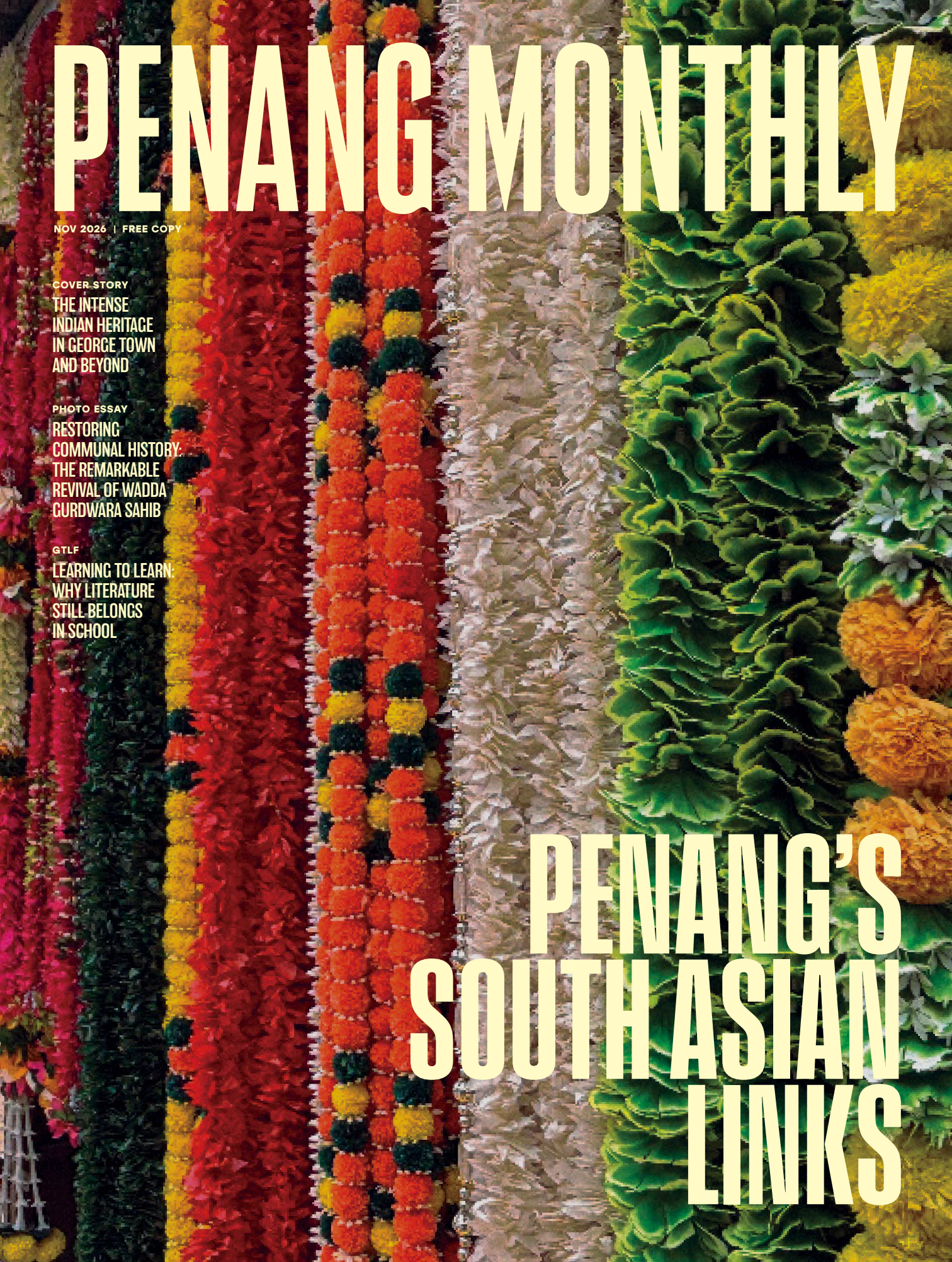


PENANG MONTHLY



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COVER STORY

THE INTENSE
INDIAN HERITAGE
IN GEORGE TOWN
AND BEYOND

PHOTO ESSAY

RESTORING
COMMUNAL HISTORY:
THE REMARKABLE
REVIVAL OF WADDA
GURDWARA SAHIB

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LEARNING TO LEARN:
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PENANG'S SOUTH ASIAN LINKS



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- 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.
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- 7 Offer reliable socioeconomic data for the benefit of decision makers in government and the private sector.

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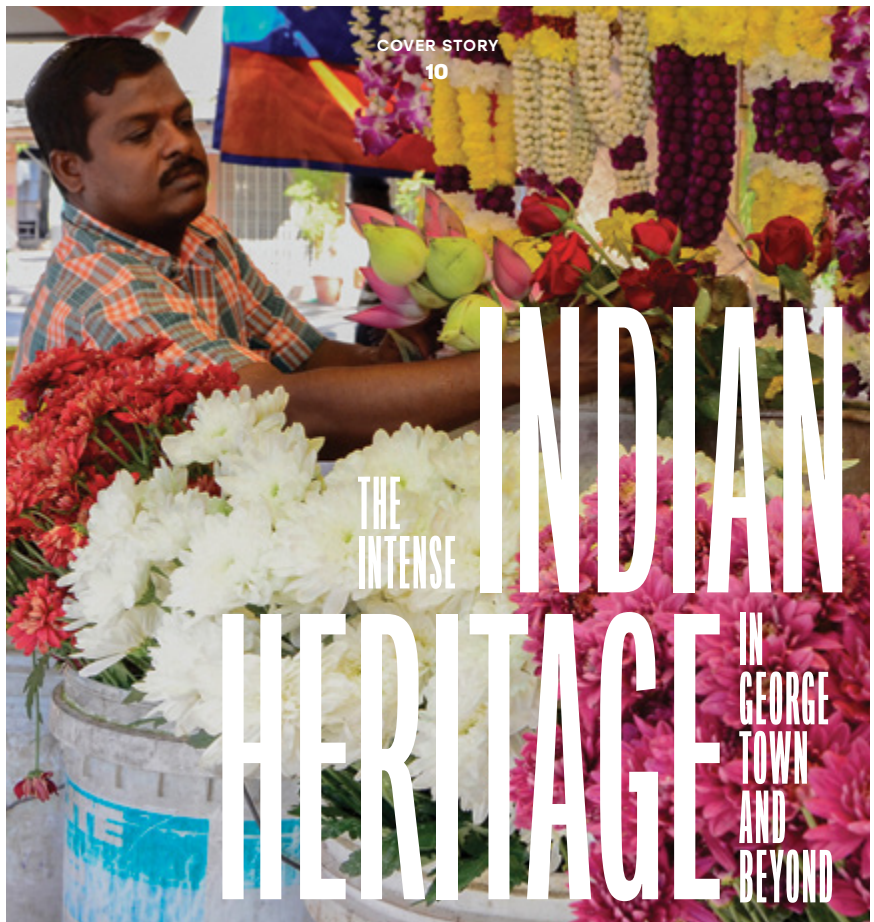
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LEARNING TO LEARN: WHY LITERATURE STILL BELONGS IN SCHOOL



The key to sustaining the enclave’s continued legacy ultimately lies with its most important element: its people. So long as they do not forget their cultures and roots, Little India will continue to be a thriving community, representing a unique part of the Malaysian mosaic.”

—HB ARUNKUMAR
**THE INTENSE INDIAN HERITAGE IN
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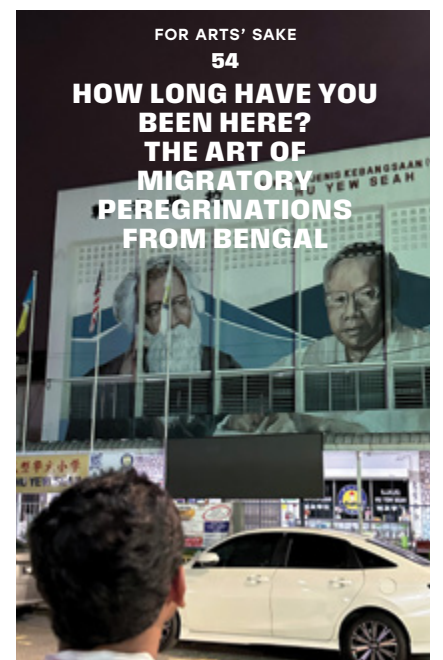
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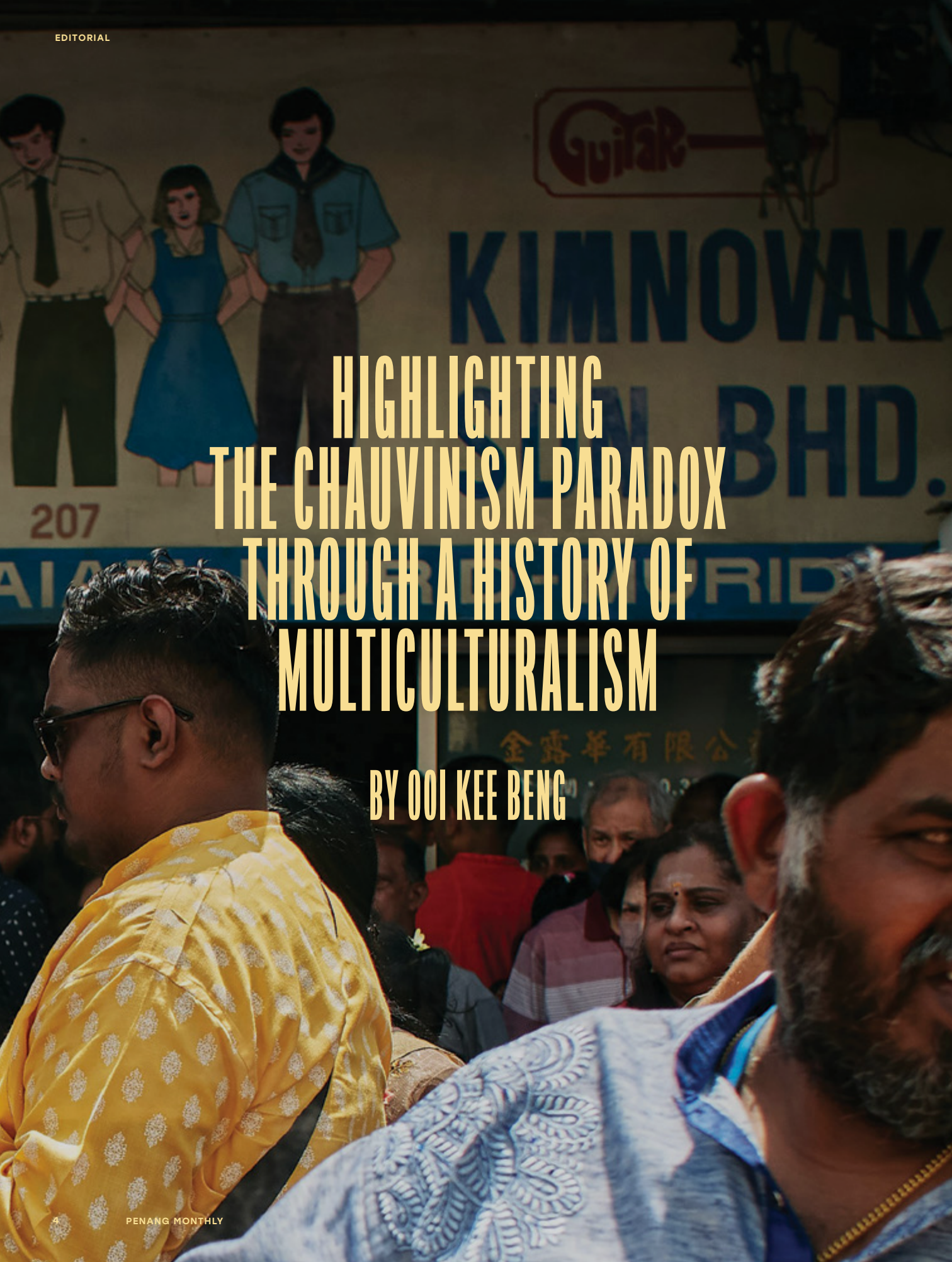


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HIGHLIGHTING THE CHAUVINISM PARADOX THROUGH A HISTORY OF MULTICULTURALISM

BY OOI KEE BENG

CAPTION

1. (Cover page) Photo
by Kelvin Zyteng

ONE OF THE deepest legacies of colonisation worldwide is the nation-state. Having learned that every inch on earth has to be owned, sooner or later, by some political power, the emergent nation-states, which inherited the territories left behind by crumbling European powers—and Japan—in the 20th century, also cultivated the envy, desperation and fear that had characterised their European models.

National borders became frontlines where flows of goods and peoples could be controlled, counted and tariffed. Other frontlines grew to monitor the flow of capital. This innovation in human organisation meant the erasure of earlier types of flows. But where maritime migration and trade patterns were historically important, things can get very messy, and their consequences hard to chart. And when subsequent settlements occur, things get really exciting.

Such spots are a paradise for anthropologists. The intermixing of communities and cultures, coupled with the growth of new trades, professions, cuisines and identities, promises insights into human behaviour in ways that studying a stable society cannot offer. Strangely though, when communities mix, they also become extremely fearful of cultural loss, or what I shall call the *chauvinism paradox*. This most likely occurs when the communities involved came from faraway places with differing civilisational impulses. Thus, one can expect radical differences in terms of how communities with differing languages, histories and values subsequently get along amidst greater cultural proximity.

This is the case for Penang. While characterised by their high level of tolerance and curiosity, Penang's constituent communities—which, importantly, are not equally balanced in terms of population size, economic coherence or political prowess—are quite defensive and instinctively proud of their respective ethnic backgrounds.

Economic interdependence seems to be the grease enabling communities to come together. At the same time, they feel a need to distinguish themselves from each other, though seldom aggressively. They occasionally megaphone their distinct nature, in accordance with customs developed and maintained over time, largely for this very purpose. There is also a spatial consideration. While we may see places of worship located alongside each other in apparent harmony, we also have urban enclaves that are clearly based on one dominant ethnic component, be this

George Town's "Little India," a clan territory or an urban Malay kampung. An apartment remains.

Such limited territorial overlaps are just as informative about history and human behaviour as Penang's more hybrid core areas. The overlaps in economic activities, the fusion in food and the creolisation of languages need to be appreciated in conjunction with distinct cultural celebrations, religious festivals and physical spaces. A cosmopolitan hub's stability and liveability are premised upon the seemingly contradictory principles of hybridisation and plurality. In fact, the latter process enables the former to persist peacefully. The resulting "chauvinism paradox" may be the prerequisite for intercommunal collaboration and acceptance.

Penang was a fringe territory of the Kedah Sultanate, for which Siamese power had been a major concern for several centuries. The formal population of Penang, gauging by colonial standards of legibility, began with the British attempt to secure a maritime, mercantile and military base on the eastern side of the Bay of Bengal in the late 1700s. This led peoples of various ethnic backgrounds, who were already settled in the immediate region, to move to the new free port to test their luck and seek safe haven. Once confidently settled, the British encouraged migration from India and China, where very distinct and disparate peoples began establishing themselves locally. Such is the formal historical narrative. But it is also an incomplete one.

South Asian migration, settlement and influence precede the appearance of any European ship in this region, signified by references to and signs of Tamil craftsmen and traders, merchants and mariners, and Brahmins and Buddhist monks dating back several hundred years before the Christian era. This is not to mention the arrival of Chola forces in the 11th century. In 1786–1957, as many as four million people of South Asian origin crossed over to Penang, although only about a quarter settled for good. They came as soldiers and armed police, as convicts from the Madras and Bengal Presidencies, and as estate and public works labourers. Alongside them were free migrants who dealt in finance, trade, clerical and technical work.

Where the Chinese are concerned, there are records of ships and pilgrims visiting Langkasuka and Srivijaya before the Tang Dynasty, and some were also resident in Temasek. 15th-century Melaka was used as a staging post for Chinese voyages,

and the Sultanate enjoyed Ming protection (at least under the Yongle Emperor). Where Penang is concerned, small populations of Chinese had settled, especially on the northern Tanjung Tokong coast. British rule encouraged Chinese already in the region—at Melaka, Phuket and Kuala Kedah—to relocate, with their population reaching around 3,000 soon after. By the end of the Second World War, 250,000 Chinese had settled in the colony (55% of the total population).

Early Malay settlements on the island would probably have been on the coasts, most notably in Batu Uban. Later settlers in colonial Penang were a diverse group, including Kedah Malays, Sumatrans, those of Arab descent (such as the Arab-Acehnese), Bugis, Javanese, Boyanese and the creole Jawi Peranakan population. Much of the Malay settlement of Seberang Perai (formerly Province Wellesley) was driven by refugee streams from Kedah, whose peoples fled the 1821 Siamese invasion and later suppressions.

Beyond these three major communities are many others. But it is sufficient to note that their stories already complicate the straightforward historical narrative of European agency, which foregrounds a Eurocentric understanding of the region's geography—and, by extension, Western discursive hegemony—and effectively erases non-European contributions. Local agency, in the final analysis, needs to be remembered and valued if we are to step beyond the curtain of colonial historiography. Regaining knowledge about the phases of—and reasons for—the migrations of Penang's early population will help us understand our own home, its historical and geographical significance and its future possibilities. And embrace our own historical agency.



A LOVE LETTER TO PUNJABI CHA

BY LIANI MK

PHOTOS BY ARIEFF ZAFIR

GROWING UP, warm balmy Sundays meant sleepy drives across states to visit aunts and uncles living in northern Peninsular Malaysia. These visits meant smatterings of words, both familiar and foreign to my ears, and homemade chapati and saag (a mix of spices and leafy mustard greens or spinach). Almost always, they ended with a whole-some jug of spiced milk tea that we call cha, to remedy the lull of the sleepy afternoon. Fatigue often took the reins, but no one refused a cup. Who would—and why? Still, Punjabi cha—more commonly known as masala chai—was something I avoided as a child who preferred things sweet. Today, the smell wafting through the kitchen is all I look forward to in the mornings.

In Penang, we know our hot drinks. Some of us are very picky about the beverage that stirs us awake at the crack of dawn. We have opinions about our kopi (in all its forms) and teh tarik (how strong or sweet we want it), and we are aware of expensive new beverage outlets. But for me, there is something different about cha: no one should claim to have the best version

or serve it expensively. Cha is nostalgic, warming and familiar, at least to me, and perhaps many people of diasporic Indian heritage.

A TEA BY EVERY OTHER NAME AND TASTE

In every Punjabi kitchen, it is usually early (while everyone else is still asleep) when the pot goes on the flame. Being the earliest to wake, this responsibility now falls on me, the unofficially designated *cha walla*, or tea barista, at home. The pot simmers, its hot handle wrapped in cloth. Into it go water, milk, tea leaves and a knob of spices, pounded until they give up their flavour. Then comes the waiting.

But masala chai does not have a fixed recipe, neither here nor in India; it differs across regions. For example, Mumbai's sweet and strong "cutting chai" is sold at roadside stalls in small half-cup portions, which gives this variant its name. It uses Assam tea leaves, but some vendors often rely on ready-made masala powder. It is meant as an affordable to-go beverage for

busy commuters. Some herbal spiced teas come in a concoction of lemongrass, mint and tulsi leaves, like Gujarat's Lilo Ukalo. Meanwhile, Bengal and Assam recipes focus on the tea itself, using less milk and often no spice at all. Kashmir boasts salted pink noon chai and kahwa (a green tea flavoured with saffron, cardamom and nuts). Hyderabad's Irani chai is rich with reduced milk, made for dunking biscuits.

These are not rules; ultimately, every family has its own preferences. Preparations change, from the type or amount of milk added to the order of things going into the pot. Sometimes, even the definition of strength changes, depending on the drinker. This is the thing about cha: it is difficult to condense into a definitive recipe somewhere, guarded by generations of grandmothers.

There is a relatively recent history to this everyday ritual. Tea-drinking in India expanded dramatically during the colonial period, when British tea interests pushed for a strong domestic market for Indian tea in the early 1900s, through the British Indian Tea Association.^[1] During this time, black tea was the most expensive ingredient. But this commercial commodity was gradually adopted into local food cultures on a scale that even colonial tea promoters could not control. Locals eventually made the drink their own, basing recipes according to their tastes, ingredients and habits, through unofficial concoctions made in kitchens.

HOW PUNJABI CHA DIFFERS

Punjabi cha is unique for using fewer spice blends, focusing more on proportion and technique instead. This cha is generally thicker and creamier, featuring more milk, often equal to the amount of water added (or as preferred). Meanwhile, sugar or honey goes in during boiling, which caramelises in the brew.

The two main spices—according to a reliable source, my grandmother—are green cardamom and fennel seeds, which give the milk tea an earthier tone. These spices are often pounded so that the flavours come through. The spice list is generally short, but some like adding "supporting acts" such as ginger. Families disagree on the type and proportions of other spices to be added, sometimes depending on one's mood, like a cinnamon stick, a clove or two, nutmeg powder, black pepper or even a slight zest of orange.

Ultimately, the main star is the tea itself. Generally, many Punjabi cooks prefer two or three spices, rather than having a dozen disrupt the taste. After all, shouldn't tea taste like tea, but with just a little oomph? The best kinds of leaves are derived through the "crush, tear, curl" method

developed in Assam in the 1930s to break them into smaller granules. This way, black tea releases colour, tannins and flavour quicker, which makes for a strong brew.^[2] This strength, known as *kadak*, results in a cha that is full-bodied, firm and strong: just the kind bound to wake up anyone downing a cup.

THE MALAYSIAN CONNECTION

The diaspora has its own story. In the UK and Canada, Punjabi families keep the pot-on-the-stove method inside their homes, while chai sold outside often becomes a type of café latte made with syrup and concentrate. In the Gulf, karak chai—strong, milky and cardamom-rich—has become a local staple among South Asian workers.

Malaysia has its own place in this story. Punjabi and Sikh communities have been part of Malaya since the 1870s, when Captain Tristram Speedy recruited men from Punjab to Perak’s tin mines—including Sikhs, Pathans and Punjabi Muslims—as part of the forces that became closely associated with the early Perak police.^[3] Their migratory histories are tied not only to colonial policing and security work (or immigration, like the grandfather whom I never met) but also cattle and dairy farming, transportation, general labour and small businesses. For many growing up with cha in their households, the drink also represents what happens when people move and make a home elsewhere. Recipes change with what is available; ingredients adapt and colour our memories through taste.

Malaysians might find an immediate family resemblance to teh tarik. A strong black tea mixed with condensed milk, pulled between two cups to create its characteristic froth, it emerged from Malaya’s Indian Muslim tea-stall culture, which incorporated ingredients found locally, mediated through the working environments of plantations, stalls and the precursors of today’s “mamak” stalls.

If you are looking for cha in Penang, you will find many versions of masala tea in “Little India,” for example at Lebuhraya Queen’s Tea Kadai and the many Indian eateries around town. Some will taste closer to a spiced teh tarik, others closer to the Punjabi original. Meanwhile, gurdwaras—which serve food communally as part of the Sikh tradition of langar (community halls)—are another setting where tea is offered to visitors.

Beyond where it is served, cha also reflects hospitality—*how* it is served matters too. If you visit a Punjabi home at any hour, the first conversation is not about whether you want tea, but how soon it will be ready. Refusing this automatic gesture



2



4

is possible, but slightly awkward. The cup arrives with something on the side, like hardy rusk, biscuits or last night’s warmed-over chapati. Tea is then indulged collectively, for it is a communal beverage, rarely made for one person but in large pots, ready for whoever drops by for a conversation or two. As a seasoned *cha walla*, I can attest to its social role. There is a reason why this drink lingers in my memory when others do not.

On sleepy Sundays, I make cha like clockwork. The morning is still when I start stirring a steel pot of this caramel-coloured mixture with a wooden ladle, the smell of spices clinging to my hair. I stay present as I stir, because I must watch the rise and boil, toeing the delicate balance between what is enough and too much. I don’t leave the stove, even as my face is warmed by the steam of spices. The process is both a meditation and slow anticipation of the eventual reward of the first sip. Even as I write this, my mind lingers on a cup. Perhaps it’s time to switch off and make a pot.



3



5

CAPTIONS

1. Pouring a cup of Punjabi cha.
2. Pounding of spices in mortar.
3. Sieving the tea to remove the leftover leaves and spices.
4. Adding milk into the tea.
5. Straining the hot Punjabi cha into a teapot.

ENDNOTES

1. The Spruce Eats. (2022). *The History of Masala Chai*.
2. Some popular brands are Wagh Bakri, Tata Tea and Brooke Bond.
3. Asia Samarchar. (2017). *Sikh migration to Peninsular Malaysia*.



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.

THE ELEPHANT AT THE DOOR: MEETING GANESHA AT THE THRESHOLD

BY SURESRAJ
THERAMBARAJOO



2



1

CAPTIONS

1. The black appearance comes from the traditional use of dark stone, such as granite or basalt, for temple murtis, rather than representing Ganesha's literal skin colour. Over years of ritual worship, oil, sandalwood, ash and repeated bathing can deepen and polish the stone, giving it a striking dark, almost luminous, appearance.
2. A beautifully crafted depiction of Lord Ganesha at the entrance of Sri Mahamariamman Temple.
3. The tall gopurams of Penang's Hindu temples are hard to miss, covered in colourful gods and figures that seem to watch over the streets below.

HERE I AM on a cracked plastic stool in “Little India,” nursing a thick semi-sweet kopi susu while the humidity does its level best to drown me. My T-shirt is already drenched—a lost cause by 10am—but the air here is surprisingly sweet. It is a clean, heavy blend of roasting coffee beans, fresh jasmine garlands and the sharp, medicinal sting of sandalwood incense, amidst the multicultural hum of the neighbourhood.

Across the street, at the footsteps of Sri Mahamariamman Temple, the oldest Hindu temple in Penang, a man is cracking a coconut open. A clean, violent break against the stone. Water spills over the sun-bleached pavement in a sacrificial washing of the slate. He is not talking to the big bosses yet. He is not looking for Shiva's destructive fire or the goddess's fierce, world-shaking protection. He is starting with the guy with the trunk. The big man, the cosmic bouncer: Ganesha himself.

In the chaotic, beautiful sprawl of the Hindu pantheon, one rule is absolutely non-negotiable: Ganesha goes first. For Hindus, life is a relentless minefield of obstacles, and Ganesha has the metal detector. He is the Vighnaharta, the Lord of Obstacles, but he does not just shift them aside like a polite valet. He owns them. He puts the boulder in your path when you are being self-important, and rolls it into the ditch when you have finally shown some genuine humility. In these ways, his presence encourages a humbler approach to life, grounded in the acknowledgement of your limits.

PRACTICAL WORSHIP

A Hindu shopkeeper does not dare start a business on Lebuah Chulia, their family does not move into a new shophouse on Lebuah Armenian and absolutely nobody sits down for a wedding feast without first acknowledging the elephant-headed deity guarding the threshold between “what is” and “what could be.” The tradition of Prathama Puja, the first worship, is not some accident of history. For Hindus, it is akin to a spiritual insurance policy. It is a necessary admission that no matter how smart you think you are, the universe can still trip you up on the way to the door.

Penang’s port was built on transitions, where people arrived with nothing but suitcases and prayers. When early settlers from South India stepped off the boats at Swettenham Pier, they were looking for a way through life, not abstract philosophy. They found it in the little red and yellow street-corner shrines you see everywhere in George Town, tucked between colonial

pillars. There waits Ganesha, sitting in the humidity, smelling of fresh limes. He represents the Muladhara Chakra: the root, the base of the spine, the earth beneath your feet. You cannot reach for the heavens if your feet are stuck in the mud. By praying to him first, Hindus ground themselves before the chaos of the day begins.

NO SANITISED LORE

To understand the devotion to Ganesha, you have to understand a family tragedy with more spice and heart than most Shakespearean dramas. Parvati, the Divine Mother, just wanted a bath. She wanted some peace. So, she scraped together some clay from her own skin—literally creating life from her own grit—and breathed a son into existence to guard the door. Then came Shiva, the Destroyer, the husband who had been away on a long-term trip, “finding himself” in the mountains. Seeing this kid blocking his way, he did what any short-tempered deity would do: he decapitated him. When Parvati found out, she did not just cry, but threatened to unmake the entire universe. To fix the mess, Shiva grabbed the head of the first creature that he found facing north—an elephant—and brought the boy back to life. In a moment of divine damage control, he declared that Ganesha would forever be the first deity to be worshipped.

This is a story about ego, the clash between the old guard and the new, and, ultimately, about restoration. Everyone loses their head sometimes, and for Hindus, Ganesha is the patron saint of getting back up with a different perspective.

In aesthetic terms, Ganesha’s form is a masterclass in functional design. Those massive ears are not just for show; they are there to listen more, to hear the whispers of the universe and the cries of the suffering in a world that will not shut up. The small mouth suggests that we talk less and waste no breath on nonsense. His big belly digests everything—the good, the bad, the spicy, the bitter—consuming the world’s sorrows and turning them into peace. Then there is the broken tusk, which he snapped off to use as a pen to write the Mahabharata. It is a reminder of sacrifice for the sake of knowledge, where there is no real art without a little blood. Even his vehicle, a tiny mouse, is symbolic. It represents the ego: small, nibbling, greedy and always looking for a shortcut. Ganesha simply sits on it. He controls desire, and not the reverse.

THE HARD STONE OF REALITY

Back at the temple, another devotee whacks a coconut to the ground. During festivals like Vinayagar Chaturthi, the sheer volume of shattered shells is staggering. It is a brutal yet necessary metaphor. The hard outer shell represents the ego, that stubborn, defensive layer we build around ourselves to feel important. The white flesh inside is the soul, and the water is the sweetness of divinity. To get to the good stuff, you first have to be broken. You have to smash that ego against the hard stone of reality, which Ganesha holds. There is something deeply punk about this total rejection of the superficial.

Under the heavy, white heat of noon, it becomes clear that Ganesha is the perfect deity for a traveller like myself. In this glare, there are no shadows to hide in, no golden light to soften the rough edges of the road. Travel is a series of obstacles: delayed flights, missed connections, bad directions and language barriers. We are constantly at the mercy of the threshold. Hindus pray to him first because they have to be humble enough to admit that they do not know the way through the midday haze. They must admit that the road ahead is uncertain, and that they need a guide who is not afraid of a little heavy lifting.

So, whether you are Hindu or otherwise, do not just walk past that elephant-headed statue the next time you are in Little India. Stop. Acknowledge him: smile, wave, salute, nod or even pray if you must. Not out of superstition, but because it is good manners to greet the doorman before joining the party. Here, Ganesha is definitely the host.

DR. SURESRAJ

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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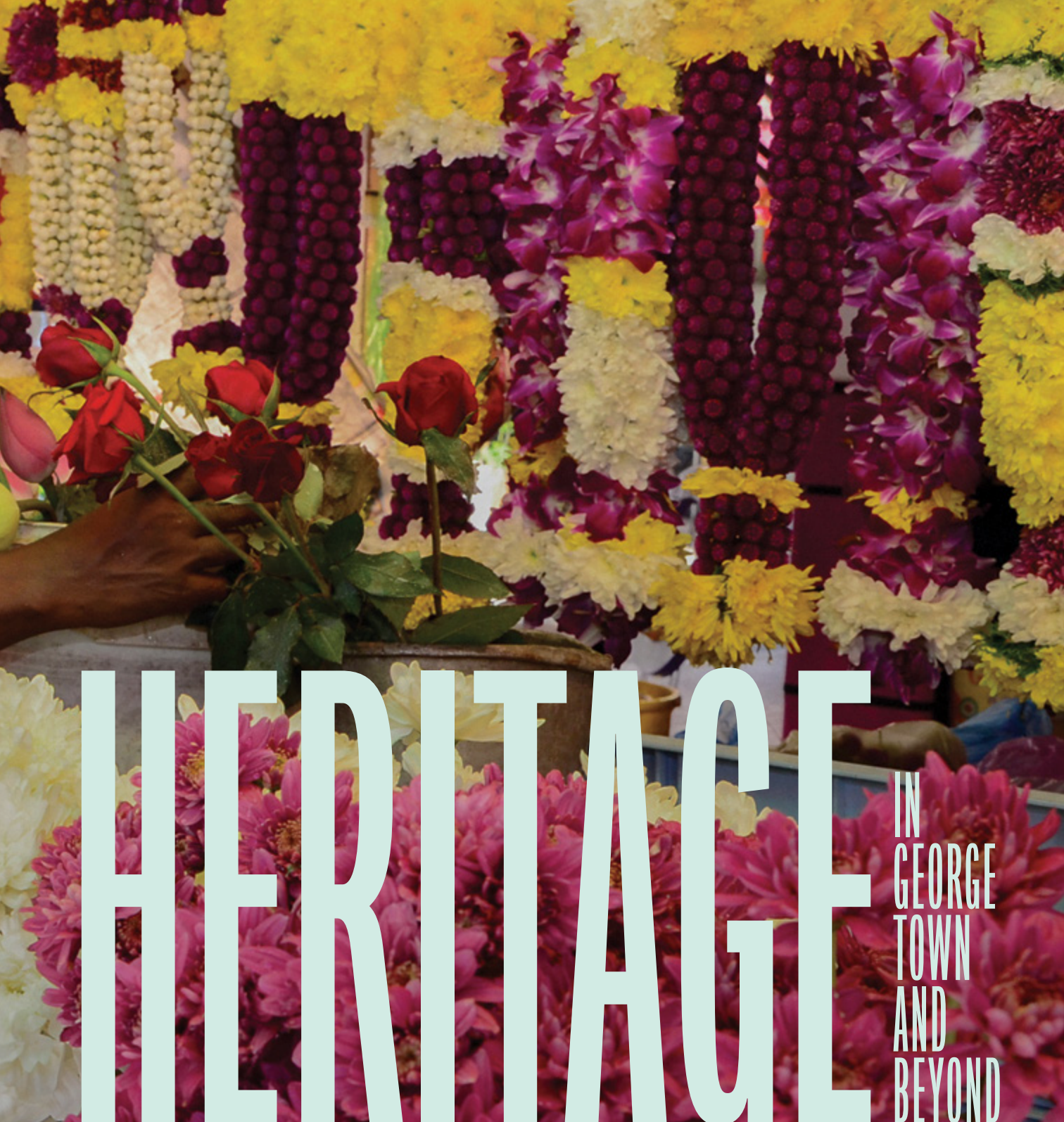


THE
INTENSE

INDIAN

PHOTOGRAPHS AND
TEXT BY
HB ARUNKUMAR

THERE ARE ELDERS among Penang's Indian community who still remember the huge steamships that transported people and goods between India and the port of Penang, before commercial flights gained prominence. ^[1] They fondly recall the names of famous passenger ships traversing the Indian Ocean and the Bay of Bengal: the *Rajula*, the *Straits of Madras*, the *Jal Gopal* and the *Chidambaram*. Each transported hundreds of people every 22 days, offloading them at George Town's port before taking hundreds of others to India. Besides enabling the movement of people, who contributed to Penang's vibrant cultural ethos, so too did products travel: spices and foodstuffs



HERITAGE

IN GEORGETOWN AND BEYOND

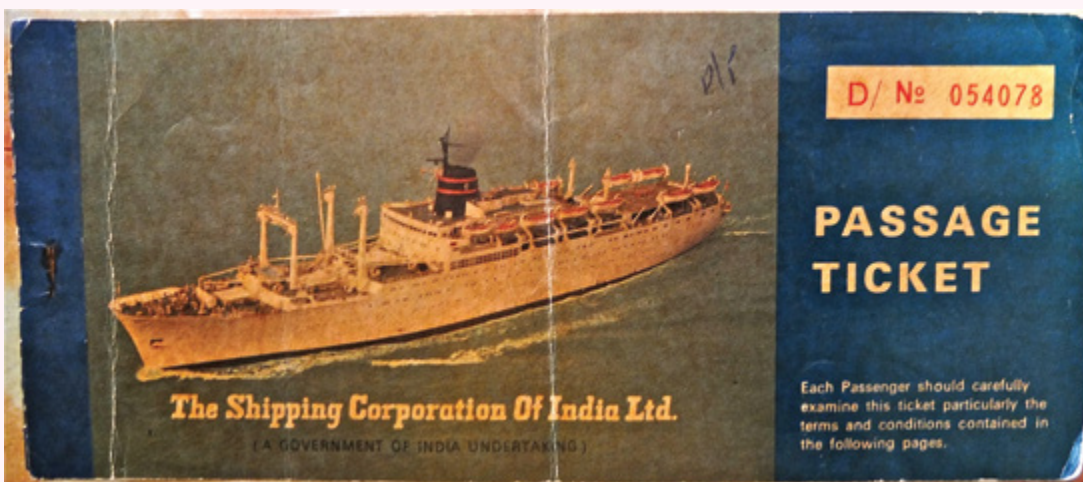
circulated through Penang, where many of the agents handling commodities operated in and around the enclave now known as “Little India.” Edibles like betel nut, copra, onion and nutmeg were spread out, like carpets, to dry in the sun along the sides of streets. However, such critical shipping activities receded after the complete removal of Penang’s free port status in the late 1960s. Brokerages and commissions linked to shipping dwindled away, and many older individuals, whose trades benefitted from the free port, soon left for India.



CAPTIONS

1. (Cover page): A florist along the iconic and endearing row of Indian flower stalls along Jalan Masjid Kapitan Keling. With its panorama of garlands, stalks and loose blooms, the row has been an icon of the area where houses of worship of different faiths have peacefully coexisted for over two centuries.

2. Tickets for passengers to board the famous *Chidambaram*, among the few ships that plied their way between Indian ports and Penang. The 17,000-tonne vessel was decommissioned after a fire broke out on its deck while sailing the Bay of Bengal in 1985. Courtesy of Prakash R. Jakathesan and Punita Mutiah.



2

Today, some heritage advocates argue that Penang's Malaysian Indian community is experiencing another form of disappearance, albeit less obvious, through the loss of traditional businesses and lifestyles, in the very zone marked for conservation. George Town's joint inscription as a UNESCO World Heritage Site alongside Melaka resulted in a focus on preservation and conservation, not only of physical buildings and streetscapes, but also the living cultures of its various enclaves, including their festivals, cuisines, languages and ceremonies. However, tourism-related enterprises now dominate the Little India enclave, while traditional traders may be ejected or just fade away due to a combination of factors such as the exponential rise in rent and other operating costs, and the acute reduction in demand for their services. Are the community's traditional trades and lifestyles experiencing a seismic change? If so, what are we to make of this shift?

THE INVENTION OF LITTLE INDIA

George Town's multicultural living heritage originated from the trade routes link-

ing Great Britain and Europe to the Middle East, the Indian subcontinent, the Malay Archipelago and the Far East. "Both towns [George Town and Melaka] bear testimony to a living multi-cultural heritage and tradition of Asia, where the many religions and cultures met and coexisted," runs the statement by UNESCO. "They reflect the coming together of cultural elements from the Malay Archipelago, India and China with those of Europe, to create a unique architecture, culture and townscape."

Little India is among the most dynamic and energetic areas in George Town's World Heritage Site. The enclave is located on the cape at the northeastern corner of Penang Island. Hence, many locals still refer to the broader urban centre as Tanjong (Malay for "cape"). Its unique heritage dates back to the early 19th century when, spurred by British colonialists, traders and labourers from India arrived in large numbers to work. Many settled near the island's port, in an area built over the years into a network of streets that became the cradle of the inner city. Religious architecture—from mosque to kovil and gurdwara—coexists with more

secular concerns, such as money changing and the all-important work of feeding the enclave's peoples.

Interestingly, the name Little India was only adopted by the local authorities as recently as three decades ago. Its origins go slightly further back, having been initially proposed by Mustafa Ali R. Jumabhoy during his first term as president of the Penang Indian Chamber of Commerce (1968–69). This initiative did not take off, and it took over 20 years before coming to fruition during his second term (1991–93). The then-State Executive Councillor for Tourism, Culture and Arts, the late Kee Phaik Chin, latched onto the idea and helped launch it. This name became popular very quickly due to several initiatives, chief of which was the Deepavali open house, which has since become an annual affair. Indeed, the move has had a deterrent effect as well as a catalytic one. It has dissuaded many property owners in the enclave from reusing buildings for purposes that do not serve the needs of the Indian community, while spurring Little India's recognition as a distinct and unique place, one which is closely

3. A female customer getting her eyebrows threaded at a bridal outlet along Lebuhr Penang. These shops provide a variety of services, including elaborate cosmetics, facials and traditional henna application for ladies.

4. This goldsmith, seen crafting a necklace within a small shophouse in an old photo, no longer works in the enclave. His implements were mostly handed down over many decades but still functioned perfectly. Traditional designs remain in demand in Malaysia, but the local talents who specialise in making them have mostly disappeared.



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Like many communal precincts in cities and metropolitan areas worldwide, Little India continues to thrive and prosper amidst globalisation.”



5

5. A flamboyant and exquisite array of dresses and fabrics adorns the inside of these textile shops, creating enticing environments full of dazzling patterns and colours. Shoppers are spoilt for choice as they are shown some of the sarees and shawls by shop attendants.



6. Most garment shops keep up with the latest fashion sense from India and popular trends among local customers. They display a variety of attire—traditional, eclectic and modern—many of which are imported.

7. An employee at a spice shop fills in a huge ledger. Shops like these sell items like freshly ground wheat, chilli, coconut, lentils, rice and traditional condiments. There are only a couple of flour mills still operating in Little India today.

8. During festivals such as Chitra Pournima, a representation of Muruga is carefully brought down along more than 500 steps from the Waterfall Hilltop Temple to be carried in a street procession towards the Sri Mahamariamman Temple, built in 1833, at Queen Street.

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connected with the identity of the community. This branding has helped to save the place, as Jumabhoy once rightly observed.

Besides its dynamism and liveliness, Little India arguably embodies UNESCO's Outstanding Universal Values, namely that it: contributes to George Town's identity as a multicultural trading town permeated by many layers of history; is a living testimony to cultural and religious diversity, as reflected in multicultural and (in) tangible living heritage; and boasts unparalleled townscapes or vernacular architecture, particularly shophouses and townhouses.

A DOUBLE-EDGED SWORD?

Prior to the repeal of the Rent Control Act on New Year's Day in 2000, many felt that Little India would experience a critical turning point. Rentals would potentially skyrocket, leading to an exodus of tenants. The repeal seemed to threaten to disperse more than just the local economy, escalating to the potential weakening of entire traditions altogether. Contrary to expectations, Little India appears to show signs of increasing business activity a quarter-century onwards. Its cultural and commercial draw has proven too robust for many business owners to risk moving elsewhere. Little India remains an attractive place to invest in, still capable of drawing crowds, although its more lucrative business activities cater more towards the Indian market, rather than the traditional local community. Over the past few years, new activities once alien to the area have boomed. Emporiums, restaurants, fashion stores and home entertainment vendors have taken hold, overshadowing the old occupations and activities that accentuated the enclave's historical significance.

Like many communal precincts in cities and metropolitan areas worldwide, Little India continues to thrive and prosper amidst globalisation. Today, the area engages heritage enthusiasts, international conservationists and tourists alike, complementing its surrounding colonial-era buildings and precincts. Its historic physical features have remained relatively unchanged, coexisting with the inevitable emergence of newer elements that increasingly dominate the neighbourhood. Ironically, following the UNESCO inscription, living culture may be said to have since taken a beating. Certain traditional trades have been affected by new arrivals. The age-old grocery and sundry shop businesses are facing new challenges, since many established customers previously resident in the inner city have moved to other parts of Penang. Other traditional businesses will need to be closely monitored, such as barbers, tailors and goldsmiths, whose professions are being overshadowed by newer ones. Many trades have had to transform

to cater to an emergent market base, rather than to vanishing neighbourhood residents.

Yet they endure. Spice merchants, textile traders, goldsmiths, hawkers, millers, cooks and sweet-sellers still ply their trades in the richly concentrated inner city, in rows of ageing terrace shophouses. Their energy and colour have helped the community adapt and sustain itself, as if in defiance of the tides of industrialisation and development elsewhere in Penang.

The key to sustaining the enclave's continued legacy ultimately lies with its most important element: *its people*. So long as they do not forget their cultures and roots, Little India will continue to be a thriving community, representing a unique part of the Malaysian mosaic. Besides community leaders and activists, the authorities have had to rise to the challenge of preserving the physical structures, communal enclaves and living cultures character-



Little India never stands still [...] Its unique community still carries the legacy of its pioneers into the present, striving to stay relevant in the culture and economy of the 21st century."

ising the city. Having measures to protect and conserve these assets were a precondition of the UNESCO joint inscription, to be pursued through education, awareness-raising and sustainable tourism. Such are the challenges of preserving living culture, even as the enclave is rebranded for economic prominence.

OTHER SITES OF INDIAN HERITAGE

It is now only fair that we also assess other key Penang sites charged with the character of the Indian community. The most imposing and iconic suburb of George Town to host a dramatic gathering of Hindus is the Waterfall area, located near the Botanic Gardens. Some 800,000 devotees and tourists converge during Thaipusam to celebrate or observe the annual procession. The lengthy stretch of road leading to the area is shut to motor traffic, since it teems with throngs of people, fringed on both sides by rows of *thaneer panthal* (temporary stalls) providing refreshments, vegetarian food and religious souvenirs. The devotees, mostly clad in yellow or saffron, their clean-shaven heads smeared

with sandalwood paste, walk past a number of temples before ascending more than 500 steps to the famous Arulmigu Bala-thandayuthapani Temple (Waterfall Hill-top Temple), dedicated to the Hindu god Muruga. The festivities traditionally end on the evening after Thaipusam, when the impressive Silver Chariot bearing Muruga's image is slowly driven back on a long overnight journey to the Natukottai Chettiar Temple in George Town.

There is also a small Indian community in Balik Pulau, in the quieter rural western half of Penang Island. A temple dedicated to the goddess Maha Mariamman also exists here, like the famous temple at Queen Street in George Town. It was built by the Chettiar moneylenders of Balik Pulau after the arrival of Indians in the district in the 1880s.

What of mainland Seberang Perai? Its most prominent area of Indian settlement is Butterworth, where the railway terminus and the port's container shipyard are located. Originally, this area was a coconut plantation fringing the ferry terminal, but in the 1890s, a tin-smelting plant, which employed many Indians, also came into operation. Around the turn of the century, a temple (also dedicated to Mariamman) was developed for the Hindus on land that was granted to the local community leader. Similar temples were established in Bukit Mertajam, Nibong Tebal and Kepala Batas, all of which still thrive today.

Meanwhile, the Church of St. Anne (est. 1888) serves a sizeable Indian population. Within the compound is a rock called the Cherok Tokun relic, which contains a Sanskrit inscription written in the ancient Pallava script. Dating back over a thousand years, it is thought to be the work of a traveller during the era of the Bujang Valley's (around Gunung Jerai in present-day Kedah) prosperity.^[2]

Such sites are living and, by extension, ever-changing. Little India never stands still: in fact, it may well be evolving into a more ethnic-based enclave, catering to an abundance of present-day Indian market demands, while traditional and historical businesses adapt or fade away. Its unique community still carries the legacy of its pioneers into the present, striving to stay relevant in the culture and economy of the 21st century.

ENDNOTES

1. "Indian" is used in a broad sense to refer to those with roots in the broader Indian subcontinent, rather than being limited to the present-day polity alone.

2. See also: Nasha R.K. (2026). *Navigating Big Powers in the Indo-Pacific Today* [Issues]. Penang Institute.

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BEHIND THE COUNTER: CAN PENANG'S OTTU

IN ANTHONY CHEAH'S watercolour painting, "Ottu Kadai Penang", the small shop being depicted occupies hardly any space, yet seems to contain an entire neighbourhood. The term "*ottu kadai*"—also romanised as *othu kadai* or *oothu kadai*—commonly describes a compact Indian sundry shop. Some occupy narrow roadside spaces, others lean against the sides of larger buildings. Their counters and shallow interiors bring trade directly to the pavement, where goods, conversations and neighbourhood knowledge circulate across their narrow thresholds.

BY KENNETH WONG SEE HUAT



KADAI

SURVIVE ANOTHER GENERATION?

THE SOCIAL LIFE OF THE OTTU KADAI

The *ottu kadai* is not a single type of business. Across my visits, I encountered sundry shops as well as small food-and-drink stalls sharing a similar spatial relationship with the street. Their trades differed, but each had a small frontage and was dependent upon repeated encounters and operators who knew the rhythms of their neighbourhood.

In Penang's "Little India," one proprietor showed me an old photograph of his father, who once ran a roti canai and bread stall directly opposite the present shop. This photograph connected two different businesses through one family's continuing relationship with the same neighbourhood. He understood the *ottu kadai* as part of George Town's distinctive heritage, rather than simply an old form of retail.

That sense of continuity is also visible within the wider trading landscape. Badan Warisan Malaysia describes Market Street as "Kadai Teru" (spelled "Theeru" in other contexts)—the street of shops—and identifies sundry shops, tea stalls and other traditional trades as characteristic of Little India.^[1] Today, older trading forms continue to serve newer communities. The same proprietor estimated that around half



visit, a bread supplier arrived on his regular rounds; she explained that the family arranged for some of the bread to be sent to an orphanage. In that ordinary exchange, selling and giving briefly overlapped. The shop's social role extended beyond the immediate transaction at the counter.

THE BUSINESS OF CONTINUITY

These visits revealed both vulnerability and persistence: relatives covering for an owner's absence, a third-generation proprietor serving returning customers, migrant workers supporting familiar products and a shop retaining its magazine display. The future of the *ottu kadai* cannot be reduced to a story of inevitable decline. The more useful question to ask is what continuity actually requires (see *Penang Monthly*, June 2026).

On licensing, several operators described their businesses as being regulated within a similar municipal framework despite partaking in differing trades. However, they do not fall under one formal licence class because of their commercial diversity. The City Council of Penang Island (MBPP) distinguishes between trade and business licences, hawkers and stall licences, private land stalls, temporary static hawkers and council market or stall sites.^[2]

One Little India proprietor described his trading place as something that should remain within the family, rather than simply be passed to an outsider. But inheriting the business depends on the shop's licence

matter as much as signboards or shelves. Two operators told me that the local council had upgraded their flooring, suggesting that practical improvements can support everyday working conditions without turning these businesses into something else.

My original question was whether these shops might disappear within five years. Perhaps not: instead, I found a form of neighbourhood commerce that persists by adapting to new migrant customers, tourists, changing products and the availability of family members willing to take a turn behind the counter.

Paintings and family photographs can preserve appearances, but they cannot replace the everyday decisions that keep a shop meaningful to its community. If an *ottu kadai* closes, Penang may lose more than just another retailer. Another small piece of the distinctive way in which commerce, care and the street have learned to live together disappears.



his regular customers were migrant workers, including Nepalese and Bangladeshis, who came looking for familiar South Asian products.

At a food-and-drink stall on Lebuhr Pasar, a third-generation operator prepared bubur kacang, cleaned the floor and arranged the seats by himself. Customers arrived to take away the dessert, some of whom were regulars. The stall is also known for chukku malli, an Indian herbal coffee. He estimated that about half his customers were foreign tourists and the other half local, a mix he attributed to being in Little India. The encounter was small but revealing: continuity was not only about inheriting premises, but also people returning.

Iksha Store, located beside Cititel on Jalan Penang, offers another perspective. Clean and with neatly arranged goods, it was among the few shops I visited that still sold newspapers and magazines. Eggs and daily necessities were common across the sundry shops, but the presence of periodicals made this one stand out. Traditional retail operations need not look cluttered or neglected to retain their distinctive service.

On Jalan Dato Keramat, I met a woman covering the counter of her father-in-law's shop, while her husband's family mourned the death of his grandmother. During the



or tenancy, where transfers are subject to MBPP's approval. Succession is, thus, complex. A statement by a councillor said that transfer applications for such stalls may involve spouses, parents and biological siblings.^[3] This procedure should not be assumed to automatically apply to every *ottu kadai*, but it shows why succession is an administrative as well as a familial question.

Ultimately, younger relatives should not be expected to preserve a business simply because others find it picturesque. Continuity requires earning a workable livelihood. Rent, licence conditions, suppliers, working hours and customer demand



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CAPTIONS

1. Anthony Cheah's "Ottu Kadai Penang." Exhibited in *Echoes in Between: Penang as Living Archive*.

2. Iksha Store prominently displays newspapers and magazines.

3. The third-generation operator prepares bubur kacang at Lebuhr Pasar.

FOOTNOTES

1. Badan Warisan Malaysia. (2021, Apr. 6). Little India of Penang.

2. MBPP. (n.d.). *Jenis-jenis Lesen*. [uLesen].

3. *Buletin Mutiara*. (2025, Aug. 27). Pindah milik gerai secara 'online', jangan bayar kepada 'runner' – Ahli MBPP.

A SMELLSCAPE OF LITTLE INDIA

BY MIRIAM DEVAPRASANA

CAPTIONS

1. Approaching Little India.
2. Madam Tan with a plate of char kuey teow at Hock Poh Lye Kopitiam.
3. Manjal on the pavements.
4. Joss sticks at the Tua Pek Kong Temple.
5. Catching Anbukarasan Moroter at a candid moment.
6. A spread of fried snacks at a Lebu King side-stall.
7. Madam Wong holds a jar of homemade kaya at her Hainanese kopitiam, along a narrow lane off Lebu Pasar.
8. Preparing thosai at Sri Ananda Bahwan Restaurant.



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JUST PAST 8.30AM, I am hit by oppressive fumes of exhaust as the 101 pulls away from the “Little India” bus stop. The road gives off the distinct smell of petrichor and wet tarmac. Apart from distant drumming somewhere down Lebu Chulia, much of this side of George Town has yet to open. The underlying scent of the enclave could belong anywhere in the inner city: a general stale and musty amalgamation, with faint pigeon-heavy pockets disappearing and reappearing two doors down. It is against this stagnant unremarkability that everything else announces itself during a day’s walk through Little India.

FAITH AND KITCHENS

As I turn towards Lebu King, I am overwhelmed by a comforting wave of spice scents. I find the bearer of this heavy nostalgia: Deen Claypot Briyani, which sits at the intersection with Chulia. Further down is the aroma of burnt sugar, buttery grease and the caramelised steam of teh tarik. Unlike the complexities of briyani, this scent is fiercely rustic, with undertones of dhal and tangy fish curry, drifting over a crowd of colored shirts and ties, sarongs and singlets.

Jostling against all these are the thick columns of smoke rising from large joss sticks outside the Tua Pek Kong temple, being burned for the Hungry Ghost Festival. There is no gentle way to say this: the smell of joss sticks wins out, and for a stretch of road, briyani, caramel and dhal all fall a step behind. It is barely 9am, and already, my sense of smell has encountered more than any one word can hold. ④

As I walk down Lebu Penang, I am surprised by the gentler fragrance of pandan and coconut, as yellow trays of kuih are carried into Nyonya Palazzo. Closer to the intersection of Lebu China, something earthier and faintly pungent surfaces. Diluted yellow patches stand out against the pavement and *kaki lima* (five-foot ways): water mixed with *manjal* (turmeric), cast across shopfronts each morning. ③ A worker at a bridal boutique describes how “manjal is used to welcome prosperity and protection so that no trouble or harm comes to the shop and those who work in it. It is also for those who enter the shop or walk past, so that they too will have a sense of calm and peace; a feeling that good things will come to them.” While *manjal* is present in many other traditional and ceremonial practices, once



2



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scaled down to an everyday ritual, the practice remains private and collective; casting a blessing over the day's business and everyone who crosses its path.

As more shutters are raised, trails of incense start to emerge. One is heavier, smokier and occasionally strong enough to blot out passing food smells entirely. The other is drier and sweeter, closer to a low, constant hum than a burst. Both are profoundly distinct; neither erases the other. *Xiāng* (Chinese joss sticks) offers a particular kind of reverence, rising from doorway shrines and the quiet thresholds of temples and kong-sis. Its heat is focused and patient, consuming tightly compressed botanical powder to leave behind a fragile spine of silvery ash. Its scent is lean, bittersweet and sharp, piercing the humid air with clarity. In contrast, agarbathi (Indian incense) is not always as visible, but its sultry, velvety aroma diffuses more evenly along the streets. At times, the deep, balsamic tones of resin and wood release something meditative and grounding. Other times, intoxicating florals like jasmine and frangipani cut brighter and sweeter. They are richer, rounder and often more pleasant, particularly around the more established goldsmiths and textile boutiques. These traces of Hindu, Taoist and Buddhist beliefs are evident throughout the day, sitting within the wider religious soundscape of Hindu devotional hymns, handbells, distant church bells and the muezzin's call to prayer, which punctuate the passing hours.

Food is perhaps one of the more immediate scents of Little India. A saturated, savoury atmosphere of generational recipes and secret ingredients simmering in large pots, interrupted by the sharper crackles of fried lentils, onions, batter and oil hitting the air. These are the louder smells of the street. 6 Then, there are quieter and sweeter undercurrents, like the perfumed nectar of ripened mangoes and the unmistakable roti bakar and kaya off Market Street, the latter crafted from a recipe preserved since the 1940s. 7

Two places particularly stand out. At the intersection of Lebu China and Lebu Penang, cooking is a full-body experience. On one side is Hock Poh Lye Kopitiam, where a hawker works over a blackened cast-iron wok, shoulder-driving the metal against a high flame. Scorched soy and the sear of rendered fat rise: smoky, salty and slightly bitter at the edges. 2 Directly opposite him, the motion is slower, lower and more deliberate: a hand smooths batter thinly across a flat cast-iron



9



10

tawa, in three continuous circular sweeps. Ghee melts against hot iron, releasing a warm nuttiness as the batter browns and crisps. ⁸ Meanwhile on Lebu Queen, nasi dalca announces itself and occasionally runs into an aromatic curtain from the Sri Mahamariamman Temple. Here, the smellscape shifts between the thick, hearty rempah of dalca and the density of brass oils and fresh jasmine garlands, blurring sustenance and sacred devotion.

THE BASE AND THE FOUNDATION

By afternoon, the crowd has thickened, and the streets smell more crowded too. It takes me a while to distinguish them, but there seems to be a layering of oils in the environment. Fleeting trails of sandalwood and frangipani, presumably oil-based perfumes worn by passersby, cut in and out of spiced and ghee-heavy curries and bryanis. Along certain street corners is the spitting heat of frying oil, while the medicinal sweetness of herbal and gingelly oils drifts from the open doorways of provision stores. Nearby, the subtle essential oils of raw spices and botanicals bleed from the spice markets, sweating in the humidity and afternoon heat. Beneath this, road and traffic smells persist. The drains are more pronounced now, smelling damp, pungent and slightly sour, although the stronger smells of lunchtime are usually enough to cover them.

Later that evening, I am back along Lebu Penang, when I come across whole stalks of sugarcane stacked in bundles by the pavement. Their smell is subtle—green, grassy and freshly vegetal—although perhaps

my familiarity with them amplifies what I can otherwise only see. They are sold by Anbukarasan Moroter, a director, actor and writer who also trades seasonally, this time for Ganesh Chaturthi. The sugarcane stalks are one of the more transient, festival-bound scents of Lebu Penang; with the arrival of Deepavali, Ponggal or Thaipusam, the smellscape shifts again. As I chat with Moroter, a thick, soft cloud rises behind me, and the pillowy scents of steamed rice, jaggery and coconut take over, as kolukattai and putturu are packed for a growing line. ⁵ ¹⁰

As I step into SAG PG Enterprise along Lebu Pasar, the smells are nearly indistinguishable. Underlying a heavy, earth-toned foundation are hints of ground roots, forming the base of nourishing meals and drinks shared across the enclave's diverse communities. A closer sniff gives me the liquorice-like note of cumin and fennel from India and Egypt, colliding with Indonesian cinnamon and nose-tickling peppers from Vietnam and Sarawak. The shop's owner, Abdul Malik M. Abdul Gaffar, knows the supply routes well. He keeps track of markets, origins and the consistency of each shipment, checking what is available and where it comes from. ¹¹ Since the Covid-19 pandemic, the market has shifted. Regular customers remain, but restaurants and larger orders for kenduri, weddings and festivals have since become an important part of his business. Such spice shops sit at the crossroads of international trade routes and networks.

The goldsmiths and jewellery shops offer a curious break. Inside, the air is chilled, sterile and scentless. Cooled down by air-conditioning, external scents are kept at bay, while internal fragrances remain delicate yet rich. Textile shops, on the other hand, have a distinctly dry, slightly starchy and faintly chemical note. I am told that it is the aftermath of starch, commonly used in cotton textile production to strengthen yarns during weaving, which can also contribute to the stiffness of finished fabrics. It is difficult to separate the smell of finished material from the processes that made it.

Between the scents of the everyday and the transient, I am made aware that Little India holds many worlds at once. ⁹ They are an invitation to return to kitchens, devotion, homes and celebrations; containers of fragments of childhood, family, culture, religion and tradition; recognised differently by everyone passing through. Perhaps that is what an openness towards smells offers: a way of experiencing a place beyond simply what we see.



9. Little India in the evening.

10. Puttu and kolukattai.

11. Encik Abdul Malik of SAG PG Enterprise.

Try it yourself!
Little India smells different to everyone who walks through it. We would like to know your experience! Scan this QR code to add your observations of its shifting smellscape to the Urban Polyphonies project. This activity takes about 45–60 minutes to complete on foot: simply note what you smell, where you are and the time of day.



BY
KHOO SUET LENG

THE INDIAN HERITAGE GALLERY & CULTURAL CENTRE OPENS ITS DOORS

AND
PREVEENA BALAKRISHNAN

IF THE WALLS, windows and doors of Penang's "Little India" could speak, they would tell countless stories about the place. From Padukara Theeru (Boatmen's Street) and Elam Muchanti (Jalan Masjid Kapitan Keling), to Kadai Theeru (Street of Shops, or Lebuah Pasar) and Chetty Theeru,^[1] each carries its own histories, memories and identities. And so, when the Indian Heritage Gallery & Cultural Centre (IHCC) opened its doors with pomp on 1 May, it was a momentous occasion. A gallery of this nature can be a cultural anchor, consolidating multicultural ties and cross-community kinship among Penangites and tourists alike.



1



FINDING HOME IN A HISTORIC ENCLAVE

Despite the presence of Little India, little of the community's origins and cultural heritage is known to the public; the city still lacks a proper establishment to act as repository and intermediary showcasing the Indian community's cultural identity. True awareness and understanding require the availability and accessibility of GLAM infrastructure: that is, galleries, libraries, archives and museums.^[2] IHCC fills this gap, founded by three visionaries: N. Ramanathan AR A. Nachiappan (founder and co-collector); Adaikalaraja Packiam of Jayam Group (patron and strategic facilitator); and Mahadevan Gopal Rengarajan of Vintage Maha Museums (prime collector).

Its story begins on Penang Street, where Ramanathan once ran the Colonial Chettiar Straits Museum. He met Mahadevan in Karaikudi, India, and was captivated by his collection. Mahadevan wanted to ship 14 containers of items over to Malaysia, far more than Ramanathan's small space could ever hold. Their search for new premises led them to a building with



IHCC celebrates cultural heritage, going beyond merely showcasing Indian business activities.”



a story of its own. It once housed Enrico's Trading, a longstanding landmark for Penang's Indian community,^[3] before being repurposed as a restaurant run by Adaikalaraja. But when the business began struggling, Adaikalaraja could not bring himself to let the building go: it held his earliest memories of Penang, beginning with the day he first arrived from India to the start of his working life here. This personal attachment was the building's saving grace.



Rather than fading away, it found a new purpose as the IHCC's home, now housing Ramanathan's former museum's collection.

IHCC is a key exemplar of the creative tourism model. Here, tourists do not just see, but are also provided with opportunities to learn, co-create and participate in Indian cultural processes and practices. This sense of cultural immersion was intentionally curated; the owners have also transformed the upper floor into a library and a space for disseminating Indian cultural practices (for example, saree-tying, floral arranging, playing traditional games).



A WALK THROUGH THE GALLERY

An antique portable shrine made of Burma teak, set with rubies and containing a Thanjavur painting of Lord Rama's coronation (Ramar Pattabhishekam), serves as the welcoming artifact.^[4] This key scene from the Ramayana shows Rama's ascension to the throne. This shrine embodies the artistic traditions of Thanjavur District, which boasts strong historical bonds with Penang. Steamship routes once linked Nagapattinam and Madras with Penang, which was also the site of exile for the Maruthu Pandiyar brothers' relatives and soldiers after the

CAPTIONS

1. Heritage café located in the front portion of the building.
2. Main entrance (front façade) of IHCC.
3. The founders—N. Ramanathan (right), Mahadevan (middle) and Adaikalaraja (left)—with Chief Minister Chow Kon Yeow (in white) at the opening ceremony.
4. Tin collection on display.
5. Traditional culinary artifacts and utensils showcasing Indian food heritage.
6. Vespa scooters were a popular and affordable mode of transportation in Penang (especially in Little India) in the 1950s–70s, besides representing modern urban identity.
7. Chinese well-wishers at the IHCC's opening (Source: Penang Jing Yue Buddhist Meditation Association).
8. IHCC is in close proximity with Little India (Source: Khoo Suet Leng).

ENDNOTES

1. A financial hub for the Nattukottai Chettiar community, which dominated the informal banking and money-lending business in colonial Penang.
2. Generally, a museum is a permanent, non-profit institution dedicated to collecting, conserving, researching and educating the public about cultural and historical artifacts, while a gallery primarily exhibits artwork, often with a commercial or promotional focus.
3. This fourth-generation family-run business traces its roots to the early 1900s, when M. Mooka Pillai, originally from south India, established a small trading business in George Town. His son, KS Nathan, joined the business in 1940 to continue the family enterprise.
4. Thanjavur, in south India, was formerly known as Tanjore.
5. An iron oxide-rich earthenware, decorated using the slip-trailing and sgraffito techniques.
6. Khoo interviewed Ramanathan and Adaikalaraja at IHCC on 4 June.

1801–02 Polygar Wars. The forced labour of these exiles built early roads and landmarks like Fort Cornwallis.

The IHCC collection also highlights mid-19th to mid-20th century clockwork tinplate toys imported from Germany, Japan, the UK and the US. These intricate playthings reflect the immense wealth and prosperity generated by colonial Malaya's tin-mining and plantation economy, which helped build consumer demand. Functional wooden tools such as ladles, spatulas and moulds, as well as antique Burma redware,^[5] are on display. So too are stone hand-grinders, including components such as the *ammi kal* (grinding stone), *attu kal* (stone mortar and pestle), as well as the saddle and rotary querns designed to preserve the natural flavours and aromas of spices by minimising heat generation during grinding. Different types of *thengai thuruvi* (coconut scrapers/graters) are also present.



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IMPACTS BEYOND ITS FOUR WALLS

The IHCC's role and impact on George Town's macro- and meso-level urban setting cannot be dismissed. Located along upper Beach Street, its proximity to, and interdependency with, Little India was intentionally orchestrated, according to Ramanathan. Visitors to Little India can drop by the gallery—which he envisions as complementing the enclave—to learn about the Indian community's history. An "Indian Heritage Trail" of sorts will be curated in due course to link the gallery with other Indian establishments within Little India. Since the Lebuhr Pasar and Lebuhr Queen areas are predominantly commercial, the IHCC celebrates cultural heritage, going beyond merely showcasing Indian business activities.

The gallery demonstrates how traditional shophouses can be adaptively reused within a network of diverse cultural and creative hubs, state entities such as Penang State Museum and Penang State Art Gallery, and successful private initiatives (for example, Pinang Peranakan Mansion,



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ChinaHouse, Jetty 35). Mindful consideration went into teasing out the gallery's cultural value proposition. As Ramanathan repeatedly stressed, it had a key goal: "Getting the youth interested to know and understand our Indian cultural heritage."^[6] Consequently, generous concession rates apply to student visitors. He aspires not merely to educate Indian youths, but also to make the wider community aware of Indian cultural heritage. As such, the gallery assumes a profound role as an intermediary for intergenerational, intercultural and intercommunity sustainability: during the opening ceremony, a group of 60 Chinese well-wishers came clad in sarees and dhotis.

IHCC is both tangible and intangible cultural heritage: the conservation of the physical building preserves George Town's *tangible heritage*, while safeguarding *intangible cultural heritage* (for example, stories, memories, identities) within its walls.

***Note:** Photographs courtesy of IHCC unless otherwise stated.



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CHANGING MONEY, CHANGING TIMES

BY CAROLYN KHOR

A TYPICAL DAY for Shahjahan VM Mohamed Ibrahim and his nephew, Shaikmeera Mohamed Ali—Shah and Shaik for short—begins at 10.30am at 37-A Beach Street. Behind the shutters of KMA Trading is a counter with a glass partition, where customers enquire about the day's exchange rates. In a small office, Shah and Shaik "hold the fort" until closing time at 6pm. Phones ring, with regular customers calling for the best rates. With his full attention on the figures, Shaik starts punching numbers into the calculator before replying. To some, he speaks Malay. To others, English. Some tell him they will come by the shop, while others will bank in money to him. Shaik even tells one customer that he will deliver currency to their home at an agreed time. "Many of them are our regulars," he said. Trust and human connection are essential to this rapidly evolving business, which now spans four generations.

WELD QUAY AND THE EARLY MONEY CHANGERS

The search for a better fortune is the primary motivation for those relocating to faraway lands. In the 1940s, one such man in his 30s made that journey from Tanjore (Thanjavur)—where farming was the family's livelihood—to Malaya. Having sold all his properties in India, KM Abdullah made his way to George Town through an established migration network, hoping to build a new life. By the time Abdullah arrived, money changing—or "shroffing," as it was traditionally known—was already an established occupation in George Town. 60 to 70 licensed money changers operated in town, forming a close-knit Indian Muslim community, about a third apparently hailing from the same village in Ramnad (Ramana-thapuram), Tamil Nadu.^[1]



His business then was very different from what it is today. Exchange rates were obtained by hand, calculations done mentally and every transaction recorded manually. Before starting work each morning, money changers headed to the nearest bank: Abdullah visited the Bank of China branch and waited for the day's exchange rates to arrive by telex from Kuala Lumpur, before copying every figure into his notebook. His apprentices, including his grandson and great-grandnephew, would later do the same.

Returning to the port to begin trading, he stood out among the crowd, dressed in the manner typical of the Tamil Muslim traders—a fez, a jacket over a white shirt and a white sarong—to wait for customers. Passengers disembarking vessels from India, the Middle East and Britain approached him to change money. There

was no shop back then. According to Shah, his grandfather kept his notes tucked in a hidden pocket sewn into the jacket lining, kept flat against his body and out of sight. In early-19th-century Weld Quay, one's clothing was related to occupation and social position.^[2] Indian labourers and stevedores dressed differently from wealthier Indians, including merchants, traders and Chettians. According to the family, the white jacket and sarong eventually disappeared from the money changing trade in the 1980s, as the older generation passed on and the younger men who succeeded them came to work in trousers.

After several years, Abdullah established Syarikat KM Abdullah Trading in 1949, which moved through several addresses along the way. It first operated in the Oversea-Chinese Banking Corporation building at 36 Beach Street, then between two pillars outside the George Town Dispensary, before settling at the current premises about 15 years ago. Now known simply as KMA Trading, this business is recognised by George Town World Heritage Incorporated (GTWHI) as one of the city's heritage money changers. Other well-established counterparts include Kanson Enterprise on Jalan Masjid Kapitan Keling (est. 1907), SMN Shaik Mohamed (est. 1924), MSKM Mohamed Haniffa Forex (est. 1940) and Ravi & Selvam (est. 1950).

This trade was not confined to the exchange of currencies. Money changers also handled old banknotes and antique coins, reflecting their specialist knowledge. From the 1960s until 1990, they also served as the primary point of sale for Social Welfare lottery tickets. About 90% of tickets, priced at RM1 each, were sold through money changers, who also bore the cost of unsold tickets. Thus, they took to the streets, coffee shops and banks to offload these tickets. Their commission was only RM7–8 for every 100 tickets sold, but





it provided a welcome supplement to their slim earnings (approx. M\$30–40 monthly in the 1960s).

TRUST AND HUMAN CONNECTION

Abdullah's children did not get involved in the business, and so it was his grandson, Shah, who took over in earnest after Abdullah passed away in the early 1980s. Shah began helping his grandfather at seven. After school, he would buy lunch for Abdullah before spending the rest of the afternoon at the shop. Part of Abdullah's regimen involved instilling discipline in Shah. Arriving late after school meant a scolding, sometimes worse, but it was simply part of growing up. Shah gradually learnt the ropes of the trade through observation and everyday experience.

Years later, Shaik followed much the same path. Shaik belongs to the fourth generation: he grew up in the same household as Shah and came to regard him as a guardian as much as a business mentor. He joined the business at 15, juggling school at St. Xavier's Institution and work. His first five years were spent entirely away from the counter. His responsibilities included collecting cash from banks, making withdrawals, buying meals, running deliveries

and other errands before being gradually entrusted with serving customers himself.

"It was like being an office boy," he chuckled. "Only later did I move behind the counter."

If there is one lesson both men have learnt, it is that money changing is built on trust. Some returning customers first met Shaik when he was still a schoolboy. "They tell me, 'I knew you when you were still in school,'" he said, adding that some customers have grown close like family members. One is Mr. Lee, a jeweller, who has patronised KMA Trading for decades. Others recommend the business to relatives and friends, creating lasting friendships that extend beyond transactions. While the business has had to adapt (including e-wallets), the principle that trust and human connection are the primary assets of the trade remains unchanged.

Money changing today bears little resemblance to the trade that Abdullah knew when he opened his shop. Few travellers arrive without first checking the exchange rates offered by banks and money changers online, and finding the best foreign currency rates has become almost effortless. Regulations have changed too. Today, Bank Negara Malaysia requires a

paid-up capital of between RM300,000–2mil to open a money changing business, much more than the modest sum Abdullah brought from India. Asked why he stayed in the business for so many years, Shaik answered without pause. "When you enjoy what you're doing, you're happy to come to work every day. Every transaction is different, and every customer is different." Some things have not changed, though: the family still maintains ties with India, and travels back at least once a year to visit friends and relatives.

THE STORY OF A PORTRAIT

Hanging on the office wall is a charcoal portrait, enlarged from a small black-and-white photograph taken in 1965. It shows Abdullah sitting cross-legged on a raised platform, a cabinet before him, while a young Shah looks on from beside the platform. Several charcoal replicas of the portrait exist, made possible through a long-time family friend, Richard Long, a well-known businessman and the owner of Ferringhi Garden Restaurant.

According to Long, Shah had seen charcoal artwork at his home and made a request for one sometime in the 1990s. "So I said, 'No problem!'" recalled Long, who took the original photo to Hanoi and commissioned a husband-and-wife team of artists (whom the Malaysian Embassy routinely recommended) to replicate the photo. Long said that the portrait was completed freehand within a day. However, both artists have since passed on. A copy of this portrait was once even displayed on the first floor of Penang's museum, before it was closed for nine years for renovations. More than 60 years after the photograph was taken, the portrait hangs where Abdullah once worked, as a reminder of how George Town's heritage money changing trade has survived through the years.

CAPTIONS

1. Shah and Bala (an RHB bank staff member) in the 1990s.
2. A customer at KMA Trading.
3. Charcoal rendition of an old photo of Shah and Abdullah.

FOOTNOTES

1. GTWHI. (2012). Directory of traditional trades and occupations in George Town World Heritage Site.
2. Lim C.K. et al. (2021). Understanding intangible culture heritage preservation via analyzing inhabitants' garments of early 19th century in Weld Quay, Malaysia. *Sustainability*, 13(10), 5393.



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RESTORING COMMUNAL HISTORY: THE REMARKABLE REVIVAL OF WADDA GURDWARA SAHIB

**PHOTOGRAPHS AND TEXT BY
SAMUEL GOPAL**

CRAFTSMEN WORKED FOR years along George Town's former Brick Kiln Road, to restore what was originally known as the Diamond Jubilee Sikh Temple. The temple's foundation stone was laid on 3 June 1901 to commemorate Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee. It opened on Vaisakhi Day, 13 April 1903.

Beyond being a place of worship, the temple functioned as a refuge, meeting space and community centre. Known in 1908 as the Malaya Tapuan Da Gurdwara, it is now called Wadda Gurdwara Sahib: the Great Temple.^[1] A century's worth of tropical weather and rising moisture had since severely affected the building's structure, which motivated the gurdwara's committee to launch an ambitious restoration project in 2019. Overcoming various difficulties, such as the Covid-19 lockdowns, the temple finally reopened on 12 September 2026.

The estimated RM6mil restoration was driven largely by the Sikh community, with support from well-wishers from across Malaysia and beyond. The Penang state government and the Sunway Group contributed over RM1mil each. More than just the restoration of a building, the project represents the preservation of memory and craftsmanship, and the history of migration and community.

This pictorial documentation depicts renewal, where the gurdwara's story is beginning again. The restored building now links the experiences of early Sikh migrants, who once sought refuge within its walls, to future generations, serving as an anchor for their identity and communal memory.

***Note:** I thank the late Sukhinderpal Singh for encouraging me to follow and document the renovations, and Santok Singh for providing me with relevant information and guidance.





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CAPTIONS

1. (Cover photo): As layers of paint were carefully removed from the gurdwara's historic façade, conservators uncovered intricate lotus and floral wall engravings. Dating back more than 120 years, these reliefs provide a rare glimpse into its builders' craftsmanship. Lotus motifs suggest the influence of Chinese artisans, and by extension George Town's diverse workforce. The restored temple stands as a symbol of resilience, reflecting the determination of a community that refuses to allow time, neglect or circumstance to erase a vital part of its identity. [22 June 2026]

2. At the entrance, twin granite staircases guide pilgrims towards the prayer hall. This construction style was once common in contemporaneous Chinese and Hindu temples. Its former lime plaster cladding (now removed) was produced from seashells and other calcium-rich materials to allow the building to "breathe" by reducing moisture retention within the walls. [23 April 2024]

3. A door frame was carefully stripped away, revealing six layers of coating. [3 April 2024]

4. Left: Completion of the new lime plaster cladding. No air-conditioning is used, since doing so allows moisture to seep into the structure and damage fragile surfaces. Instead, the gurdwara relies entirely on natural air circulation. Right: Workers plastering a column. [9 February 2026]

5. The original Majolica tiles remain among the building's most distinctive architectural elements. [23 April 2024]

6. Left: Old red bricks removed during restoration were crushed, mixed with lime, sand and water, and then reused for flooring. Right: Porous red terracotta bricks were installed along the perimeter to facilitate the natural evaporation of moisture, while a lime-based slurry coating was applied to walls for stabilisation and protection. [31 March 2026]

7. The original solid granite staircase has been carefully preserved. Efforts were made to faithfully repair or replace damaged sections. [30 July 2025]



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8. Traditional Jali brickwork allows for natural lighting and ventilation, providing both comfort and beauty. [10 December 2025]

9. Traditional craftsmanship meets modern engineering techniques.

TOP: Scaffolding is erected to protect the vaulted ceiling. Such ceilings, uncommon in local heritage buildings, were designed to enhance ventilation and natural cooling. However, they cannot accommodate significant structural load. Engineers constructed an upper-floor slab on a raised support system to protect the original ceiling. [23 April 2024]

BOTTOM: The original flooring was removed and beams were laid to handle the main load of the upper floor. [30 July 2025]

10. After the base flooring was completed, the installation of the roof truss began. [9 February 2026]

11. Rising damp from ground moisture carried soluble salts upwards through capillary action, via porous materials such as brick, mortar and plaster. The resulting damage was particularly evident along the entrance walls. [10 December 2025]

12. Historical records indicate that the temple once featured an iconic central dome, which was mysteriously removed. A new fibreglass dome, fabricated in India and assembled on-site, was introduced, flanked by 28 smaller domes. [31 March 2026]



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13. Ceiling motif on the second floor, prior to the installation of light fixtures. [22 June 2026]

14. A close-up view of the lotus motif on the outer façade. [22 June 2026]

15. Santok Singh Ranjit Singh, chairman of the gurdwara, points out carbon fibre-wrapped columns. More than 80 structural columns were reinforced in this way. [30 July 2025]

16. Throughout restoration, religious activities continued uninterrupted. The dining hall was temporarily converted into a Darbar Sahib, serving as an interim prayer hall. [22 June 2026]

17. With the main restoration works completed by end-August, workers managed the final touches, such as laying the carpets. [7 September 2026]

18. Corridors adorned with bell jar lanterns, a quintessential British colonial and Anglo-Indian light fixture. [7 September 2026]



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With 40 years of experience in engineering, **SAMUEL GOPAL** is now pursuing a Master of Arts (Fine Arts) at Universiti Sains Malaysia. His current thesis research work focuses on visual ethnography and the cultural heritage of Penang.

ENDNOTE

1. Alternatively, a Sikh place of worship can be spelled "gurudwara" or "gurudwar."



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OPENING WITH AN enigmatic arrival in 1970s' London, Amelié Skoda's novel, *Bethnal Green*, follows a young woman's sojourn in the metropole to pursue a career in nursing. Suyin's complicated act of leaving Penang offers a point of departure for questions about empire, family and selfhood. Skoda's upcoming appearance at the George Town Literary Festival (GTLF) is a homecoming of sorts, given that her mother—a former National Health Service (NHS) nurse—hailed from Penang. We speak with her about her debut novel, and its interrogation of the oft-overlooked link between nursing and migration.

**FROM SOCIAL HISTORY
TO LITERATURE**

[...] Suyin thought constantly about how she might get away. She had seen the recruitment posters outside the Cathay Theatre advertising training and jobs in English hospitals. Every year they came back, looking for more girls to recruit. Were there no nurses in England? Suyin wondered.^[2]

Skoda's novel is, at heart, a story of migration. Suyin—named after the famed Johor-based doctor and novelist, whose transnational medical trajectory offers a foil to Skoda's main character's journey—is persuaded by the possibility of finding nursing work, and takes up the offer to leave for London's East End. As a trainee at the titular hospital, she becomes part of an international workforce, notable for a period characterised by rising xenophobia.^[3] In this literary exploration of the British medical profession, the social world of patients and multinational nursing professionals hailing from across the Commonwealth emerges. Whether Asian, Caribbean, or Irish, the trainees at the core of *Bethnal Green* navigate what it means to move to London and live with the vast changes of the 1970s, unfolding both in the city and their distant homes.

"[W]e expect absolute commitment from every student," a tutor impresses upon the trainees as the programme begins, "you should consider yourselves married to your job."^[4] But the transformation of a profession bound by strict codes of morality governing the home and workplace was already underway during the novel's temporal setting; a transition that the characters grapple with in love and life. Skoda's choice of temporal setting was not just out of a fascination with the period of her parents' youth (although this was certainly an influence), but also because of its historical significance. As Skoda noted, "the world was changing for women, and legislation was coming into force around equality, discrimination and employment rights. Those conversations would have been on

MAKING AN
"INVESTMENT OF HOPE":

AN
INTERVIEW WITH AMELIÉ
SKODA ^[1]

BY
WILLIAM
THAM

ENDNOTES

1. This title comes from a line in: Skoda, A. (2025). *Bethnal Green*. Manila Press, 85.

2. Ibid., 11.

3. Within the NHS, Shirin Chua describes a workforce imagined as expressing "a harmony eluding even the United Nations." Chua, S. (2026). "I would do it all again": Malaysian nurses in the NHS. *Imagined Malaysia*.

4. Skoda (2025), 42.

5. Chua (2026).

6. Skoda (2025), 217.

7. Ibid., 194.

8. Ibid., 220.

9. For Penang's economic context during this time, see "Penang's Parking Attendant Scheme," in this issue.

10. Wang, G. (1992). Migration Patterns in History. In *Community and Nation*. Allen & Unwin.

11. Lee, K.L. (2023). *London Does Not Belong to Me*. Maya Press.

people's minds at the time, and part of the atmosphere for women working in jobs like nursing."

Skoda, a former journalist, began research in the post-Brexit environment, which offered an opportunity to channel her outrage at heightening anti-immigrant rhetoric. "I was always aware of the vital role East and Southeast Asian nurses of my mum's generation had played in British healthcare," she remarked: after all, the NHS has always been a multinational enterprise. "The history and function of the NHS, then and now, is inextricably linked with migration, and that's not something that gets talked about very much." Although this dynamic raises broader questions about how the system effectively removes vital human resources from their countries of origin—echoing, if not exactly replicating, imperial logic—this does not deny the agency of those seeking upwards mobility abroad, particularly when similar opportunities eluded them at home.^[5] For all its ubiquity, there is surprisingly little literary representation of the link between nursing and migration in Southeast Asia, which constitutes "an essential piece of British and Malaysian social history."

THE FEELING OF INFRASTRUCTURE

The hospital was more than just a building. We need it. Suyin cheered with everyone else at the end, but she felt dread rising inside her again. Bethnal Green Hospital was not just her workplace; it was also her home. Could it really be taken away?^[6]

While Skoda took inspiration from her mother's career, the events in *Bethnal Green* are largely invented. Yet the physical setting is rooted in historical fact. Archival work helped her reconstruct period-correct meals, uniforms and floor layouts of hospitals, while visits to the site of the real-life Bethnal Green Hospital (now occupied by apartments) provided a spatial and architectural scaffold. Rather than constraining its scope, this grounding was generative, setting the parameters within which the characters' inner worlds emerged. Learning to see London anew was crucial for mapping Suyin onto spaces such as the Home Office and Chinatown.

Writing thus involved "conveying some of that atmosphere and emotional tension which naturally came about from that research." In doing so, a sense of what it felt like to work inside a hospital emerged, while foregrounding the shared humanity between its professionals and their patients. Yet not all was well: the spectre of efficiency and administrative rationalisation was strongly felt, and so too the constant prospect of deportation for those who failed the programme.

Bethnal Green Hospital was situated in East London, where Skoda's mother worked and trained. Its history was decidedly radical. The mobilisation of the local community in response to its impending closure, and the dedication of its staff to keep working even after closure was confirmed, made it a case study of how hospitals were more than just vital infrastructure, and seen as belonging to local communities.

In a sense, this is a sociological novel of the NHS, but the system is never approached in the abstract. Discrete community institutions emerge, evoking care and stability within the crumbling Victorian spaces the women trained and worked in. The migrant nurses are given depth—whether escaping unwanted marriages or experiencing racism. Their work is not invisible or thankless, but very much part of what keeps the social fabric whole. And for Suyin—and indeed, Skoda's mother—the job offers more than wages: it is also a calling and social world.

At Bethnal Green ... well, it's like family. I have my room, my group of friends, and I know everybody and everybody knows me. It's safe, and whenever I go away for work, I feel happy to come back.^[7]

But life outside the hospital matters too. For all the hardship at work and post-colonial hauntings, Skoda emphasises the importance of joy and camaraderie. The characters listen to music, attend night-clubs and buy the latest fashions: in short, they let loose. As for the small Malaysian student community depicted in the novel, so too are their transient lives fleshed out. These range from depictions of supper clubs—the "simple act of cooking", so important to Skoda's family, receives much attention—to holidays at the Lake District, finally seeing the landscapes represented in the poems studied at a remove back home.

After book-related events, many readers remarked to Skoda how much of a chord the novel struck with them: whether reminding them of their own experiences, or their relatives'. "The greatest privilege is to have those conversations, to share something, really," reflected Skoda. Even if migration is a common experience, this does not render any single journey any less extraordinary: for her, each one is something to be celebrated and kept hold of.

THE MODES OF INDEPENDENCE

Father, in particular, had been more clear than ever in his last letter that he hoped she would come home after the exams and find a job at the local hospital; even Hua [Suyin's sister] had asked whether she thought she

would stay in Britain after she qualified.^[8]

As Skoda muses, a recurring theme of the London novel is arrival, through which its protagonist's selfhood unfolds. *Bethnal Green's* premise led Skoda to consciously place it in conversation with similar narratives of arrival, such as Sam Selvon's *The Lonely Londoners* or Andrea Levy's *Small Island*. Here, the interrogation of migration and nursing offered a unique opportunity to engage with this tradition.

Every arrival requires a departure, and one central tension here is the increasing distance between Suyin and Penang, mediated only by guarded letters and remittances constantly gauged against a favourable exchange rate.^[9] Yet *Bethnal Green* frames migration as an inherently ambiguous exercise. After all, it is a two-part process: first of leaving, and second deciding whether to stay or return.^[10] Some migrations end decisively: in Lee Kok Liang's posthumously published novel, return is the only option for his unnamed Malayan narrator. London, to paraphrase the title, does not belong to him.^[11]

The decision is more complicated for Suyin. Nursing offers her a chance to build herself anew as an economic subject, to explore once-unthinkable ideas of selfhood. Returning means reckoning with (patriarchal) oppression within broader familial structures, and the interwoven anxieties of class and race. But there is also care and love for, and duty towards, her immediate family, which provides safe harbour amidst the gothic-like setting of gloomy shop-houses. "I was hoping to convey the choices that Suyin's free to make, as opposed to at the start of the novel. That's what's at the heart of it: female agency and strength, and what that means," said Skoda.

For Skoda, at the structural level, *Bethnal Green* is implicitly about two journeys of independence: "personal independence, and independence in the political and national sense." There is "a slight mirroring between what it means to live life on your own terms, and the long path that it takes for a country to emerge as its own self." In these ways, she not just narrates the afterlives of empire, colony and their institutions, but also selfhood and gender, in all their complexities.



***Note:** Amélie Skoda's appearance at this year's GTLF is made possible with the support of the British Council.

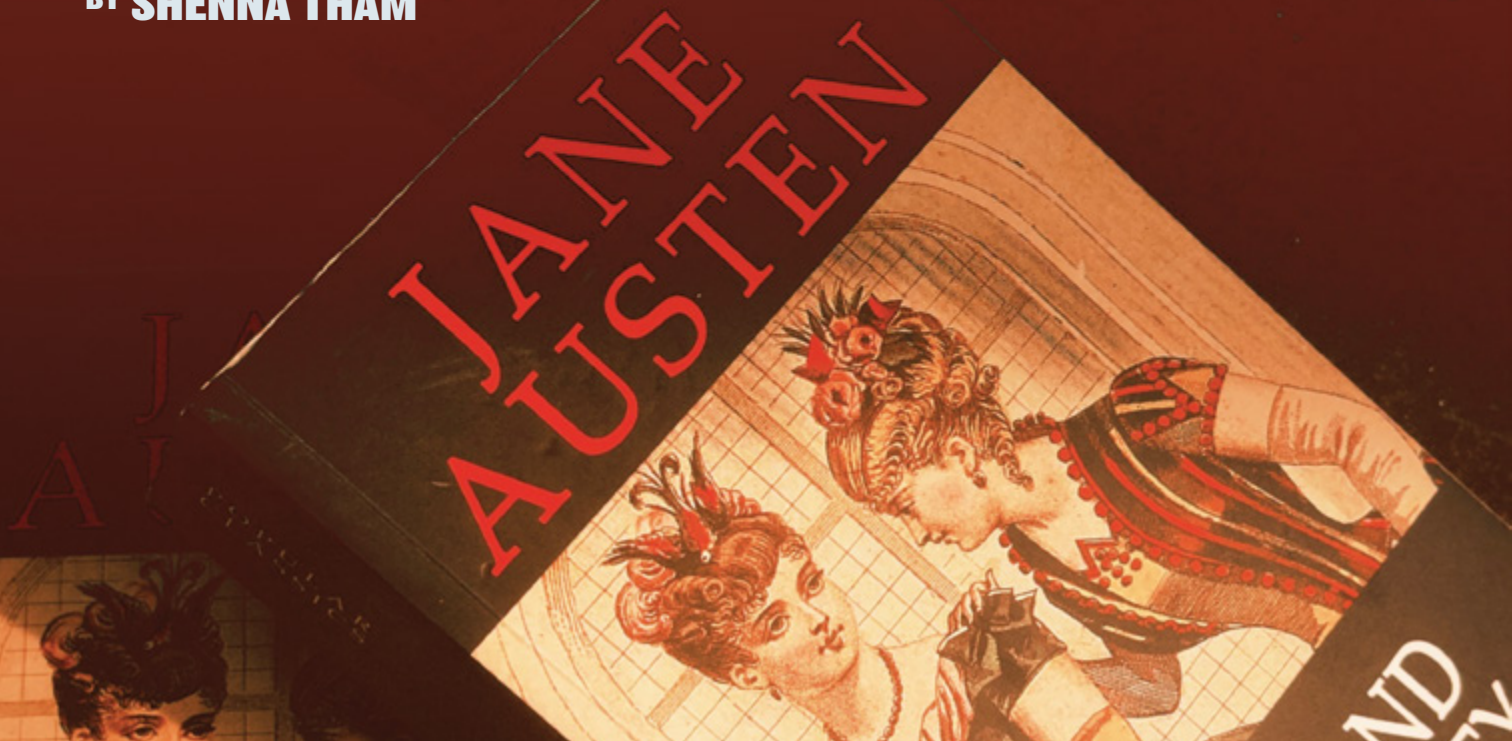
WILLIAM THAM has been published in *NANG, PR&TA, The Best of World SF: Volume 2*, and the *Southeast Asian Review of English*. He co-edited *The Second Link: An Anthology of Malaysian and Singaporean Writing*.

LEARNING TO LEARN: WHY LITERATURE STILL BELONGS IN SCHOOL

BY SHENNA THAM

“WHY CHOOSE LITERATURE?”

This is a question I have been asked ever since I began Form Six at Penang Free School (PFS), with Literature in English (Paper 920) as part of my Sijil Tinggi Persekolahan Malaysia (STPM, the Malaysian Higher School Certificate) subject combination. It is almost always treated as an unusual choice. In fact, Literature has quietly become one of the rarest STPM electives, offered by only a handful of schools nationwide. Many people assume it simply involves reading old books, memorising quotations and writing essays about fictional characters. But as classrooms dedicated to this subject disappear, so too do opportunities for students to discover what a literary education actually offers.



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BEYOND BOOKS AND EXAMINATIONS

PFS (est. 1816) is Southeast Asia's oldest English-medium school. Its heritage makes it a particularly compelling place to study Literature today. Over 40,000 students sit for the STPM annually, but Literature attracts only a small number of candidates. Inside the classroom, students debate character motivations, annotate poems line by line and argue over interpretations that resist a single correct answer. When I asked a classmate taking Accounting (who often wandered into our classroom whenever his own teacher was absent) what he thought of the subject, his answer was unexpectedly enthusiastic. “English Literature is pretty lit. If I had the time to study it, I definitely would have picked it. Besides, writing anything in general shows creativity and it's

much more exciting because it's *your* signature.”

A poem can invite a conversation about family expectations, while a short story opens discussions of grief, identity or belonging. For me, that shift became deeply personal when I presented on KS Maniam's “Arriving,” a short story from the revised 2025 Semester 1 syllabus. Maniam's exploration of identity and belonging reflected questions I had quietly been asking about home, family and an existence between different worlds. Literature stopped feeling like an examination subject and became a way of reading my own life.

Literature rarely asks students for one correct answer. Instead, it asks them to defend an interpretation with evidence, listen to competing readings and sometimes return

to a passage because someone else has noticed something they missed. Learning becomes less about memorising information than about paying closer attention. Empathy is not taught through being told to care; it is practised through reading to understand perspectives different from our own.

Much of my appreciation for Literature began with my teacher, Suriya Kumari, who has taught the subject at PFS for more than two decades. Her lessons rarely stop at preparing students for examinations. A poem becomes a conversation about society, a character becomes a debate about morality, and a single, once-overlooked sentence redirects an entire discussion.

Reflecting on education today, she told me: “It is something artificially ingrained through drills and memoris-

ing. The pursuit of education should come naturally.” Her lessons reflect this philosophy. Students question each other’s interpretations, revisit passages and discover meaning together rather than receive it ready-made. For a subject offered by so few schools, teachers like Suriya do more than just teach a syllabus. They keep Literature visible for students who might otherwise never encounter it.

WHEN A SUBJECT HAS TO PROVE ITS WORTH

“What can you do with it?”

This not-unreasonable question seems to follow almost every Literature student. Students today are expected to think about university admissions, careers and financial security long before they actually leave school. Parents understandably want reassurance that the subjects their children choose will lead somewhere tangible. But this practical question can start becoming a test of whether a subject deserves to exist at all. Literature is often asked to justify itself in ways that many other subjects are not. Science is associated with innovation. Business promises entrepreneurship. Technical and vocational subjects are linked to employability. Literature, meanwhile, is frequently treated as something that must defend its practicality before it is considered valuable.

To be sure, Literature develops skills that employers consistently ask for: students learn to write clearly, analyse evidence, construct arguments and interpret complex ideas. These abilities travel beyond the classroom and into journalism, law, education, communication and public policy. Yet reducing Literature to a list of transferable skills feels incomplete. Literary scholar Simon During argues that literary study cultivates judgment through close reading, interpretation and sustained attention to language and ideas.^[1] In practice, this means noticing how a single word changes a sentence’s meaning, reconsidering first impressions and defending interpretations with evidence.

Mohamad Rashidi Mohd Pakri, who has served on the Majlis Peperiksaan Malaysia (Malaysian Examinations Council) Board for STPM Literature in English since 2022, believes the current syllabus is “comprehensive and suitable” when it comes to preparing students for university-level Literature and related English-language degree programmes. He also sees the critical skills that students develop as being relevant beyond examinations, including in today’s job market.

Literature thus prepares students for university and careers. But it also prepares them for something less measurable. Haavineesh Vengadasan, PFS’s current school captain, recalls turning to Rudyard



CAPTIONS

1. Part of the syllabus: Jane Austen’s *Sense and Sensibility*.
2. A cover image for a presentation of Semester 1 poems.
3. The author (right) with Suriya Kumari (left).



Kipling’s “If” during his first few months in leadership. “The poem served as a guide to me, as captain of prefects,” he said. A prescribed poem had become something to live by, offering a different kind of value altogether.

WHAT HAPPENS AFTER STPM?

As teaching Literature in English becomes harder for some Form Six schools to sustain, this begets a question of access as much as advocacy. Where the subject is offered, and who gets the opportunity to study it, may also reflect wider differences in access to English-language education between urban and less urban areas. A student cannot choose a subject which they have never encountered. But opportunities to learn also exist outside the formal curriculum. Where schools can no longer sustain full classes, other points of contact—such as reading clubs, creative writing circles, theatre productions and conversations around Malaysian literature—can still help keep the discipline visible.

By making the familiar strange and the unfamiliar recognisable, literature teaches us that “life is possible, living is possible!” as Suriya often reminds her students. It gives language to experiences we have felt, but never quite known how to articulate. I have been fortunate to study a subject that

many students across Malaysia may never encounter. That is why this conversation is ultimately about *opportunity*, rather than insisting that every student should take the subject. Literature does not need to be rescued as a museum piece, but needs to remain accessible as a living part of our education.

Perhaps “why choose Literature?” is a reductive question. Perhaps the more important question is to ask why we have become so comfortable with asking this subject to justify its existence before making room for it in our classrooms.

ENDNOTE

1. During S. (2015). When Literary Criticism Mattered. In R. McDonald (ed.), *The Values of Literary Studies* (pp. 120–36). Cambridge UP.



SHENNA THAM is a former intern at Penang Institute with a passion for writing, fashion and visual culture. Inspired by faith and gothic romanticism, she sees life as a metaphor shaped through beauty and memory.

A DELIGHTFUL STAY AT RIMBUN DAHAN: A SIDESTEP RATHER THAN A RETREAT

BY **OOI KEE BENG**



1

FOR WORKAHOLICS TO drop everything and go on a retreat is as crazy as asking a parent to stop worrying about their children for a while. Not really possible. Unless, of course the workaholic is suffering the symptoms typical of advanced alcoholism. When he begins doubting his very ability to work well or care well for his family, then he has to take some drastic action. Otherwise, he is at risk of burning out.

Going “cold turkey” for a workaholic ... what would that be like? This sounds way too drastic. What about a halfway house then? A resort spa? A mountain retreat?

I am of course talking about myself. My workload and involvement in all my interests were overwhelming me in early 2026. I could not continue at the pace I was moving at. Come to think of it, I no longer remembered weekends. My week was made up only of weekdays. I needed a break, and a stint at Rimbun Dahan, not far from Kuala Lumpur, offered a welcome opportunity.



2



3

CAPTIONS

1. A green lotus seed pod on the grounds.
2. The Rumah Penang, originally from Jalan Perak, now relocated to the grounds (Source: William Tham).
3. A statue of a garuda in the Taman Sari spice garden.

4. The Oois with Angela and Bilqis Hijias (middle).
5. Lush greenery in the morning light (Source: William Tham).
6. Fellow inhabitants of Rimbun Dahan.
7. Hijias Kasturi painting in his studio.

A CHANGE IN PACE

After leaving Sweden in 2004 to work in Singapore, my working life changed from a sporadic mode—when I was a part-time lecturer at Stockholm University and a full-time quality controller at Ericsson Electronics—into an intensive one, as a researcher at the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS). By the time I left to take over Penang Institute, I had written the equivalent of two dozen books in 13 years. During that time, I had also established the policy brief series, *ISEAS Perspective*, for ISEAS, and the city magazine, *Penang Monthly*, for Penang Institute.

And with my dear wife, I was raising two young kids.

What all this tells me is that in this day and age, late-middle age is not too late in life. It can, in fact, be one's most productive period. One can peak late. All the better for that, in fact.

Ten years into managing and developing the think tank in my hometown, my interest in work stayed high, but I sensed that I was close to burnout. Something had to be done. But cold turkey was not for me.

Penang Monthly colleagues suggested that I go for an artist's retreat. They knew of a place called Rimbun Dahan, run by the family of Hijjas Kasturi, the famous architect, which operates an annual Southeast Asian Arts Residency programme. This is sited on Malay Reserve Land in Kuang, near Sungai Buloh, northwest of Kuala Lumpur.

Loving my work, I wished for a halfway house more than a complete retreat from said work. Could that be arranged? Furthermore, would Hijjas's family agree to consider a writer of opinion pieces and political biographies, not to mention a long-term think-tanker, as an artist in residence?

Happily, I had met the family before; they knew of my work and my writings, and were happy to have me over for six weeks in June and July. They were even fine with me coming and going, since some of my duties could not be abandoned. So that was arranged, and off I went to Rimbun Dahan.

A JUNGLE IN THE CITY

I entered its compound on the afternoon of 4 June, a Thursday. After going through the gates of Rimbun Dahan with a sign warning of *anjing garang* (fierce dogs), I was met by Bilqis, Hijjas and Angela's daughter. This wonderful lady gave me a quick introduction to the lay of the land, before



I was lodged in a comfortable room opposite the family house, above Hijjas's art studio. Four dogs had the run of the place. Bark-happy ones that wagged their tails only after they recognised you at a short enough distance.

My balcony overlooked the pool. My stay turned me into a swimmer, and reignited my wish to become a painter again—to exercise a spontaneous art form that sidelines my frontal lobe, one which reminds me that words are not the only efficient form of communication and expression.

I found that I wrote better while in residence, producing material of better literary quality and with sharper thinking. Workaholicism was not my problem; being overworked was. At Rimbun Dahan, I felt in control of my immediate time and space, and so my mind could settle down, yet wander where it would without going off-track.

Such a sidestep could not be a short one. Staying put allowed me to understand the terrain and the ecosystem in this residence. This included knowing the people there, of course: the Hijjas family and the permanent workers on the grounds. The macaques that pass through on some mornings and evenings. Far from timid, their troupes would cross the grounds, climb the roofs and go up and down the trees, searching for food and excitement. The lilies that bloom according to their evolved daily patterns; the singular monitor lizard crawling among the trees.





All the trees on the grounds are of Southeast Asian origin, by the way. Angela had made certain of that over the years, when she turned the compound into a truly local forest. In fact, it is now an accredited arboretum. Bilqis spends much of her time on dance choreography, with her latest project involving only Southeast Asian dancers. Hijjas himself, the very famous architect, spends his free time painting on the ground floor.

Taking breaks from my writing in the afternoon, I would interrupt him from his

work for chats on Malaysia and the world. He bought acrylic paint for me to try my hand at his style of creative abstract painting. This I did, to my satisfaction and with generous words of appreciation from the master himself. It was quite amazing to learn from him that if you sit in front of a complex abstract oil painting, a conversation develops; your mind is challenged to respond to evolving and dissolving motifs in the work.

I have to admit, though, that my sidestepping sojourn occurred during the football World Cup. That did distract

me somewhat. But it was not a bad distraction.

Being so close to Kuala Lumpur, it was inevitable that I would entertain some visits from friends who came for chats or meals in the district. My dear wife came down twice. It felt incomplete for me to have a deep and unique experience without her to share in it, however sporadically.

SIDESTEPPING, NOT RETREATING

My stay at Rimbun Dahan gave me time for thought: food for thought, in fact. A retreat is rather dramatic and a misnomer for my time here. The term I prefer to propose to the world is “sidestep.” In fact, the “retreat” is a concept born of modern progressivism and its relentless love of immediate purpose. “A sidestep” might instead be a better description of my stay here; it avoids some approaching danger, without retreating altogether.

Every now and then, workaholics and more sane people alike, need to take a sidestep. Retreats, vacations, changes of career ... all choices taken to mark dramatic differences from everyday life.

But more often than not, you need a break that is not really life-changing, one that is not a criticism of your life choices. You are just in need of more sustained control over your daily schedule. I would then suggest that you take “A Sidestep” in your otherwise meaningful life. Don’t retreat. Just take a substantial sidestep, and then step back in with more conviction and vigour.

***Note:** I am most grateful to Hijjas, Angela and Bilqis for allowing me to take an unforgettable sidestep into their world. And thank you, Julia Tan and William Tham, for the suggestion to do so.



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



BETWEEN ISLANDS: TEXT, TRANSLATION AND CONTESTATION

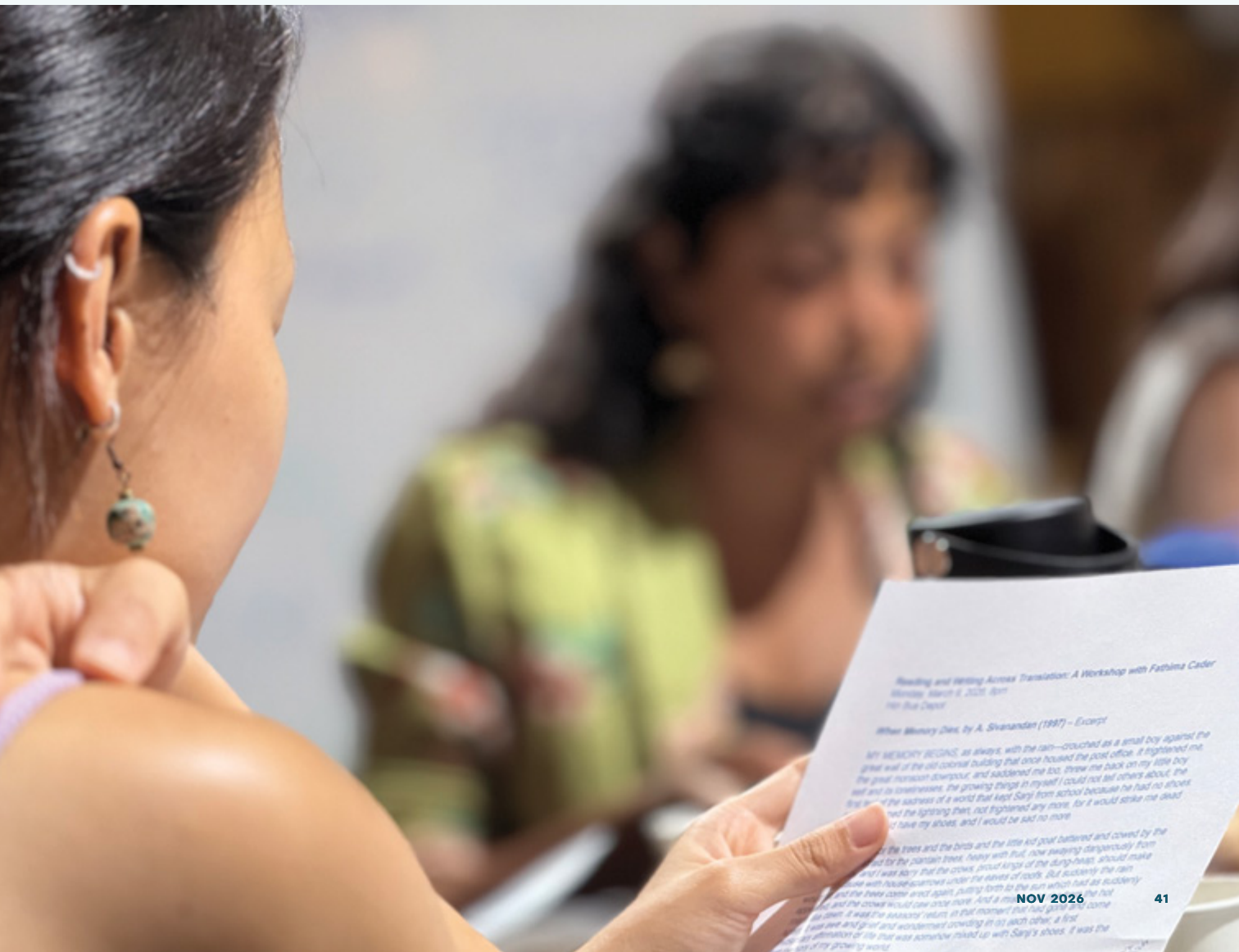
BY FATHIMA CADER

“**MY MEMORY BEGINS**, as always,” opens *When Memory Dies*, “with the rain.”

A. Sivanandan’s 1997 novel follows Ceylon’s transition away from being an outpost of the British empire to the postcolonial state of Sri Lanka (where I was born). The novel is a rare charting of how centuries of exploiting Tamil workers on tea plantations paved the way for the state’s subsequent war on Tamil people.

This first scene unfolds in the 1930s, deep in the central highlands. A small boy watches the monsoon, nursing his own internal maelstrom: that morning, his best friend, the son of a plantation worker, was sent home from school because he did not have shoes. “The things that crowded in on me that day in the rain, and in many rains after, and made me an exile for the better part of my life,” reflects our narrator, looking back at his childhood self, “were also the things that connected me to my country and made me want to tell its story.”

Nearly a century after this scene, I convened a workshop at Hin Bus Depot in Penang to study this text. How does narrative connect land and water, nation and border? What is art’s relationship to empire and labour? What is the terrain of exile, and what are the responsibilities of the traveller and the storyteller?



Reading and Writing Across Translation: A Workshop with Fathima Cader
Monday, March 8, 2021, 4pm
Hin Bus Depot

When Memory Dies, by A. Sivanandan (1997) – Excerpt

MY MEMORY BEGINS, as always, with the rain—crouched as a small boy against the
gravel wall of the old colonial building that once housed the post office. It frightened me,
that great monsoon downpour, and saddened me too, drove me back on my little boy
feet and its loneliness, the growing things in myself I could not tell others about, the
first time of the sadness of a world that kept Sargi from school because he had no shoes.
I did not meet the lightning then, not frightened any more, for it would strike me dead
if I have my shoes, and I would be sad no more.

...the trees and the birds and the little red post battered and cowed by the
wind for the plantation trees, happy with fruit, now swaying dangerously from
what I was sure that the crows, proud kings of the dung-heaps, should make
...with house-queens under the eaves of roofs. But suddenly the rain
...and the trees came and split apart, putting forth to the sun which had as suddenly
...and the crows would crow once more. And a mad boy came and
...it was the answer, return to that moment, that mad boy, I come
...and that great and wonderful crowing in its each other, a first
...an attention or its true was somewhere mixed up with Sargi's shoes. It was the
...age of my growing world.

In homage to Penang's linguistic multitudes, I designed the workshop as a collective translation exercise. From shop signs to street slang, Penang reverberates with many voices. To them all, we declared, “வணக்கம்” and “Selamat datang!”

The workshop centred on the novel's first page, which closes with these words:

“We all bore the imprint of that history, like a stigma, internalized it even, made it our own, against our will, calling to memory the while to lose it by losing memory itself.”

Interspersed below are some of the translations that attendees drafted, tracing history's contestations, from pre-independence Ceylon to contemporary Malaysia.

ஆனால் இருக்கும் வரலாறு
நம்பலோடையாக ஆகாது. நாம்
அடையாளத்தை நாம்
மறைக்கிறோம். ஏதாவது
ஆகாது, ஏனென்றால் அது நம்
எழுதிய வரலாறு அல்ல. நம்
அடையாளத்தையே நம்
மறைக்கிறோம்.

– Tamil, by Nithyarubini

The workshop fell in the middle of Ramadan, the month of fasting, நோன்பு, with its daily ritual of solitary daytime hunger bookended by communal nighttime meals. For my first iftar, I attended Masjid Kapitan Keling, simply because it was close to my accommodation.

As I approached the mosque, I was surprised to hear its loudspeakers broadcasting duas in Tamil. The dialect was markedly different from my own, but the cadence was deeply familiar. The sound transported me to Toronto (where I now live) and the countless Ramadan nights I have whiled away in its Tamil-speaking mosques.

Later, I would learn that the mosque had been built in the 1800s, making it the oldest mosque in Penang. The “Kapitan” in its name is a reference to its founder, Cader Mohiuddeen Merican, a seafaring Tamil trader from the south of India. The British eventually appointed him “Kapitan” of the Indians of Penang. That Malaysians use the words “Tamil” and “Indian” interchangeably is a misnomer enshrined in state policy.^[1] The word “Keling,” meanwhile, is a Malay term for people of Indian origin. Though the term lingers in official nomenclature, it is typically understood to have since become a racial slur, usually directed against Tamils, but also more broadly against anyone of Indian appearance or descent. These days, that includes migrant workers and sometimes even Africans.

Notwithstanding these slippages

and fissures in identity classifications, the sensation that suffused my first impression of the masjid was familiarity: for iftar, the mosque served vadai, rice kanji and coconut-stuffed pancakes that, in Tamil, are called suruttu appam. In Malay, they are often called kuih ketayap, the crepes rendered bright green with pandan. That night, I broke fast feeling bemusement and endearment, for these are foods I associate deeply with home and family—and I was far from both.

It was as I was readying for prayer that the older Tamil woman who had entered the mosque alongside me spoke aloud. Her head was shaved, grey stubble cropped close to brown scalp, a lingering symbol of the Tamil Hindu festival, Thaipusam, which had ended a few weeks before. Earlier, while I had crossed the threshold into the women's area, she had lingered uncertainly at its arch.

Now, she asked for food. After her hands were filled, she expressed thanks in a combination of Arabic dua, British-accented English and Tamil, her voice shaking with suppressed tears. As she left, she turned in the direction of the qiblah and bowed to touch the ground.

I turned away, I wanted to weep.

I was raised with the principle that, as a matter of faith, Muslims bow to none but God. It is with pride that I have stood with straight neck before judges and rulers, in rooms still freighted with the weight of colonial power, my uncurved back a small assertion of what is sacred to me.

But here, my elder's hunger was a sacrilege.

Then the muezzin called us to prayer, and I entered the ranks of worshippers. I folded into sujud and touched my forehead to the ground, my neck curving under the weight of the reminder that the sacred is also a frontline of dispossession and struggle.

*Kitam kamemon amikul kassan sajara,
bettek nibuanan palik, nipasod majalum
lahak, manjari kita dapuna, missan pen
mba kita bilahi, subay kitam ngentom
pabalik banan kanangan missan pen
pidi', illi na caranya bok mba ta ange-
tom ta banan kanangan.*

–Bajau, by Azwan Arik

On the night of the workshop, we gather in the Hin Bus courtyard. Dusk falls and we eat together. As we pass around the food people have brought to share—fat samosas and delicate wafers, gold-wrapped chocolates and ink-blue lychee juice—several attendees remark that they have never attended an iftar before. In the distance, fireworks punctuate our conversation: lingering celebrations from Chinese New Year, or early festivities for Hari Raya, or—in classic Penang fashion—fireworks simply

for the love of fireworks.

At first, the shyness feels palpable. Then I ask my opening questions: What languages did you speak today? What languages do you wish you spoke? The responses come fast and they range wide: Arabic, Anishinaabemowin (or Ojibwemowin), Bajau, Cantonese, Hokkien, Malay, Mandarin, Sanskrit, Tagalog, Tamil, Teochew, Thai and more.

*Kecuali kita semua membawa
bebanan dalam sejarah, seperti
stigma, diasimilasikan bersama
diri, tanpa kehendak sendiri, seperti
memanggil kenangan sambil kita cuba
memadamkan ingatan.*

– Malay by Tea Grey

As we work on our translations, Azwan Arik tells us he is Sama-Bajau, a people Indigenous to Sabah. The community is so small that the only person he speaks Bajau with is his grandmother. He tells us he is compiling a Bajau dictionary in preparation for the birth of his first child. Azwan's translation of Sivanandan into Bajau is a profound generosity: an invitation not only into language, but also into kinship and responsibility. Its inclusion here is a re-inscription of Bajau and Indigenous life across this archipelago.

*But actually hor, that history already
left a mark on us, you know, make us
malu only, malu even in our bones
itself. Even though we didn't even want
it leh. End up each time we remember,
we are actually forgetting the more we
remember.*

– Manglish, by Yee Heng Yeh

Ramadan continues. One night, after moreh, I stop at TS Bismi Chowrasta Teh Halia, a tiny tea shop on Tamil Street. The woman working there, dressed in an abaya and hijab, is visibly relieved when she realises she can speak to me in Tamil, instead of us stumbling along in Malay and English. I make my order, we exchange salaams, and I take my steaming glass to a plastic table.

It is well past midnight. The dark and narrow alley mills with people who, like me, are sipping small glasses of freshly brewed இஞ்சி தேநீர்: freshly grated ginger, black tea, sugar. This is my favourite style of tea. I love its sparseness. It is also one of my strongest associations with my family in the east of Sri Lanka, where the drink is especially common, partly because so many people cannot afford milk. I think of them whenever I prepare or drink this tea—the fishermen and paddy workers, the young women and unreading elders who raised me. This tea is the flavour of nights I have spent listening to the ebb and flow of relatives speaking Tamil around me, the mun-

danity of family gossip intertwined with stories of wartime devastation.

سام، سألوه اوله ساتو بين يغ منجادي سبهاكين
ديري والاوفون برتنتغن دغن كهندق، سميل
مغنغ والاوفون اخيرن كهيلغن كنغن ايت
سنديري.

—Malay (rendered in Jawi),
by Nadia Rose Noordin

Now, as I drink my ginger tea, I read my copy of P. Singaram's *Beyond the Sea*.^[2] Originally published in Tamil in 1959 as *கடலுக்கு அப்பால்*, the Penang-set novel follows Tamil men recruited by the British to force Japan out of Malaya. Unbeknownst to them, these same soldiers are also secretly working to expel the British from India.

An early scene depicts a forest skirmish between Tamil and Japanese soldiers. It ends in victory for the Tamils, but with several deaths. "Their hands clasped in prayer," they commence both Muslim and Hindu funeral rites, but are interrupted by the sudden appearance of "Anti-Fascist People's Army"^[3] fighters, all of whom are Chinese, except for one Tamil soldier. He approaches the Tamil group. At first, the representatives speak in Malay, then English, until the Tamil captain bursts out in irritation in Tamil: "Are you a Tamil or an English man?"

"I am a Communist!" comes the response. At this juncture, his captain joins in. In "a mixture of crude Tamil and English," the Chinese captain compliments the Tamil soldiers on their recent victory against the Japanese: "you gave it to them nicely, nalla podu pootingal!"

The Tamil captain makes a mental note of the Chinese captain's accent: "When he spoke Tamil, he could pronounce the Tamil 'r' ... he must have been born and bred in Malaya." This is the letter "ர," whose infamously elaborate curl of tongue against roof of mouth is Tamil's most obstinate declaration of identity, more demanding and more embodied than any flag and any passport.

The scene is a microcosm of Penang's multilingualism: not only do the Tamil men proclaim their loyalty to Malaya in different languages, but it is the Chinese fighter's fluency in Tamil that confirms their alliance. In an echo of this scene, one Tamil attendee at the workshop translates Sivanandan into Cantonese, to the special delight of the Chinese participants.

Nithyarubini, meanwhile, translates the text into Malay, and then into Tamil. Her translation of Sivanandan's English words about the suppression of Tamil people into a Tamil inflected with Penang's idiosyncrasies is a reminder of how fractal



the relationship between time, land and language is; every homecoming is a migration through more than just space.

Another attendee, Alicia Rae Drost, describes being Anishinaabe Ojibwe, Indigenous to what is now called North America. Over the last two centuries, successive Canadian and US governments have attempted to decimate Indigenous peoples across the continent. In one especially brutal and systematic strategy, these colonial governments forcibly confined Indigenous children in church-run residential schools, where torture and starvation were rampant. Administrators punished children for speaking their native languages.^[4] Given this context, Alicia explains that she had been raised to be protective of her ancestral languages, to keep them within Indigenous communities and not expose them to strangers. Yet two hours later, in a powerful gesture of trust, Alicia expresses her thanks to everyone in Anishinaabemowin, as we close the event.

Listening to her speak, I feel a lightness flood through my chest: the territories of the Anishinaabe people encompass Toronto, and the words Alicia utter are words I hear often in Toronto. Her trust is an unexpected collapsing of place and border, a sweet and powerful intimacy amid the ordinary loneliness of travel.

After my month in Penang concluded, I returned to Toronto, where, a season later, I unexpectedly found myself finishing this essay on the Anishinaabe territories of the Chippewas of Rama First Nation. I was attending an Anishinaabe law conference, and our workshops also incorporated sessions about language. This looping of coincidence feels like a gift, which is to say it also feels like a responsibility.

In Anishinaabe teachings, this continent on which I now live is known as Turtle Island. Indeed, our workshop in Penang—which centred on a story set in Ceylon—is a reminder of how, from one island to the next, language ebbs and flows between us. One migration flows into another, until it seems that all of time and place is a weaving of kinship and obligation. In our stories and in our maps, the webbing that bind people to each other are bright tracings across time and ocean, across blood and across border.

***Note:** This session was part of Fathima's artist-in-residence programme at Hin Bus Depot in March 2026: the first time a writer was hosted.

CAPTIONS

1. (Cover page): Listening to feedback from the participants during the workshop. (Source: Leaf Yeap)
2. An evening with all the participants. (Source: Leaf Yeap)

ENDNOTES

1. Malaysia's census designation of anyone with origins in South Asia as "Indian" even includes people with no Indian ancestry. The category "Tamil" is also generally assumed to automatically include Indian Muslims, who are distinguished from Malay Muslims.
2. 2012 translation by R. Karthigesu, published by Areca Books.

3. Likely the Malayan People's Anti-Japanese Army.
4. In Canada, the last federally funded residential school only closed in 1997. To this day, mass graves of Indigenous children continue being unearthed at the former grounds of these institutions.



FATHIMA CADER is a writer and community arts programmer, based in Toronto. She was an artist-in-residence at Hin Bus Depot.

WEAVING PATIENCE: BASKETRY AT ST. NICHOLAS' HOME

BY AQ'ILLA LATIF



THE FIRST THING that greeted me was silence.

Not the uncomfortable kind; instead, it settled gently over the basketry workshop. There were no machines humming in the background, only the soft sound of rattan being shaped by experienced hands. The scent of natural plant fibre lingered around unfinished baskets, weaving tools and bundles of rattan waiting to be transformed. St. Nicholas' Home has long supported the blind and visually impaired, and the art of basketry continues there not only as a traditional craft, but also as a way of building independence, confidence and connections across generations. Of the completed works displayed around the workshop, a woven table lamp cover caught my attention. It was not what I expected to see there, reminding me that this craft continues evolving to suit new needs.

WORKING WITH ONE'S HANDS

I was welcomed by Tang Wei Chong, a fundraiser who has been working at St. Nicholas' for five years. "Come, I'll show you around," he said with a smile. As we walked through the compound, Tang introduced me to teachers, students and the different vocational programmes available. Almost everyone we passed by greeted him warmly. Some stopped for short conversations; others exchanged jokes.

Despite having low vision, Tang moved through space easily, familiar with every corner of the place he had grown to know. Watching his interactions, I realised that St. Nicholas' is more than just a training centre; it is also a community, built through years of trust and shared experiences.

Later, over coffee at its café, our conversation turned to basketry. For Tang, the craft is not only about creating something with his hands. It has also changed the way he approaches life. "Before this, I always did things quickly. I didn't have much patience. But basketry taught me to calm down and be more patient," he said.

The repetitive process of weaving encouraged him to slow down, focus on each movement and appreciate the process, instead of only looking towards the final outcome. This simple reflection stayed with me throughout my visit.

TRADITION AND PRACTICALITY

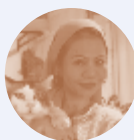
Such patience explains how the basketry programme at St. Nicholas' has continued for almost eight decades, beginning in 1947 as a sheltered workshop for the blind.^[1] Under the guidance of Mrs. M. Aitkin, residents were trained in light basketry, rattan work, simple carpentry and weaving split-rattan blinds, while others learnt knitting and simple weaving. Back when opportunities

CAPTIONS

1. Basket-weaving classes are open to groups of six, by appointment only.
2. St. Nicholas's basketry programme also accepts special requests: lamps, large baskets and the like.
3. Soon is swift with his fingers despite his low vision.

ENDNOTE

1. Ooi Hock Tiam. (2023, Sept. 12). *The Blind in Penang: The Story of St. Nicholas' Home*. Penang Story.



AQ'ILLA LATIF

is a coffee brewer, independent journalist and art event organiser passionate about craft, culture and community.



2

for visually impaired individuals were limited, the workshop implicitly offered a way for residents to develop independence, confidence and practical skills. The programme expanded in 1979 to include carpentry, before scaling down in the early 2000s. Although its structure has changed with time, its purpose remains the same: preserving traditional skills while helping visually impaired individuals develop their abilities.

Today, that institutional responsibility continues through Sabudin Othman, better known as Cikgu (Teacher) Din. Cikgu Din first joined St. Nicholas' in 1986 through its Early Intervention Programme, where teachers travelled house-to-house to help children with visual impairments develop living skills. More than two decades later, he began teaching basketry at St. Nicholas'. Since then, he has dedicated himself to training students and producing rattan products, which are sold through hotel orders, demonstrations, visitor purchases and special bookings.

When I met him at the workshop, Cikgu Din was supervising a student, Soon Kok Kie. Originally from Gopeng, Perak, Soon joined St. Nicholas' Skill Development Centre as a trainee in 2021, developed an interest in basketry and chose to continue with the programme. He completed his basketry course in 2022, spent nearly two years as an intern, and later became a staff member of the workshop team.

Watching Soon work was an experience in itself.

His hands moved quickly yet carefully, weaving strips of rattan together with confidence and precision. There was a sense of familiarity in every movement, as though years of practice had allowed his hands to understand the process automatically.

Ultimately, basketry is about more than just producing a finished product. "Basketry can train your hand skills, cognitive memory and sensory ability too," Cikgu Din explained. The St. Nicholas' basketry programme

involves three levels of training. The first introduces students to basic weaving techniques over three months. They then progress to learning different designs over four months. The final stage imparts advanced techniques, including incorporating colours and modern elements, while still maintaining traditional methods. The programme is provided for free to visually impaired participants, while members of the public are welcome to join selected workshops for a fee.

The resulting products reflect both tradition and practicality. There are baskets of different sizes, ranging from traditional egg baskets commonly used during Malay weddings to large shopping baskets and decorative household pieces. Although some designs have been adapted to suit modern needs, the techniques remain rooted in traditional methods.

"Before plastic, basketry had existed for a very long time," Cikgu Din said. "The way we make them is still traditional. But now, basketry has become something people appreciate rather than something they truly need every day."

Keeping the craft alive comes with its challenges, particularly the rising cost of rattan: since the Covid-19 pandemic, raw materials have become more expensive. Another is changing public perceptions of the craft. Basketry is sometimes viewed as a less practical vocational pathway compared with fields such as information technology or massage therapy, which are often seen as offering more immediate financial opportunities. But for Cikgu Din, the value of basketry cannot only be measured through income. It also involves preserving knowledge that may otherwise disappear. "I hope there will be more platforms that can highlight basketry, so that it will not be forgotten," he said.

As I prepared to leave St. Nicholas', I thought about what Tang had shared earlier. The patience he found through basketry permeated the workshop itself—expressed not only in the baskets being made, but also in the people who continued to teach, learn and preserve the craft.



3



1

PENANG'S PARKING ATTENDANT SCHEME: SMART MOVE IN DIFFICULT TIMES

BY KOAY SU LYN

BEFORE COUPONS PROLIFERATED, only to be replaced by digital parking applications, parking attendants were ubiquitous across Penang's public parking facilities. Now largely vanished, these attendants were once part of a transformative state strategy to provide skilled labour for industrialisation in the 1970s, while combatting high unemployment rates.

In an unlikely twist, a parking attendant scheme was central to interventions of the City In-Service Training Centre (CITC, est. 1 February 1970), which was founded in response to Penang's economic troubles in the 1960–70s. Although the CITC's role has been superseded by the Penang Skills Development Centre, which provides school-leavers with industry-specific skills today, we revisit this early scheme to understand how the inception of Penang's industrial transformation unfolded at the personal and institutional level.

RESPONDING TO ECONOMIC DOLDRUMS

Following Malaysia's formation, fresh political-economic directions and centralised control precipitated the erosion of Penang's longstanding economic mainstay: its "free port" status. Following Port Klang's development as Malaysia's main port, Penang Port endured an immediate 15–20% decline in trade.^[1] Coupled with the Indonesian Confrontation and eco-

nomic nationalism, Penang's combined trade with Indonesia, Thailand and Burma fell by about \$70mil from 1962–63 alone.^[2] This declining sector was unable to provide sufficient jobs, while the nascent small manufacturing industries in Mak Mandin, Butterworth, could not absorb enough labour. Despite having an overall population density four times greater than that of Selangor (the second-most urbanised state), Penang suffered the lowest employment rate nationwide.^[3] With the complete erosion of Penang's free port status by 1969, per capita income dropped 12% below the average national wage, and with recession, the unemployment rate increased to 16%.

Indeed, Penang's economic woes required a fresh solution, and with Lim Chong Eu's ascension to chief ministership in 1969, a new dawn ensued. He instituted various reforms and prioritised the development of skilled manpower: a crucial resource not only for expanding industrial development, but also tackling the high unemployment rate. The creation of a base of skilled workers would be pursued through the CITC, established with the City Council of George Town to provide in-service training as an integral part of a job-cum-training programme. Given the absence of specialised institutions and the general lack of vocational schemes, Lim envisioned this centre as the nucleus of a future state polytechnic.^[4]

CAPTION

1. Parking lots outside the newly built Dewan Sri Pinang. Photo taken circa 1976. Image from the Marcus Langdon Collection.

Located at the site of the former maternity hospital on Jalan Macalister, 40 part-time instructors, including experienced council staff and qualified teachers, were recruited by the CITC, with a budget of \$109,000 allocated to train school-leavers and job-seekers, so long as they were Penangites or had been resident for at least a year.^[5] Nine types of courses relevant to future industrial employment were offered—i.e., radio-television servicing, electronics, mechanical engineering craft, motor vehicle mechanics, welding craft, electrical engineering, electrical installation, draughtsmanship and book-keeping—along with compulsory language and civics courses. Headed by a retired vocational headmaster, Yeoh Swee Hock, the CITC's initial batch of trainees included 269 parking attendants, 54 road transport workers and 14 lift attendants.^[6] Evening classes were conducted thrice weekly, with practical and theoretical exams held throughout the three semesters (each 9–10 weeks long).^[7] An encouraging 1,462 trainees enrolled in 1970–74 with 1,055 graduating, peaking in 1972 with Penang's industrial boom. Later, a separate training centre was established in Prai.^[8]

An interesting feature of training was that trainees were given part-time jobs as parking attendants. By working for four hours, and then undergoing four more hours of study at the CITC, school-leavers could earn an allowance while equipping themselves as skilled professionals to improve their industrial employment prospects.

MORE THAN JUST A JOB OPPORTUNITY

"The CITC was a name I coined so that we could run it independently as a City Council project, and need not go through the Ministry of Education," recounted Anwar Fazal, then the Council's assistant city secretary. Its curriculum, Anwar reflected, was developed through town-and-gown collaborations. "I invited Prof. Chatar Singh, one of the pioneering professors of the Universiti Sains Malaysia's School of Physics and Mathematics, to lead an advisory council of academics, professionals and civil society, like the Rotary Club, for the Centre. Under his leadership, we saw professional development."^[9] The CITC benchmarked itself against international standards, by adopting the UK's City and Guilds study and certification framework and, with the aid of the German Development Service and several teachers from the German Volunteer programme, West Germany's globally outstanding vocational training programme.^[10]

But why employ trainees as parking attendants? This scheme actually preceded the CITC's formation, having been implemented as a pilot scheme by the City Council

in 1969, under the first chief minister, Wong Pow Nee (who was then the officer directly administering the Council).^[11] By replacing all coin-based, metered parking systems, the resulting demand for immediate manpower would create mass employment opportunities, especially for school-leavers lacking specialised skills and unemployed job-seekers. But it was no mere populist move. Retired civil servant Loo Kam Weng remembers how the scheme—then referred to as the "N-Project"—benefitted youths who lacked further educational opportunities. "The rising electronics sector was a good source of future employment, but basic training must be provided and the youths must be skilled."^[12] In short, the scheme was a preparatory system to create adaptable human resources, capable of adjusting to the demands of industrialisation. Consequently, it resonated with Lim's constant appeal that youths "reorient their attitude" by "fitting into blue-collar jobs in line with technological development in the country."^[13]

Trainees were entitled to several perks as part-time attendants. Alongside an allowance of \$60 per month, they qualified for free public bus passes, basic medical benefits, a monthly bonus of \$20 and an additional \$3.75 for overtime work on public holidays.^[14] Given the prevailing sense of gloom, these perks were attractive. "All of us who took the Malaysian Certificate of Education exams then had very little prospect of finding employment, regardless of whether you passed or failed," recalled retired academic, Ariffin Omar.^[15] "There were no jobs available except for those who had connections or could afford to go overseas. Many left Penang and those who remained were lucky to become parking attendants, despite the long hours under the sweltering sun."

"LOOK AT WHERE IT BROUGHT US TODAY"

Despite the scheme's apparent hardships, it was seen as a necessary measure. "Some called it exploitation, but resolving the high unemployment rate was our utmost concern then, and we thought that it was good to have the youths work and study at the same time to acquire the basic skills to be absorbed into the electronics industry," Loo emphasised.

Indeed, this was the experience of at least two former CITC trainees, Koris Atan and his wife, Sita, for whom training was more than beneficial. Koris, trained in draughtsmanship, "secured employment as a toolmaker at the newly established Robert Bosch. Later, I left to become a draughtsman for the Ministry of Telecommunications." He was particularly proud of having a \$60 allowance: a generous amount for the time. Sita, trained as a laboratory assistant

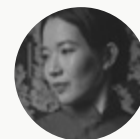
before becoming a factory personnel supervisor at the Free Trade Zone, saw training as upskilling, to use today's buzzword. "We did not think much back then as school-leavers as to whether the parking attendant scheme was brutal or inhumane. So long as there was an opportunity to study and learn a new skill for future prospects, coupled with a part-time job, we jumped at it. Look at where it brought us today."^[16]

The parking attendant scheme continued under the City Council, until coupons and digital payments were normalised. Despite being phased out, it still testifies to the importance of political will and innovative spirit during economic hardship.

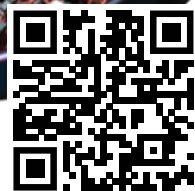
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KOAY SU LYN's an independent researcher who recently obtained her MA in history from NUS. She now straddles two islands: her hometown, Penang and host city, Singapore.



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MIRRORED MIGRATION:

COMING HOME SHOULD be easy, or so I thought. After four years of living in the UK, I imagined that returning to Penang would feel like slipping back into a familiar rhythm: of the food, the languages, the old streets I grew up knowing and the people I once called my “community”. Instead, I found myself readjusting to and navigating changes—in Penang and within myself—before coming to the unsettling realisation that life back home had continued without me, while I was busy building a life halfway across the globe. Is this an inescapable feeling, and if not, what does this experience feel like for other returnees?

A RETURN TO FAMILIARITY

To grasp perspectives beyond my own, I sent out a questionnaire and conducted interviews with peers who had returned to Penang after living overseas, as well as those who were still abroad. Among my respondents, family was the major factor behind their return home, followed by career prospects, cost of living and personal relationships, among others. Notably, not everyone found the transition back to Malaysia difficult, highlighting how differently “reverse culture shock”—that is, “the process of readjusting, reacculturating and reassimilating into one’s own home culture after living in a different culture for a significant period of time”—is experienced.^[1]

For Lynn, who spent three years studying in the UK, returning to Penang meant navigating a very different working and social culture. After an academically intense and relatively liberal environment abroad, she found Bayan Lepas’s industrial work culture overwhelming. “I met people who were obsessed with quirky interests and those who could reconcile two contradictory belief systems while studying there [the UK], but I saw less curiosity of this nature in Penang,” she recalled.

Despite missing the everyday pleasures of life in England, coming back sharpened Lynn’s appreciation for home. “I bet everyone says they miss the food, definitely me included,” she added. “I also appreciate the predictable sunlight hours here more, since the sun sets at 3pm during winter in the UK.” She also expressed her sense of belonging to Malaysia, describing how living abroad often made her feel like a guest in someone else’s house, where she had to be careful not to do anything that might be considered offensive. She was constantly conscious of unspoken social rules abroad, whereas she feels more at ease in Penang.

Returning home also gave Eugene Leong, who studied aerospace engineering in the UK, a stronger sense of community than he had experienced overseas. “I felt like I was part of the constantly changing environment there, but [am] more deeply rooted in Penang,” he said. Like Lynn, living abroad also reshaped his expectations of work. While his UK experience sparked an interest in aerospace technology and innovation, he found that opportunities in Penang leaned more towards manufacturing and machining parts for Boeing and Airbus. Still, he felt at home almost immediately. “Penang is still very much the place I remembered and imagined while I was away—the people, culture, food and overall way of life feel familiar,” he said.

FINDING THE WAY HOME

BY JOEL TEH

MIGRATION AS AN ONGOING PROCESS

My little questionnaire also shows that returning to Penang does not always mean staying here for good: some respondents are considering leaving again. For Melissa Ong, returning was less a choice than a consequence of circumstances. After graduating in Australia during the Covid-19 pandemic, she spent three months unemployed before securing a job in Shah Alam after a potential position in Penang was frozen. Financial considerations and visa restrictions eventually closed off her ability to remain in Australia, and she has since made Kuala Lumpur her home.

Penang remains a complicated place for Melissa, who feels she has changed into someone her hometown cannot accommodate. "Australia was very welcoming, fair and less judgmental for who I am," she said. To her, Penang represents family, food and cultural roots, but she sometimes feels compelled to shrink to fit its expectations. Kuala Lumpur, meanwhile, offers the career opportunities she seeks, while Australia remains on her mind. "I travel between personas," she reflected. "Where exactly do I fit in both worlds?"

Another respondent, Mars Leong-Schotsch, who pursued his master's in Australia and is now happily married in the US, said moving abroad was more about becoming the person he wanted to be than simply finding himself. "You know how you always hear stories about Westerners travelling East to find themselves?" he added. "Well, I went West to become myself. [...] I hate that I had to leave my little island, but a bird has to leave the nest when the environment becomes too hazardous and no longer nourishes it."

He misses Penang's spontaneity: from pasar malam visits and beach barbecues to buskers and murals, and being able to get around without a car. Living abroad has taught Mars to recognise the contradictions in different cultures and question behaviours he once accepted as normal. He jokingly shared some of the habits that he had to shake off: *kiasu*, *kiasi* and *kiamsiap* (Hokkien for fear of losing, fear of change and stinginess, respectively). "I used to be two out of three," he quipped. Mars still hopes to visit Penang someday, however. "I'll be a tourist to the place I grew up in," he said. "It's a strange, bittersweet kind of grief to be a stranger in the most familiar place you've ever known."

REDEFINING HOME

Perhaps Penang's strongest pull lies not in the physical place itself, but the people and memories that make it feel like home. What keeps returnees tethered, despite the challenges of settling back in, often comes down to the things that are hardest to replicate elsewhere: family, friends and community. For others, it is food, duty (such as caring for ageing parents) or simply the sense of belonging that comes from being somewhere deeply familiar.

Most respondents agree that home is where they find their community and build a life with loved ones. For Lynn, the concept of *Hiraeth*—a Welsh word encapsulating a longing for a home and time to which one cannot return—helped her understand the complicated feelings of those who leave. "Places aren't only physical localities; they also encode temporality. Home, by definition, is a place where we have built something—life, dreams, relationships, memories," she said. Eugene, meanwhile, remains in Penang by choice, finding stability in familiarity. "Home is a place where I know where things are—it gives me a sense of stability and allows me to think about the future."

For those living outside of Penang, the idea of home has become more fluid. Melissa described it as "anywhere I can be at peace with myself," while Mars expressed: "Home is where you choose to be, and what you choose to make of it. The grass isn't always greener on the other side; it's green where you water it. Even in places neglected for generations, you can still grow something real—something that serves the community, and in turn, the world."

Understanding these perspectives has helped me make peace with my own return to Penang. Perhaps coming home was never about resuming the life I left behind, but finding the courage to build a new one. I may not have found my footing yet, but I believe that home is not something we return to. It is something we learn to call ours again.

ENDNOTE

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JOEL TEH lived across London and Hertfordshire over a span of four years.

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TEOCHEW PUPPETRY: DO THE DEITIES APPROVE?

BY LEE CHEAH NI



THE FRONT OF the Hor Kai Kong Temple in Pulau Tikus filled with young students and neighbourhood worshippers, as a performance by Ling Goh's Iron Gang Puppet Theatre (铁枝帮) began.^[1] Onstage, her students and the musicians performed the Four Fortunes Set (四出连)^[2] and reimagined the Malay folktale, Si Tanggang, facing the temple entrance so that the deities could enjoy the show. They were staging a contemporary Teochew iron-rod puppet performance on temple grounds for the first time. But it was also an experiment in how modern theatre forms could be injected into traditional puppetry, rather than the other way around. Staged ahead of the 2026 International Performing Arts Symposium & Puppetry Spectacular, *Moved to the Temple* brought the contemporary back to the site where the form has always lived. By the end of the night, I was asking what the audience thought. And crucially, did the deities like it?



BORN INTO THE TROUPE

Ling Goh is a leading advocate for local Teochew opera and puppetry. Her great-grandfather managed an opera troupe, her great-grandmother was an opera actress, and her grandparents were also in the trade. Her mother, Toh Ai Hwa, was thus born into an opera family. Ai Hwa left the trade briefly but returned to work for the Lao Rong Xiu Chun (老荣秀春) troupe, which performed *chaoyin* (潮音) and puppetry. She took over when its manager died, renaming it the Kim Giak Low Choon (金玉楼春) in 1989. Ling Goh later renamed it the Kim Giak Low Choon Puppet Troupe (金玉楼春潮州木偶剧团). As puppetry gained attention, it became the troupe's main focus, although its members still perform *chaoyin* (but have stopped taking funeral engagements). Performance has always been a form of livelihood for them.

Teochew eight-tone ensembles and songs, then gongs and drums, were performed during festivals, weddings, birthdays, funerals and temple rituals. For more than 60 years, Ai Hwa sang Teochew opera, operated iron-rod puppets and played the drum. As lead percussionist, she commanded the ensemble's rhythm, earning the highest wages in the troupe alongside the *erxian* player. Her own children grew up in this world. Ling Goh and her elder sister, Huey Theng, were vocal performers-cum-puppeteers. Their brothers had other duties: Lih Shan played the *yangqin* and Lih Tat leaned towards the drum. Huey Theng has since left the troupe, but while her brothers each briefly walked away, they both eventually came back. Only Ling Goh has never left.

SACRED BUSINESS

Today, Lih Tat leads Kim Giak Low Choon, primarily treating it as a business. The troupe travels to temples across Malaysia, carrying on the family's good name. Lih Shan, one of Malaysia's better-known Teochew musicians, once worked as an agent to bring over opera troupes from China, and founded Gaik Lai Teochew Puppet Troupe with his wife, Goey Paik Wei, in 2014. Both troupes stage shows mostly for deities, who demand "serious and well performed" work, according to Lih Shan. Standalone Teochew puppet performances are actually a recent tradition. They were rarely

commissioned before the 1980s, but when staging full operas became too costly, puppetry—as a form of miniature opera—caught on. In fact, demand is still growing. The brothers take a practical view of work, expecting to keep performing until the community no longer needs them. "We may have fewer spectators (观众), but that doesn't mean we have no listeners (听众)," they said. This distinction matters: those who love Teochew puppets come to listen (听戏), unlike younger viewers, who are more visually oriented. Crowds are often thin, but the singing and music must still be good, because someone is always listening.



The real challenge is manpower. Younger people do not want to endure long waits between performances, or work the hot outdoor stages for irregular incomes. Yet keeping the art alive is a secondary priority for the brothers. "I am lucky my children are still working with me. Even my daughter comes to help after work. But I don't expect them to keep the art alive. That's up to them," said Lih Shan. In contrast, Ling Goh has worked hardest at securing their inheritance; consequently, they respect her approach and will help where they can. For the brothers, the audience is settled and nothing needs be added to the show. For Ling Goh, the opposite is true. "I never want to do things that others have done before," she said. To this end, she established the Teochew Puppet and Opera House in 2014, and the Iron Gang Puppet Theatre in 2022.^[3]

all, and I can sing most of them," she admitted frankly. The art was never explained to her, but was instead learned by ear and kept alive through practice. Now, it is asked to explain itself: to funders, the young and perhaps even the deities.

Returning to the temple, I asked the elders for their thoughts. They wondered whether the deity could understand so many languages. "Maybe he knows them all," one said, "He has been here so long." Ultimately, who is a show for: the deities, the young or the sake of tradition itself?

***Note:** The 2026 symposium, *Moved to Life: Tradition and Reinvention in Asian Puppet Theatre*, takes place at Penang Institute on 7–8 November. I thank Goh Lih Shan, Goh Lih Tat and Toh Ai Hwa for sharing information in several interviews. Photos courtesy of Sunny Tan.

CAPTION

Scenes from *Moved to the Temple: An Experimental Night of Iron-Rod Puppetry at the Temple*, a pre-symposium event held at Hor Kai Kong on 20 September.

ENDNOTES

1. Iron Gang Puppet Theatre is Malaysia's first contemporary troupe dedicated to exploring new ways of staging Teochew iron-rod puppetry, while training next-generation puppeteers.
2. A repertoire of four auspicious pieces, which opens the stage with blessings for fortune, longevity and prosperity.
3. Teochew Puppet and Opera House runs the Malaysian Teochew Arts Heritage Centre.



WHAT MAKES AN INTANGIBLE CULTURAL HERITAGE?

George Town's UNESCO World Heritage Site listing has encouraged more people to see such arts as intangible cultural heritage. But Lih Tat laughed at this label, which is mainly of value to people outside the field. Neither "culture" nor "heritage" does anything material for the troupe. Meanwhile, Ling Goh has noticed how performers, once looked down upon, have acquired a new status. Official events promoting local culture now feature them, bringing work and recognition. Performers are not merely being seen more, but acquire broader cultural capital through this shift in standing and setting. In fact, Ai Hwa has received recognition for cultural heritage and artistic transmission, and will receive a national honour this month. "I am uneducated. I only feel happy, but I don't have words to say more. I learned all this from listening to cassettes and the radio. I just memorised it



LEE CHEAH NI is an independent researcher, curator and cultural worker with an MA in Inter-Asia Cultural Studies. She works with oral history, visual culture and socially engaged art, and is interested in colonial Penang's labour history.



BY WILLIAM THAM

HOW LONG HAVE YOU BEEN HERE?

THE ART OF MIGRATORY PEREGRINATIONS FROM BENGAL

NIGHT: At the Hu Yew Seah school, a mural featuring the polymath Rabindranath Tagore, who laid its foundation stone, masterfully overlooks Lorong Madras. Often remembered as a global “Indian” intellectual, Tagore’s literary fame earned him a Nobel Prize for literature and a platform to articulate socio-political critique. Visiting George Town in 1927, he railed against the emergence of nationalism, which increasingly defined British India’s anticolonial movement. In Penang-based artist Hoo

Fan Chon’s work, Tagore’s sojourn offers a starting point to centre the transnational trajectories of migrant workers from present-day Bangladesh. *Penang Monthly* speaks to Hoo about his solo exhibition—*How Long Have You Been Here?*—and the ethos of his cultural work. Its title, a common query among migrant workers, now poses questions of migration, aspiration and performance.





CAPTIONS

1. Launch night at Hin Bus Depot (Source: Thum Chia Chieh, Hin Bus Depot).

2. With Rana on a field visit to Gabriel Pitcher's Lorong Madras mural. Tagore is flanked by Dr. Wu Lien-Teh.

3. Tiga Tabib HooHaZat.

4. Selection from the "Learn the language in 30 days" series (Source: Thum Chia Chieh).

the Bangladeshi government's formal reliance on remittances to resolve post-independence economic struggles, according to researcher Raiyaan Mahbub.^[5] Depending on where exactly one hails from, they may end up in the UK, US or Singapore, while others serve Malaysia's agricultural and manufacturing sectors. Their presence thus represents the degree to which aspirations of class mobility stretch across the former Raj, where labour fuels, for instance, the renovation of George Town's heritage buildings.

and class^[6]—showed up at Hoo's informal recording studio at home, where a filmic sense of their interiority emerged. There is much to value in these unpolished performances: laughter broke out between takes, some awkwardly mumbled the lyrics appearing on the makeshift teleprompter, but the last one—who eagerly auditioned by singing unprompted over the phone—evocatively brought the lyrics to life against a backdrop of rolling seas. A subtle critique of literary mythmaking arises through Hoo's intervention. Now, *anyone* can engage with Tagore, although this work suggests another implicit question: why are other Bengali writers, such as Kazi Nazrul Islam, not as well remembered?

THE MEANS OF ASPIRATION

Tagore has become a gateway to interrogating *aspiration*—a key theme in Hoo's work—which "operates as a structuring force of mobility, shaping how and why bodies move across time, geography and class." Yet aspiration "does not emerge freely; it is formed within constraint, shaped by inequality and necessity."^[7]

A series of paintings, "Learn the language in 30 days," engages with the language which mediates aspiration, through his versions of the covers of Bengali–Malay phrasebooks: essential guides for wannabe migrants and the newly arrived, on sale in George Town and Dhaka alike. Here, tangible signifiers of global modernity, which

OVERTURNING THE CANON

Almost a century ago, Tagore's lecture series, given during a tour of Southeast Asia which culminated in Bali, articulated his increasing wariness of nationalism.^[1] But in the years following his death, the Indian subcontinent was fractured by partitions, giving rise to multiple states, including India, Pakistan and Bangladesh.^[2] Akin to Shakespeare's institution as *the* canonical "English" writer, emergent national imperatives have assembled Tagore as the quintessential "Indian" writer. Yet this is artifice. Tagore's ancestral home in Shilaidaha lies in Bangladesh, not India's West Bengal border state, while his song "Amar Sonar Bangla" has been adopted as the young country's national anthem.

Hoo uses Tagore's song, "Kharo Bayu Boy Bege," written at the E&O Hotel, to interrogate a lasting aspect of empire: migration. Presently, the Bangladeshi migrant worker contingent in Malaysia is approximately 900,000 strong, gauging from 2024's figures.^[3] Indispensable to domestic economic growth, they are easily distinguished from Malaysia's established Bengali community, rooted in colonial-era migration.^[4] Contemporary outmigration corridors are structured by domestic class and geographical divisions, stemming from



The video installation "Revoicing Tagore's Song (A Fierce Wind Blows Fast)" centres the literal voices of these workers vis-à-vis Tagore. By inviting them to sing, Hoo's work audibly overturns their relative invisibility by making their voices heard. To sing is to no longer just be a factor of production. To partake in the same literary register as Tagore, these workers—recruited through nondescript advertisements and hailing far from the Tagores' elite caste

may or may not actually depict Malaysia, come into sharp relief. Filled with "skyscrapers, airplanes, office workers and attractive women," as Hoo lists them, these covers are often illustrated by artists or designers who might not actually have been to Malaysia. Instead, the country is "a destination imagined in advance," he noted, more fiction than fact, where upwards mobility may be found.^[8] Hoo renders these paintings through Bangladeshi



5

5. A still from the video installation.
6. Behind the scenes at the impromptu recording studio.

rickshaw art's visual language, partaking in a "vernacular tradition of ornament, hand-rendered script, pastoral storytelling, urban fantasy and cultural aspiration."^[9] Often deployed to depict film posters, this gaudy style calls attention to fictive imaginations of Malaysia as a destination of plenty, where speaking the "Malaysian" or "Singapore" language grants migrants access to hard-earned foreign currency.

Success also manifests in purchases of "Korean blankets," the ubiquitous ceremonial sheets now mostly made in China and bought in Malaysia, before being brought back to Bangladesh. Although impractical for everyday usage due to their thickness, these homecoming gifts symbolise that one has successfully *made it*. They can be used "to wrap electronics, clothing or sweets, sometimes replacing luggage entirely," Hoo said, constituting "a soft infrastructure through which aspiration is materialised, carried and returned." They occupy the opposite temporal end of the phrasebooks, as tangible markers of success accompanying one's homecoming, becoming "proof of labour performed, the ceremony of return, the evidence of aspiration fulfilled."^[10] Thus, his final installation, "Oversized Floral Carrier," features king-sized Korean blankets, tailored into enormous homecoming bags, stuffed and suspended in mid-air. This manifestation of elevation suggests the physical flight home and upward mobility, and encapsulates the exhibition's overall ethos.

MYTH OF THE INDIVIDUAL ARTIST

The exhibition is grounded in a broader process of research which actively engages with Hoo's subjects of representation—the workers themselves—and material critique. This is necessary given the privileged spaces artists often occupy; after all, a formal education and sociocultural capital are required elements of a professional artistic career. His own training at the University of Arts London and participation in residencies and projects worldwide have made an artistic career possible.

It helps to think of Hoo's artwork as a series of discrete research projects revolving around different subjects—from fish to photographs, durian to restaurants—each resulting in distinct outputs. The assembly of art requires strict work schedules, incisive reading and thorough reflection, before being filtered through a distinct aesthetic approach combining humour, irony and provocation. This exhibition even required extensive fieldwork in Bangladesh, ranging from the Tagore residence to more remote locales. It informed the shape and soul of this exhibition as a subtle exploration of migrant agency. In contrast with active processes of participatory art-making with marginalised communities,^[11] Hoo's approach still centres the artist's role, yet provides space for a subject's agency. It surfaces from the interactions between subject and the emerging work, even from the simple act of responding to recruitment posters at local restaurants.

Art, at its core, is a relational process: it was not possible to work and travel without collaborators of some sort. Hoo's housemate, Masud Rana, volunteered as an informal community facilitator, and even sang for the video installation. On his return from Dhaka, Hoo carried stick-

ers depicting a painting that he commissioned from Muhammad Hanif Pappu, a famed rickshaw art practitioner. It features Hoo with his fellow artists Hasanul Isyraf Idris and Izat Arif (collectively known as the "Tiga Tabib HooHaZat"), and serves as an informal business card. In these ways, transnational artistic collaborations complicate not just the contradictions of the nation-state system, but also the myth of the individual artist.

***Note:** *How long have you been here?* is supported by The Back Room, Hin Bus Depot—where it is exhibited—and Penang Art District. It runs from 3 October to 15 November. Photos by Hoo unless otherwise stated.

FOOTNOTES

1. Tagore, R. (1918). *Nationalism*. Macmillan and Co., Ltd; A. Netto. (2012). *Old Penang: Tagore's visit in 1927*. Anilnetto.com; Webb, A.K. (2008). *The Countermoment Moment. Journal of World History* 19(2), 189–212.
2. Dalrymple, S. (2026). *Shattered Lands*. W.W. Norton & Co.
3. Buletin TV3. (2025). *Warga Bangladesh, pekerja asing paling ramai di Malaysia*.
4. On Bengali migration to this region, see: Rahman, G.M. (2025). *In the Malay World*. Cambridge UP. Learn more about the local community from the Malaysian Bengalee Association.
5. In Ong K.J. (ed). (2026). *How long have you been here* [zine]. cloud projects (p. 27).
6. The Tagores were Bengali Brahmins, one of the upper castes from which the colonial-era Bhadrak (gentry) class was constituted.
7. Qtd in Ong (2026), p. 14.
8. Qtd in Ong (2026), p. 51.
9. On rickshaw art, see: Lahiri-Dutt, K., & Williams, D.J. (2010). *Moving Pictures: Rickshaw Art of Bangladesh*. Mapin Publishing.
10. Hoo, qtd in Ong (2026), p. 47.
11. See works by artists such as Yee I-Lann, Okui Lala and Wong Hoy Cheong.

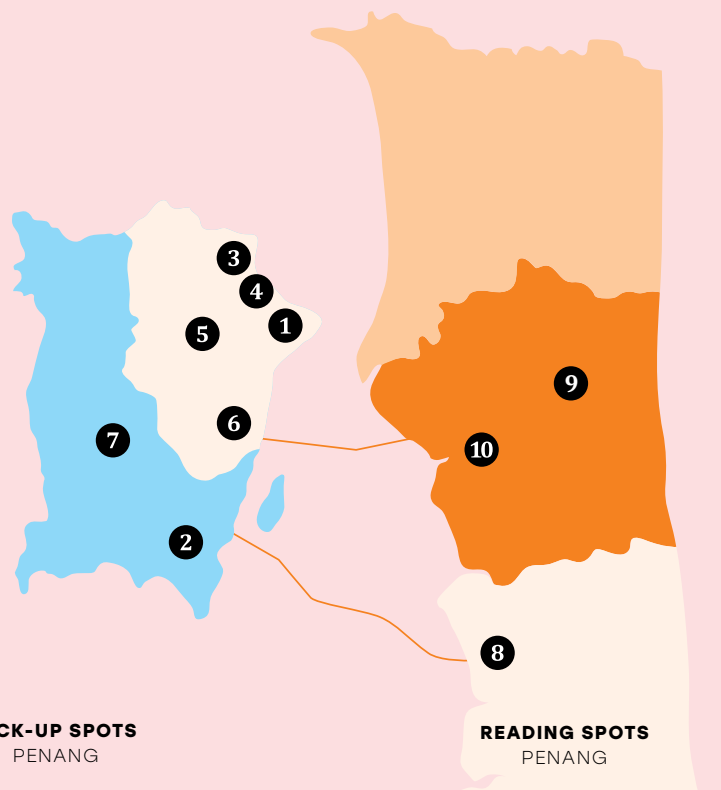


WILLIAM THAM has been published in *NANG*, *PR&TA*, *The Best of World SF: Volume 2*, and the *Southeast Asian Review of English*. He co-edited *The Second Link: An Anthology of Malaysian and Singaporean Writing*.



6

HERE'S WHERE YOU CAN FIND PENANG MONTHLY



PICK-UP SPOTS KL/SELANGOR

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

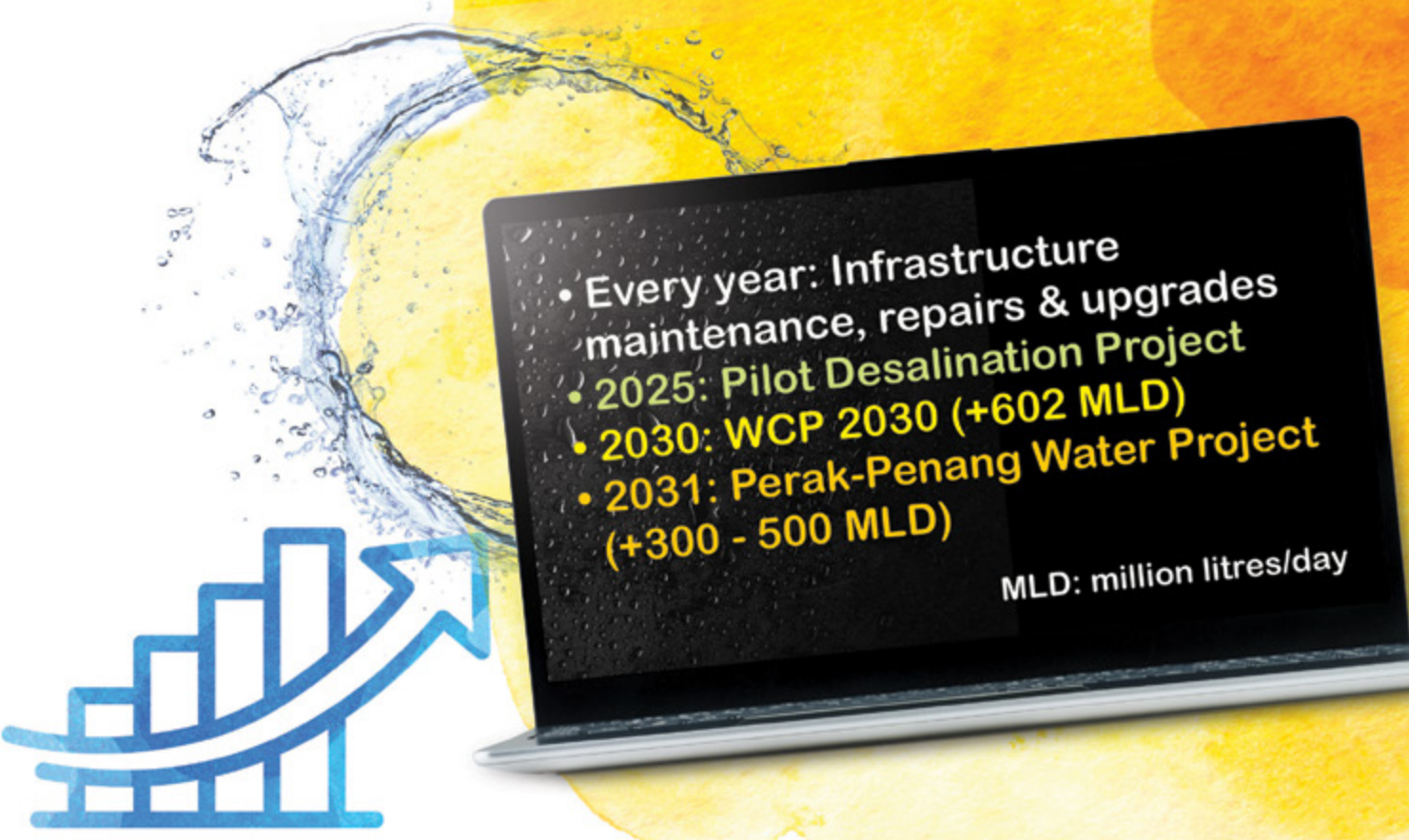
PICK-UP SPOTS PENANG

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

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

READING SPOTS PENANG

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

- 
- 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.