as I slowly unveiled history and provenance.

A BAROQUE SENSIBILITY?

Peranakan ceramics display a profusion of colours, motifs and patterns, packed with ornamentation. These objects seemingly echo a Baroque sensibility,^[1] with their deep colours and exuberant style. Despite being swamped by symbols of longevity, fortune and health, representations of people are almost totally absent. These vibrant porcelain pieces, decorated with Buddhist symbols and notable repeating motifs, were the material objects through which the Peranakan Chinese chose to announce and display their culture. They might be gathered into wedding sets, and were most likely commissioned as gifts to a young couple.

Having crossed the continents and settled in Australia, these artifacts have begun a new transnational chapter in their lives. They are currently cherished not just for their commercial value, but also sentimental content, having become family heirlooms. The visual symbols on Nyonya ware are reflective of a hopeful and optimistic mindset, being a tangible reminder of the southwards dispersal of resilient Chinese to seek wealth and honour.

***Note:** My examination is informed by the work of the Nyonya ware specialists, Ho Wing Meng and Kee Ming Yuet, and corroborated with reference to gotheborg.com's extensive documentation of Chinese porcelain reign and factory marks (particularly Straits Chinese porcelain).

CAPTIONS

1. 22cm-diameter serving plates, obverse and reverse faces.
2. A bowl containing a typical border decoration.
3. A spoon rest containing four symmetrical petal patterns.

ENDNOTE

1. In 17th-century Europe, the Baroque style was communicated through intense and realistic images, with extravagant decorative motifs and sensuous richness.

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EMPOWERING WOMEN TOWARDS FINANCIAL INDEPENDENCE AND LEADERSHIP ROLES

BY ELIZABETH SU

“WHEN YOU EDUCATE a girl, you empower a generation,” says Joanne Yeoh, the immediate past president of Soroptimist International (SI) South East Asia Pacific.

In Penang, significant work is already being done to empower women. From grassroots political training to cutting-edge technological literacy, the state has firmly established itself as a trailblazer in women’s advancement. According to the Penang Women’s Development Corporation (PWDC), Penang is “setting a precedent for gender-inclusive political participation.”

What are some of these efforts, particularly in terms of leadership and financial independence?

CAPTIONS

1. Joanne Yeoh with her SI Iskander Puteri team in Johor on 23 June 2026, celebrating the Rohingya refugee women’s educational project under SI South East Asia Pacific’s Brilliant Futures Programme.

2. Khoo Hoon Eng of AWLUC.



ELIZABETH SU is a Harvard Mason Fellow (Class of '97). She is very curious about people and the world around her, and believes that asking questions is a great way to learn. Elizabeth teaches, writes and loves storytelling.

ECONOMY AND POLITICS

On 22 June 2026, the Parliamentary Special Select Committee on Women, Children and Community Development proposed a Gender Parity in Political Representation Bill. This would require that political parties field at least 30% women candidates in general and state elections to address their under-representation in politics. The Committee also proposed amending the Federal Constitution and strengthening the National Women’s Policy to incorporate a minimum target of 30% women in decision-making positions at all levels of government, in line with Malaysia’s commitments under the United Nations’ (UN) Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women.

According to the Global Gender Gap Index 2025, Malaysia ranked 108th out of 148 countries, with a score of 0.681. In terms of economic participation and engagement, Malaysia ranked 81st with a score of 0.682, but scored lower on women’s political empowerment (0.079), ranking 128th. SI, a global volunteer movement with a network of over 62,000 club members in 118 countries, has highlighted the linkages between women’s education and economic and political participation. It affirms that:

“[...] educating women and girls goes beyond individual empowerment; it produces better health outcomes, fuels economic growth, and contributes towards stable and peaceful societies. A 2018 World Bank study underlines the economic impact, revealing that restricted access to 12 years of education for girls globally costs countries USD15–30tril in lost lifetime productivity and earnings.”



EMPOWERING WOMEN THROUGH EDUCATION

Advocacy for human rights and gender equality lies at the heart of SI's work across UN centres in New York, Geneva, Vienna, Paris, Rome, Nairobi and Bangkok, whose 26 UN representatives ensure that women's and girls' voices are heard in key global discussions. Joanne Yeoh believes that:

"True empowerment is not just a gift we give; it is a catalyst we ignite. Through every project, every classroom built and every scholarship awarded, we do not just change lives—we create the architects of tomorrow. When we empower women to use their voices, engage communities with compassion and elevate each other, we rewrite the future for everyone."

In March 2026, Joanne attended the Commission on the Status of Women, established by the UN in New York in 1946, to talk about SI's pilot project at Sekolah Menengah Kebangsaan Perempuan Sri Mutiara: the Digital Library & TVPSS Studio. It "helped the school to convert their traditional library into a digital library. Give the girls resources, training, and they can do many things, such as making their own movies and exploring digital pathways." In New York, she was asked how foundations and clubs could start such projects. Her answer was to "first, approach your state authorities to do a pilot. Collaborate, and soon the project could become a kind of blueprint [for implementation]."

Joanne is also the president of the Young Women's Christian Association in Kuala Lumpur. In 1998, the Association established a Vocational Training Opportunity Centre that has since trained over 2,000 girls from "Below 40" communities. These girls include many from indigenous communities across Malaysia, including Sabah and Sarawak, who:

"[...] learn skills such as hairdressing, beauty care, baking, hospitality and early childhood education—which takes two years compared to the usual one year of study—to help them become financially independent and ready to go to the marketplace. Our Centre helps in job placement, with the indigenous girls going back to teach children in the village."

BECOMING LEADERS IN SOCIETY

The Asian Women's Leadership University College (AWLUC) in Penang was founded in 2011 by three Smith College graduates with roots in Asia, who met through the prestigious Smith alumni network. Working together with several prominent Malaysian women leaders, the project began with a vision of educating and empowering women leaders for development and change. Its mission has been to produce visionary female leaders in Asia capable of championing positive social transformation, grounded in the regional context and also aligned with the needs of a globalised world.

In September 2025, AWLUC launched its Master of Arts in Leadership Development. Today, its 14 students, including nine Malaysians, are a mix of full-time students and those taking micro-credentials part-time. By taking a single course (or a set of courses), learners obtain skills, knowledge, values and competencies in specific areas of study and practice. These mature students, ranging in age from their 20s to 40s, can testify to the transformative power of education, by "offering valuable leadership knowledge and practical insights that have shaped both personal and professional growth". One student believes that "the programme refined my reflective, strategic management approach,



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"[...] the AWLUC in Malaysia, dedicated to educating and empowering women leaders from Malaysia and Asia, is essential for driving change nationally, regionally and globally."

enhanced cross-cultural leadership skills, and deepened my understanding of artificial intelligence (AI) as a strategic pillar shaping contemporary leadership and organisational decision-making". Another reflected on how the programme strengthened her ability to lead humanitarian and development initiatives in complex contexts, by enhancing "skills in innovation, design thinking, strategic communication, negotiation and conflict resolution, enabling stronger collaboration with governments, NGOs [non-governmental organisations], and communities to support vulnerable populations."

Khoo Hoon Eng, director and co-founder of AWLUC, believes that a liberal arts and sciences education is "a critical component to empowering women in building a strong society; it emphasises the development of students' capacity for critical thinking, rather than simply introducing students to different forms of knowledge. With this broad education, graduates become informed, flexible thinkers and lifelong learners, with a strong foundation of knowledge, skills and experiences that enable them to reason and make ethical choices, to recognise the importance of the past, and work toward a better future."

Hoon Eng highlights her experience at the Asian University for Women, established in 2008 in Chittagong, Bangladesh. "If we want the world to be a more peaceful one where our women are leaders in their countries, then the university has to be a multicultural, multinational, multi-ethnic, multi-religious institution where students live and learn from each other."

She recalls a Cambodian graduate who went on to obtain a master's degree in Ireland before returning home. Today, she is a prominent Young South-east Asian Leaders Initiative professional fellow and alumna, who is actively engaged in managing programmes and driving development for youths in her community. Notably, she has served as a programme manager for various regional NGOs, using her professional skills to empower the next generation of leaders.

WHAT COMES NEXT?

Today, pioneering Penang state initiatives like PWDC's Sidang Wanita and the new AI-focused PenMentor programme are actively dismantling barriers to leadership and sustainable entrepreneurship. It is true that there is a bright future for Penang's women in AI and tech. However, while young women now make up over half of Malaysia's science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) university students, they remain underrepresented in the workforce. Bridging this gap is the core mission of targeted educational initiatives like Tech Dome's "Women in Science" and the Penang Science Cluster's "Girls in Engineering and Technology" programme.

Ultimately, these efforts align with a broader economic vision whose key measurable targets include: doubling down on STEM enrolment in secondary schools; university outputs in STEM; STEM-related technical and vocational education and training output; girls in STEM education; and doubling the number of high-value jobs. By seamlessly connecting classroom excellence with workforce development, the highly male-dominated field will slowly be marbled by the next generation of women participants. This demographic shift then positions women to act as vital change-makers to drive Penang's industrial and technological future.



CAPTIONS

1. Nibong Tebal, where river, rail and road converge (Source: Small Towns Malaysia).

2. The expansive mangrove systems of Seberang Perai (Source: Tan Choo Eng).

3. The Network City Model, which shows how LUSP connects George Town and Butterworth to their surroundings. Source: Chapter Four of Think City's *City Makers* (forthcoming).

WRITING THE NEXT CHAPTER OF SEBERANG PERAI

BY MATT BENSON
AND KISHORE RAMDAS

“SEBERANG” LITERALLY MEANS “the other side”, and for generations, the strait dividing Penang’s mainland from the island reinforced the separation between both jurisdictions. Larger than Singapore, and connected by rail and road to the entire peninsula, Seberang Perai was long overshadowed by what lay across the water. Today, growth and investment have transformed the mainland in ways that would have been unimaginable even a generation ago. The Penang2030 vision formalises what has already been becoming apparent: that balanced development between island and mainland is no longer optional, but essential to the state’s future.

A NEW VIEW OF THE MAINLAND

For much of the 20th century, train tickets were bought on Penang Island. The Malayan Railway Building on Gat Lebu China (completed 1909) had a grand clock tower and booking hall, but no actual railway. Instead, travellers paid their fares before crossing the strait by ferry to board their trains at Butterworth. The institution was on the island, and the infrastructure on the mainland. This, in miniature, was once the story of Seberang Perai. But today, the Malayan Railway Building stands empty, awaiting a new purpose. Meanwhile in Butterworth, the old station has been absorbed into Penang Sentral: a transit hub that is repositioning the mainland from the edge of Penang’s story to its centre.

Before the British arrived, there was already a settlement at Bagan, where wooden jetties reached into the Perai River estuary and passengers crossed over to the island by sampan. When the East India Company acquired the territory from the Sultan of Kedah in 1800, it plainly defined the mainland’s threefold purpose: agricultural land, defensive buffer and transport spine. The railway terminated at Butterworth, where tin and other commodities were shipped from the wharves. Trains and ferries carried passengers onwards to destinations elsewhere. Seberang Perai became a place one simply passed through.

Over the past two decades, this view has been changing. Think City’s Levelling Up Seberang Perai (LUSP) programme seeks not just a change of perspective—that is, seeing the strait and rivers as assets instead of obstacles—but also the operationalisation of this new view. The waterfront and ferry link offer opportunities for economic and place-making renewal. At the same time, mangroves protect the coastline while supporting fishing communities and tourism.

A NETWORK CITY, NOT A DORMITORY

Underpinning all this is a shift in how Seberang Perai understands itself: not as a collection of settlements organised around the needs of others, but as a network with its own logic, connections and potential. Seberang Perai contains more than a dozen town centres, over 100km of coastline, agricultural lowlands, national parkland and riverine landscapes shaped, and bounded, by the Muda and Perai rivers. Viewed one way, these are the characteristics of a dispersed hinterland, difficult to connect and lacking the density associated with urban productivity. Viewed another, they are the foundations of a network city: a system of places, each with their own identities, linked by water, roads and ecological corridors into something larger than any one centre could be on their own.

LUSP is built on this second understanding. Rather than concentrating investment along a single growth corridor, the programme identifies activation points across the network. These include coastal towns with underutilised waterfronts, inland settlements with distinctive cultural identities and natural landscapes whose ecological value has too often been treated as a backdrop. The aim is to strengthen both the nodes and the connections between them, thus transforming a geography of division into one of connection.

Nowhere is this reversal more visible than along the coast. Butterworth, once the logistical heart of the mainland, was hollowed out when administrative functions moved inland. What remains is a town with exceptional bones: a working waterfront, direct connection to George Town and rich stock of heritage shophouses (largely preserved because they were bypassed by investors). The strait that once defined Butterworth as a departure point is now its greatest asset: the new ferries are already operational, while plans for Penang Sentral, upgrades to the Butterworth train station as well the cross-strait extension of the LRT Mutiara Line are in place. Meanwhile, the mangrove systems and estuarine mudflats fringing this coastline are not obstacles to development. Instead, they are instead the natural buffers upon which any resilient coastal economy depends. Today, around 80% of Penang's remaining mangroves are found in Seberang Perai, making their protection essential to the state's climate resilience.

Returning to rivers, the Muda and Perai were understood as boundaries for generations: they were the edges of districts, limits of jurisdictions and lines on maps. They can now be better understood as connective tissue. The Muda River corridor underpins the rice bowl of Kedah and Penang, but may yet become an important freshwater source for a growing city. The Perai River links Butterworth to inland towns, while its estuary now supports mangroves and mudflats of national ecological significance. The Teluk Air Tawar–Kuala Muda mangrove forest hosts globally important migratory shorebird populations. LUSP treats these ecological systems as infrastructure: mangroves as coastal protection, rivers as economic connectors and wetlands as the foundation of a genuinely green state. In these ways, LUSP integrates ecological preservation with everyday urban life and fosters a sense of custodianship that policy alone cannot create.



The next chapter of Seberang Perai is already being written. The task ahead is to ensure that this becomes the rule rather than the exception."



DR MATT BENSON is a senior director at Think City. He is a geographer specialising in the challenges of urbanisation.



KISHORE RAMDAS is a senior manager at Think City. He is responsible for overseeing the Levelling Up Seberang Programme alongside a similar place-based initiative in Kuala Kangsar.

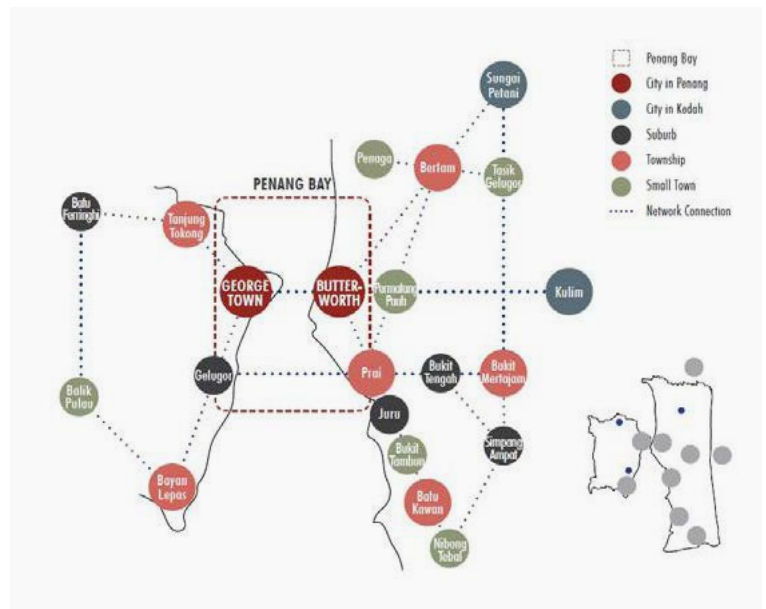


SMALL TOWNS, NEW ROLES

Butterworth's trajectory is not unique. Small towns such as Kepala Batas, Nibong Tebal and Jawi grew rapidly as service centres during the post-independence decades, before being bypassed by newer industrial zones and expressways. LUSP seeks to identify the distinctive strengths of these towns and create conditions that generate value locally. This means restoring historic town centres, connecting cultural assets into coherent visitor experiences and positioning each town within a wider mainland network that encourages visitors to explore further, rather than being content with a single destination.

LUSP's first phase engaged more than 3,000 residents and supported 65 community-driven projects and programmes worth RM8mil, spanning town centre revitalisation, heritage restoration, ecotourism and circular economy initiatives. Together, they demonstrate how Seberang Perai—with its coasts, rivers and small towns—is not peripheral to Penang's future, but central to it. Young families are finding what much of Penang can no longer easily provide, namely affordability, space and an authentic sense of community, in places like Bukit Mertajam and Nibong Tebal. Islanders are crossing the strait to explore, and interstate travellers are beginning to see the mainland as a destination rather than a transit point.

The next chapter of Seberang Perai is already being written. The task ahead is to ensure that this becomes the rule rather than the exception.



PENANG: AN IDEAL DESTINATION FOR PEACE DIALOGUES

BY IAN MCINTYRE

HEADLINES ARE DOMINATED by warfare, or threats of warfare, even as we watch from the sidelines. We may be relieved to be far from physical conflict, yet we do not forget the evidence of Penang's own war scars. But with any talk of war, there is a parallel discussion of peace. Intolerance is something Penang abhors, centred as its people are around ensuring liberty, promoting human rights and eradicating poverty. With the ongoing war on Iran, as well as in Myanmar, Palestine and Ukraine, among others, a discussion on the pursuit of peace is essential.



IAN MCINTYRE is a veteran journalist with over 25 years of experience reporting for the mainstream and alternative media. He subscribes to a belief that what is good for society is likewise beneficial for the media.



IN DEFENCE OF DIALOGUE

Real dialogue begins when we engage with those who disagree, offend or even oppose us. As the late Nelson Mandela reminded the world: "If you want to make peace with your enemy, you have to work with your enemy." To reject dialogue is to retreat into moral isolation. To engage, however, is to believe that persuasion and conscience still matter—that moral courage can still shape power, according to Mohd Yusmadi Yusoff, a former Balik Pulau parliamentarian.

One emerging idea over the past year, incidentally, is that Penang is a perfect venue to host peace dialogues and exchanges. Anwar Fazal—aged 85, he is perhaps the oldest civil society activist in Penang—can discourse longest about war, having learned about and experienced it firsthand. But the loudest voice advocating for Penang to become a preferred venue for such dialogues today is Singaporean entrepreneur Winfred Khoo. He and award-winning architect Tay Kheng Soon are at the forefront, and are in fact organising a peace dialogue in Penang. It will feature several global luminaries, including the prominent American economist and pacifist, Jeffrey D. Sachs. In accordance with its theme, "Bridging civilisations in a multi-polar world", invited guests are expected to deliberate on five centuries' worth of globalisation to ask a key question: Has the world become a better place?

For Khoo, modern Penang's inception as an entrepôt made it a place where people of diverse backgrounds could settle with the common goal of seeking prosperity and earning a living. Dialogues are also a crucial mechanism for mitigating not just global conflict, but also preventing its off-world proliferation. Khoo emphasises outer space as a collaborative frontier for peace, rather than for militarisation, in line with a United Nations resolution strictly prohibiting space-based weaponry.

The now-defunct Asian Dialogue Society offers a potential platform for peace-building work. To institutionalise these efforts, Khoo advocates for the revival of this decades-old organisation, as does Yusmadi, who points out its significant political heritage (which counts Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim as a founding member).

DIALOGUE ENABLES JUSTICE

When Malaysia assumed the Association of Southeast Asian Nations' (ASEAN) chairmanship in 2025, few anticipated that one of its first major debates would centre on whether or not to invite United States President Donald Trump to the ASEAN Summit in Kuala Lumpur. Some saw his eventual invitation as a betrayal of principles, but others viewed it as a diplomatic necessity. But this division masked a deeper question: What does dialogue actually bring to the table?

Through dialogue, Malaysia seeks not to please the powerful, but to remind them of the power of justice. At a time when major powers are divided by wars, sanctions and ideological blocs, ASEAN can demonstrate that moral leadership and moderation remain a valuable contribution to the world.

Particularly pressing is the Rohingya tragedy in Myanmar and the Rohingya refugees elsewhere (including in Malaysia), which urgently requires a new, courageous and humane approach to achieve a peaceful outcome.

This is ASEAN's moment to transform itself, away from being merely a regional association and into a principled moral voice for humanity. For Yusmadi, it is a matter of proving that our unity in diversity is not merely political, but civilisational. "In a world where many talk only to friends, Malaysia must be the nation that dares to talk to everyone, and still stands firm for justice. Because real dialogue, like real leadership, begins not in comfort, but in courage," he said.

An important moment has arrived, one where local residents can take up the cause of peacebuilding dialogue, driven by Penang's foundational values.

***Note:** The Penang Peace Dialogue will be held on 5-6 September 2026 and graced by Anwar Ibrahim, prime minister of Malaysia, Chow Kon Yeow, chief minister of Penang and Joko Widodo, former president of the Republic of Indonesia.



Book a tour

grows
confidence
Where



HIKE AT A GLANCE

LENGTH

2 hours (full loop)

DIFFICULTY

Easy

INTEREST LEVEL

Moderate, good views of
Batu Kawan

SIGNPOSTING

Signposts available at
junctions

LIKELIHOOD OF GETTING LOST

Low

NUMBER OF HIKERS

Few

BUKIT TANGGA BATU



EXPLORING THE HILLY HINTERLAND OF SUNGAI BAKAP

BY
**REXY
PRAKASH
CHACKO**

SUNGAI BAKAP, in southern Seberang Perai, is celebrated for its old-town charm and delectable food scene. Here, the sprawling Kee Kongsi (or the Kee Poh Huat Kongsi) stands proudly at its heart. Not many know, however, that a low range of hills, extending eastwards into Kedah, lies a five-minute drive away at its eastern outskirts. In recent years, one of these peaks, Bukit Tangga Batu (Stone Step Hill)—more commonly known among hikers as “Stone Dragon Hill”—has become popular following the hiking boom in Penang.





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Having already explored many of the state's more popular hikes, I felt that it was time to add this peak to the list. We set out from Penang Island towards Taman Ketitir in Sungai Bakap, just off Jalan Badak Mati. After parking near the shop lots, we crossed the busy road to reach our starting point: a wide, unpaved track leading into an oil palm estate, marked by a bright red sign-board. Within five minutes, we arrived at a chicken coop and passed through open gates into an orchard, where the trail began gently ascending through stands of lush durian trees. Along the way, a swiftlet house stood quietly amongst the greenery. Most of this area's natural vegetation has been replaced with farms, orchards and even quarries. Stands of the original forest survive only near the peaks.



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Another five minutes brought us to a bend where the trail joined a cement path that climbed steadily uphill. As we gained elevation, the view opened towards the north, framed by the distant peaks of Bukit Mertajam and Bukit Seraya. In the foreground stretched a vast sea of green—oil palm interspersed with durian trees. With durian season approaching, the trees that we passed by were heavy with developing fruit, each carefully tied to their branches to prevent them from crashing to the ground and splitting open. As we continued further up, we passed a huge *Ficus* tree. Interestingly, there was a small Datuk Kong (Na Tuk Kong) shrine right below it. Such shrines are dedicated to local guardian spirits, and devotees, usually Chinese from the vicinity, visit them to seek protection and safe passage.

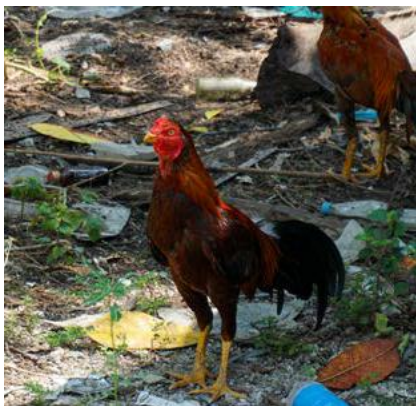
The cement road continued uphill, passing a small stream. Further up, we turned right onto a narrow cement path, which continued further through the

orchards. In the distance, we could see wooden chalets on the opposite ridge, one of which had a windmill at the back. At this point, the trail forked again. We took the left fork, which began zigzagging up the slope. As the trail began climbing steeply uphill, we paused briefly to catch our breath. Above us, a massive rocky outcrop came into view, looking like two large rocks stacked upon one another. Perhaps this explains why the hill has been gazetted as "Bukit Tangga Batu". Among hikers, this rock formation is called the "Stone Dragon", although whether it resembles a dragon or not is debatable. Perhaps it was so named for its auspicious charm, rather than any likeness in form.

A further five minutes of walking brought us right up to the formation. In total, it had taken us 45 minutes to reach this spot. Another large *Ficus* tree, which had anchored itself on the rocks, came into view, adding to the formation's nat-



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ural charm. As we paused to take photos, delicate blue blossoms of *Commelina diffusa* caught our attention. This species, which often grows together with weeds, has medicinal properties and its petals are also used to produce a blue dye. Continuing further along the trail, we passed newly planted durian trees and got a glimpse of Batu Kawan down in the plains.

The trail continued gently towards the top of the ridge, and just a few steps further, we arrived at a junction where towering pylons cut across the hill range. Here, we got a view of the southeastern periphery of Penang state and even of Kedah. Taking the left turn, we followed the trail as it snaked downhill beside the pylons, eventually skirting the edge of a vast quarry before reconnecting with the orchard we

had passed earlier. Descending steadily, we completed our hike just in time to indulge in a delectable lunch of Teochew delights in Sungai Bakap.

Whether you call it “Bukit Tangga Batu” or “Stone Dragon Hill”, one thing is certain: this splendid hike offers something for beginners and seasoned hikers alike, capped with rewarding views of Sungai Bakap’s lesser-visited hinterland.

***Note:** Avoid the Bukit Tangga Batu hike during the durian season, since parts of the trail will be closed during this time.



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CAPTIONS

1. (Cover spread)
View from the slopes of Bukit Tangga Batu towards the north. A vast “sea” of green framed by the distant peaks of Bukit Mertajam and Bukit Seraya in the background.
2. The popular photo spot in front of the “Stone Dragon” rocky outcrop.
3. Developing durian fruits carefully tied to prevent them from crashing to the ground.
4. One of the wooden chalets spotted on the ridge opposite us.
5. Following the trail as it snaked downhill along the periphery of the pylons.
6. A rooster spotted along our hike.
7. A small Datuk Kong shrine right below a huge *Ficus* tree along the trail.
8. The delicate blue blossoms of *Commelina diffusa*.
9. Kee Kongs in Sungai Bakap.



REXY PRAKASH CHACKO is an electronic engineer by profession and a nature lover by passion. While he spends his weekdays earning a living at the Bayan Lepas Free Industrial Zone, his weekends are spent reflecting and recharging on the green hills of Penang.



WE NEED TO TALK

ARTISTS' RIGHTS AND THE QUEST FOR INTELLECTUAL PROPERTY JUSTICE

BY NICOLE CHANG



LAST YEAR, Ernest Zacharevic's solo exhibition at Cultprint gallery, *We Need to Talk*, engaged local creatives and the public in immersive reflections and discussions on intellectual property (IP) infringements. The exhibition showcased a series of Zacharevic's works, inspired by his ongoing legal battle against AirAsia for the alleged unauthorised use of his public mural, "Kids on Bicycle", for private corporate gain. What can the experiences of Zacharevic and other artists tell us about how artists protect their rights, defend themselves from infringements and pursue IP justice?

MORE THAN A SOLO

Zacharevic's famous mural needs little introduction, having virtually become visual shorthand for Penang. However, it was featured on AirAsia's aircraft livery, corporate email campaigns, advertisements and in-flight magazines without proper credit. He acknowledged that plaintiffs are often discouraged or restricted from speaking about cases publicly once legal proceedings commence. Their challenges are compounded by a general lack of IP awareness among creative workers, which urgently requires platforms to facilitate dialogue, share experiences and build links with legal advisors to provide clarification and guidance on protection strategies. Despite being publicly visible and accessible, public art such as Zacharevic's work does remain well-protected under local IP legislation,^[1] where artists retain control over unlicensed or unauthorised reproduction, merchandising and commercial adaptations.

This airport-themed exhibition was designed in response to his artwork's appropriation and curated to address local artists' struggles to speak out, the hidden costs of creativity, the rights that creatives deserve and the need for meaningful collaborations within the creative ecosystem. The gallery space parodied an airline check-in zone, leading visitors through mock check-in counters, where they received themed "boarding passes" and satirical "in-flight safety cards" with tips on IP rights. Proceeds from sales of limited-edition merchandise, collectibles and campaign souvenirs supported Zacharevic's legal pursuit, which he was advised could cost up to RM250,000.

Rather than being just a solo exhibition, it also incorporated an active public engagement campaign by inviting local communities—particularly creative practitioners—to openly confront recurring issues of artistic exploitation, IP or copyright infringements, plagiarism, creative misappropriation and unauthorised reproduction, among others. Public forums, IP clinics and gatherings for creatives allowed for open sharing and dialogue. In collec-

tively spotlighting injustices facing artists, *We Need to Talk* called for legal and cultural accountability to ensure respect and protection for creative rights.

CHALLENGES AND SILVER LININGS

Joining Zacharevic at a 5 July 2025 forum were the installation artist-cum-architect Jun Ong and creative consultant Fey Ilyas from Current Media Group (CMG). Like Zacharevic, Jun's publicly accessible, site-specific installation artwork faced similar challenges. His iconic 12-faceted, five-storey "STAR" light sculpture, installed within an unfinished concrete building structure in Butterworth in 2015, has



attracted both international attention as well as uncredited and unauthorised appropriation and replication elsewhere. "In 2018, someone reached out and sent me a photo showing a recreation of a 12-pointed STAR sculpture installed in a building in Brussels, Belgium," said Jun. Lacking knowledge of IP rights, he delayed action until he secured legal support for IP registration, through a process that took years.

As for Ilyas, he alleged that the Ministry of Investment, Trade and Industry (MITI) had used his team's proposed architectural design concepts and ideas for the Malaysian pavilion at Expo 2025 Osaka. They had pitched their proposal in 2022, only to see it being replicated without consent, credit and compensation. Soon afterwards, CMG would issue a formal letter of demand on 17 July, initiating legal proceedings following two months of inaction by MITI, despite its promise to open an investigation.

"The legal system does not empower the creator. It's always hard, time-consuming and expensive for creators/authors to protect their works. [The] burden always falls on the creator rather than the opposing party. Even speaking out entails risks that might result in a countersuit, making the process more costly and difficult," Ilyas stated. This experience underscores vulnerabilities in safeguarding creative ideas or conceptual proposals during the pitching phase in Malaysia's creative industry, especially when standard contractual agreements are lacking.

From a visual artist's perspective, Zacharevic pointed out how globalisation has enabled artwork to be instantly shared worldwide, complicating the control of one's IP. Accounting for the quantity of works requiring registration, specific territorial jurisdictions and varying registration costs across countries, among other considerations, is indeed taxing work for creatives.

Vincent Liew, an IP lawyer and member of the Malaysian Bar Council IP Committee and several international IP associations, also shared valuable insights. Crucially, the "[c]reator/author of a copyrightable work enjoys lifetime exclusive rights over the work plus 50 years after death", as per Malaysia's Copyright Act 1987. Although copyright protection is essentially automatically granted upon creation of an original work, it is still advisable for creators to file a Copyright Voluntary Notification with MyIPO to establish prima facie evidence of ownership and creation date, for a standard registration fee of RM200. Doing so empowers owners or creators to license the authorised use of their work, with compensation through fees or royalties.

There are also other points in favour of local creative workers. Liew noted that Malaysia's IP registration and legal fees are more affordable than in many other countries. Indeed, a recent IP court case awarded RM500,000 in damages to the plaintiff, setting a new precedent for creative workers. "Do not hesitate to pursue litigation or consult your legal counsel," Vincent advised. However, he also noted that *not all* IP enforcement actions require court action. In fact, many disputes can be resolved or mediated through negotiations following the issuance of a letter of demand or a cease-and-desist letter.





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WHAT IS TO BE DONE?

What, then, are artists to do? Fortunately, Cultprint's team has shared several tips on creative rights on social media. To briefly adapt and sum them up:

FOR CREATORS

- 1. Know your rights over original works:** understand *economic rights* to control unauthorised commercial use of work; and *moral rights* to be credited and to protect the integrity of work from alterations/misuse; and
- 2. Document and protect creations:** establish a trail of authorship (e.g., save drafts/messages/notes, take screenshots/photos, record videos and store digitally in a dated system)

FOR CLIENTS

- 1. Respect and value creativity:** ask for the creator's author's *permission*; *credit* original creations; and *pay* creators/authors fairly;
- 2. Stop the cincai/casual verbal agreement culture:** act professionally by engaging in written contracts.^[2]

Lawyer Tristan Ng recommends securing a formal written agreement or contract that includes clear IP clauses and non-disclosure terms, along with documentation of all communications, to help mitigate the risk of plagiarism or appropriation.^[3]

Meanwhile, the Media Specialists Association of Malaysia launched its 2025 Media Pitch Guidelines in July 2025 in order to protect IP during the pitching process.^[4] In formalising fair expectations for both clients and agencies, it seeks to promote ethical, transparent and IP-conscious pitch practices across media and advertising sectors.

CAPTIONS

- (Cover photo) Taking AirAsia to task over alleged misuse of Zacharevic's "Kids on Bicycle" mural.
- Some promotional images from AirAsia, based on "Kids on Bicycle" (Source: Cultprint's Facebook account).
- Jun Ong's "STAR" light sculpture/installation (2015) in Butterworth (Source: Cultprint's Facebook account).
- Speakers at *We Need To Talk's* public forum on 5 July 2025. From left: Vincent Liew, Jun Ong, Fay Ilyas & Ernest Zacharevic.
- Parodying the airline check-in zone at Cultprint gallery.
- The parody continues.

ENDNOTES

- Malaysia's IP system is mainly administered by MyIPO, which administers legislation including the Trade Marks Act 2019, Patents Act 1983, Copyright Act 1987, Industrial Designs Act 1996, Layout Designs of Integrated Circuits Act 2000 and Geographical Indications legislation.
- See the full details at the following hyperlinks: (1) fb.com/photo/?fbid=1225175389226448&set=a.122180262092226448; and (2) fb.com/photo/?fbid=122253367994226448&set=pcb.122253368084226448.



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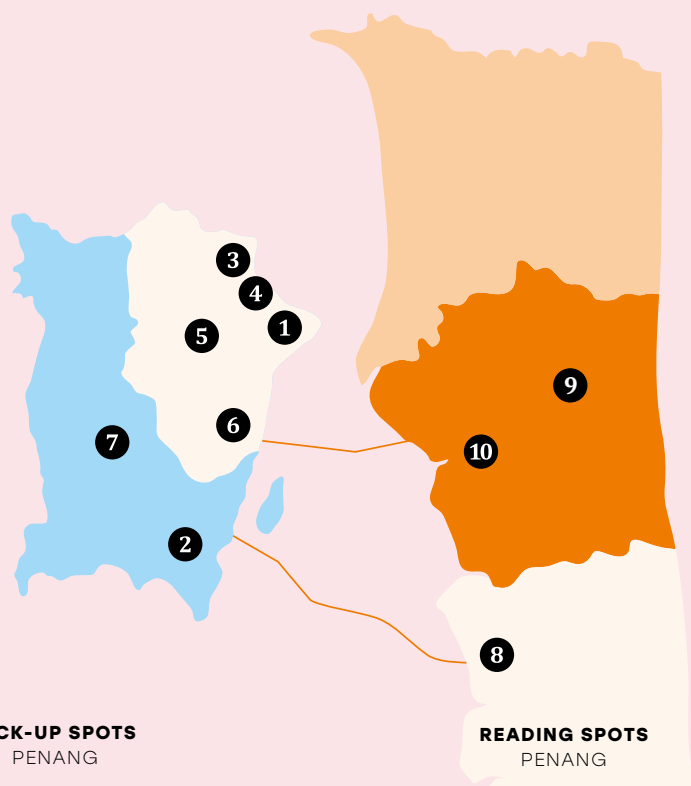
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- Khaw, C. (2025) "MITI allegedly 'stole' an agency's design—here's what creatives can do to protect their work", vulcanpost, April 29, 2025. vulcanpost.com/886880/miti-allegedly-steal-expo-2025-designs-copy-right-infringement/
- See: mysa.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/MSA-Pitch-Guidelines_2025.pdf. This Association (est. 2003) is the official industry body representing media agencies in Malaysia, advocating for best practices in media research, strategic planning, negotiation and placement, while promoting transparency, professionalism and ethical standards across the media and advertising ecosystem.



NICOLE CHANG has just completed her PhD programme at the Department of Development Planning and Management, School of Social Sciences, Universiti Sains Malaysia.

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 Bungaluh
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	



- Every year: Infrastructure maintenance, repairs & upgrades
- 2025: Pilot Desalination Project
- 2030: WCP 2030 (+602 MLD)
- 2031: Perak-Penang Water Project (+300 - 500 MLD)

MLD: million litres/day

WATER SUPPLY ROAD MAP TOWARDS 2050

Whenever a Penang water consumer pays a water bill, he/she is paying for more than just clean water flowing from taps.

Every year, PBAPP spends millions of ringgit to maintain, repair and upgrade water supply infrastructure, including installations which are 50 – 100 years old. PBAPP is implementing 8 new water projects under its Water Contingency Plan 2030 (WCP 2030). We are working on a pilot project to explore the viability of desalinating sea water.

PBAPP is obliged to buy treated water from Perak to supply in Penang from 2031.

Looking ahead, PBAPP has a water supply road map in hand. However, every check-point on that map will incur a significant investment and additional expenditure.

It is a fact that future Penang water rates will be determined, to a large extent, by the volume of water Penangites choose to consume now and in the future.



PBA
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Pulau Pinang Sdn Bhd
199901001061 (475961-X)

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