

PENANG MONTHLY



OCTOBER 2024
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FREE COPY

**15 YEARS
STORYTELLING
PENANG**

NATURE
BIRDING IN
AIR HITAM DALAM
EDUCATIONAL FOREST

HERITAGE
SILAT PULUT: AN
ESSENTIAL MALAY
MARTIAL ART
AND PERFORMANCE

PEOPLE
A PENANGITE'S
SCIENTIFIC VOYAGE
TO ANTARCTICA

“HOW MUCH TAP WATER DOES PENANG CONSUME EVERY DAY?”



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Penang has unlimited potential. However, as a “small state”, our water resources are naturally limited. **Please use water wisely.**

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PENANG MONTHLY

THE PENANG MONTHLY ENDEAVORS TO BE THE VOICE OF PENANG AND AN INSPIRING READ FOR THE CURIOUS MALAYSIAN. A PUBLICATION OF PENANG INSTITUTE, IT AIMS TO:

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

LIKE WHAT WE DO? SUPPORT US!

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15 YEARS OF PENANG MONTHLY

By Azmi Hussin

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**AFTER 15
ROUSING YEARS,
THE PENANG
RENAISSANCE
STILL RESONATES CLEARLY**

WE ARE AT one of those self-appraising points in time when we—not only *Penang Monthly*, but also Penang Institute as a whole—stare hard into the rearview mirror in order to orientate our journey forward.

BY OOI KEE BENG



Knowing the strengths and the weaknesses of Penang society allows Penang Institute, through its many channels of influence, such as *Penang Monthly*, to strategise at improving the standard of public discourses, of intellectual interactions, and of inter-organisational activities.”

In fact, individually, we do that all the time in life. When driving, for example, in order to stay safe and get where we wish to go, we scan our surroundings on all sides. This is all the more necessary when we are on the move, unlike if we were sitting in a still conference hall. In fact, we do that as pedestrians as well.

So, that’s a necessary habit to have. A good habit to have... predicting future movements based on past movements. It’s how you survive.

Doing is learning, and having learned things along the way, new ways of doing things present themselves—in fact, new things to do, too.

We look in the calendar today, and we see October 2024. It is exactly 15 years ago that the first issue of *Penang Monthly* hit the stands. Voters in Penang had decided in 2008 that it was time for a change. And that change in the state government would lead, just 10 years later, to the federal government falling. Since then, it has fallen another three times.

In Penang, however, the reform government that came to power in 2008 has remained in power. This has provided Penang Institute, the state think tank, with the continuity and the chance to develop itself into a stable institution whose main tasks today are to do cutting-edge research on Penang, strengthen connectivity among stakeholders of Penang, and enhance the public policy ecosystem in Penang. The last point is of key importance, and is a goal learned from anthropologically studying how leadership and followership work in Malaysian culture, and how segmented and lacking in synergy Penang organisations have become.

Knowing the strengths and the weaknesses of Penang society allows Penang Institute, through its many channels of influence, such as *Penang Monthly*, to strategise at improving the standard of public discourses, of intellectual interactions and of inter-organisational activities.

We learned some hard lessons after starting *Penang Monthly* in October 2009. It was called the *Penang Economic Monthly* at first, and was sold on magazine stands throughout Penang, as well as at selected spots in KL and even in Singapore. Bookstores soon informed us that we should drop “Economic” from the name; it scared off casual readers, they said. And so we did.

We were producing the magazine in three cities. The proofreading and editing was done in Singapore, by me; the stories were created and collected in Penang; and the design was carried out in KL.

Economic realities—and endless discussions within the Penang Institute board of directors about the magazine’s viability—helped to turn *Penang Monthly* into a free publication distributed from selected hot spots throughout Penang. We decided that the magazine should simply be a social service to the people of Penang. Meanwhile, the Internet and social media convinced us that the magazine should also go online.

Why such fervour to create this magazine? Why so much work? So much blood, sweat and tears just to produce a free magazine?

Looking back, we are proud to claim that Penang Institute has been one of the few institutions that consistently understood that the new state government needed all the help it could get, especially from the agencies it gave support to, and that must now support it in return.

But what project have we all been a part of, post-2008? Back then, we called that dynamic a “Penang

Renaissance”. Voters were crying out for serious change—in Penang’s international relevance, in its cultural gravity and in its economic prowess. Under that sloganistic inspiration, *Penang Monthly* found its present shape.

Now, 15 years later, Penang Institute can propound that the passion behind the Penang Renaissance remains strong. In fact, with the many successes we have had in deepening public discourses, in generating information about Penang, in building programmes and institutions, in collaborating with international players, in accepting interns to learn from our work, and in providing policy suggestions through our many channels, that passion has in fact grown stronger, and become more purposeful.

Penang Monthly today calls itself The Voice of Penang. This is both a hope and a vision that becomes more imperative by the day, as we notice how public information and news continues to become more and more superficial, being of fleeting interest in character, and taking the form of click baiting.

Put simply, apart from being a public policy research institute, and a discussion partner for the state, Penang Institute also has a strong journalistic function that does not focus as much on news (we leave that to our cousin, *Buletin Mutiara*) as it does on grounded information about Penang, current issues and social development.

REFORMING JOURNALISM

In that important sense, *Penang Monthly* is now complemented in its goals of discourse upgrading, knowledge generation and data dissemination by Penang Institute’s policy publications (namely *ISSUES*, *Monographs*, *Suara Nadi* and *South Wing Papers*), and by its social podcasts in three languages, not to mention its many public seminars and book launches.

More than ever now, *Penang Monthly*, a city magazine in essence (think tanks are often too highbrow to produce such a magazine the way Penang Institute does; we do it because we see its potential for public discourse enhancement), is integrated into the think tank activities of its institutional home.

The launching of the Forum for Leadership and Governance (FLAG) Programme by Chief Minister Chow Kon Yeow last year offers new platforms for synergy within Penang’s public policy ecosystem. Roundtables to discuss and develop ecosystems are now the order of the day for the think tank, and *Penang Monthly*, with its all-round coverage of Penang matters becomes an ever-sharper tool for achieving the Institute’s long-term objectives.

As a sidenote, social development is as much about citizen empowerment as it is about progressive leadership. That has been the rationale for the initiation of FLAG. Furthermore, discussing leadership and governance allows for the think tank and the magazine to connect to global discussions beyond Penang-relevant matters.

Most excitingly, the rapid yet organic way in which Penang Institute has grown over the last 15 years has made us confident enough to establish iconic annual conferences and roundtables, together structured to cover as much ground as possible, following the Institute’s belief that trawling the public policy ecosystem for practical ideas is as important as generating ideas by ourselves through internal research.

Going forward, Penang Institute, supported by *Penang Monthly* as its major publication, will annually

hold the Penang Economic Forum to discuss economic trends streaming through Penang. This year's was held on 25 June, and was generously supported by Affin Hwang Investment Bank. For policymaking ideas in the medium term, we have Penang2030, the state vision that we helped to develop over the last six years. For long-term thinking, with the support and encouragement of Penang's governor, Tun Fuzi Abdul Razak, we have something we call the Bel Retiro Roundtable. The first was held in November 2023, with 10 esteemed thinkers from various fields who love Penang and who are concerned about its future.

GTLF PLUS TALKS

Where the arts and culture are concerned, the role that *Penang Monthly* plays in Penang society is being strengthened by the fact that Penang Institute has from 2024 been tasked by the Penang state government to organise the George Town Literary Festival (GTLF). Started in 2011, this event has always been held in the month of November, and likewise this year, it will be held from 29 November to 1 December.

Inspired further by this, the Institute plans from next year onwards to hold seminars, perhaps every second month, on issues concerning literacy, literature and language in a series that we hope will break new grounds in public discussions. These we will name GTLF Plus Talks.

Remember that the rationale driving all our activities is the Penang Renaissance and that objective must embrace all of society, most importantly in adult education and knowledge regeneration. Democracy requires that its voters stay well informed, and are able- and open-minded individuals, confident in expressing themselves publicly.

Again, looking back, we do notice that *Penang Monthly* has taken a path that is partly a response to what readers have been interested in, what writers have been available and what they have been keen to discuss, on top of what choices of subject the short deadlines a monthly magazine must obey dictate.

In summary, our coverage falls to a manifest extent under the categories of Art; Food; Heritage; Nature; Economics; and People. This is not to mention the Statistics that we carry that has made us the go-to site for quantitative information about Penang.

Of those categories, let us now shine the light on some of them which were central ideas already when the magazine started back in 2009. In light of the electoral "tsunami" of 2008, most of us were convinced that Penang voters had been feeling disempowered long enough, and had therefore voted for "Anything But UMNO". Thus, the Pakatan Rakyat government came to power practically as the default winner.

Whichever the case, Penang then, along with Selangor especially, stood out as the bastions for an eventual power shift at the federal level. But for that to be viable, many of us thought that change should reach deeper levels in society first. A new sense of purpose, a wider sense of people empowerment had to be built.

Thus, "Penang Renaissance".

That term expresses something lost and suggests something to be regained, and in novel fashion. Penang had, after all, for the longest time entertained the slogan "Penang Leads", albeit with diminishing confidence, especially since the Asian Financial Crisis of 1997 to 1998. It is only now, in 2024, that we finally feel enough



Now that we have seen what is in the rearview mirror, we can assertively look ahead—both the magazine and the think tank alike—and seek new synergy, make new connections, think new thoughts and represent anew the best that Penang has to offer the world.”



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

optimism to restart and rise again from where we left off.

The goal of the Penang Renaissance is the maturing of Malaysia as a nation.

Under Liew Chin Tong's lead, the new government took over the Socio-economic and Environmental Research Institute (SERI), which had been founded by the Gerakan government in 1997. Instead of having a monthly brief for the Chief Minister to read, we decided to transform that publication into the thicker gratis city magazine you now know as *Penang Monthly*. The original production team included Yours Truly as Chief Editor, Roz Chua as Deputy Editor, Ooi Geok Ling as marketing advisor and Lim Siang Jin as production advisor.

Since then, the row of deputy editors or assistant editors has included Jeffrey Quah, Julia Tan, Regina Hoo, and now Sheryl Teoh and Rachel Yeoh. A long-time designer along the way was Nic Lee; and our current designers responsible for the recent design changes are Fam Kai-Cong and Kevin Teh.

We highlighted the Arts from Day One with the column *Penang Palette*, with Ooi Kok Chuen; showcased the man-on-the-street with *Day in the Life*; chorused important personalities with *Penang Profile*; revisited history with *Lest We Forget* and *Picking on the Past*; and introduced hiking trails in Penang with *Peaks and Parks*, first with submissions by Louise Goss-Custard, and then those by Remy Prakash Chacko. There have been occasion columns along the way, such as *Creative Industries* and *In the Industry*. There is *Statistics* of course, and *Penang2030* reports, plus *For Arts' Sake...* and *Voices of USM*. Starting from this October issue, we will also be debuting a *Lifestyle* column for more casual and light-hearted reading.

Food was often reserved as the theme for December issues.

In 2019, *Penang Monthly* celebrated its 10th anniversary, publishing *Peaks & Parks* as a coffee-table book, and *Month by Month*, a collection of the editorials published thus far.

I always wrote the *Editorials*; 15 years now, and these have functioned as my much-needed philosophical vent. For this, I am most grateful. I learned that a deadline can be one of the most inspiring things to have. Having to say something novel every month has been a challenge I loved to rise to.

All the executive directors of Penang Institute throughout this time had been very supportive of *Penang Monthly*—as phenomenon, as aspiration and as cultural icon. Woo Wing Thy took over from Liew Chin Tong and was succeeded by Zairil Khir Johari before I came on the scene. We must not forget the Chief Ministers and chairmen of Penang Institute either, over those 15 years—Lim Guan Eng and Chow Kon Yeow—who provided the financial means and promised the intellectual freedom for us to identify the jobs that needed doing, and the means for doing them.

In a deep sense, my personal unfulfilled aspirations in journalism in the 1970s when I was with *The Star* and *The Straits Echo* resurfaced on the think tank vehicle, which I was involved in upon returning to the region in 2004, and to Penang in 2017. For that too, I am most grateful.

Now that we have seen what is in the rearview mirror, we can assertively look ahead—both the magazine and the think tank alike—and seek new synergy, make new connections, think new thoughts and represent anew the best that Penang has to offer the world.



生意興隆

萬事如意

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JOURNEY TO
IMBIBE OFFAL, ONE
ORGAN AT A TIME

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**A PERSONAL
JOURNEY
TO IMBIBE**

ORAL

**ONE ORGAN
AT A TIME**

BY SHERYL TEOH

I F I WERE to locate the exact point in time when I became serious about food, it would have to be upon reading Anthony Bourdain's essay in *The New Yorker*, "Don't Eat Before Reading This" and his later book, *Kitchen Confidential*. In fact, the larger-than-life yet relatable late chef, writer and travel documentarian had taught me more than just when to order fish at a restaurant in New York and to never, under *any* circumstances, order a steak well done—"they pay for the privilege of eating our garbage". Bourdain, notorious for being a voracious and fearless eater, and who advocated for people to step out of their comfort zones and try new, exotic things—even to the extreme of unwashed warthog anus—was an enthusiast when it came to eating offal.

Of haggis, Scotland's national dish made of mashed-up liver, heart, lung and suet of a sheep shoved into the animal's stomach and then boiled, Bourdain said, "Don't let them tell you otherwise, [it's] really one of life's great pleasures." Sliced open, fresh and still steaming, it looks like an alien infestation spilling out from its membranous placenta, but who am I to argue with the peerless Anthony Bourdain?

Closer to home, dishes speckled with organ meats are aplenty. Grey, pockmarked slices of liver hide among slippery noodles, deep burgundy cubes of blood curds float in soups and curries, Roti Bengali is dunked into a piping hot, peppery stew of bull penis.

I did not grow up eating offal, and any accidental ingestion of it had always been an unpleasant experience, if not an outright (w)retched one. With Bourdain's rhapsodic endorsement, and my own dining philosophy of eating the whole animal and not wasting parts, as well as my appreciation of how nutrient-dense offal generally is, I was moved a few years ago to go on a mission to convert myself into Someone Who Eats Offal.

IT TAKES GUTS TO EAT GUTS

My initiation dish was carefully selected for its lower barrier to entry—Yemeni Kebda. Soaked in milk first to neutralise its taste, I was careful not to breathe in the iron-y tang of blood oozing out of the liver while slicing it, lest I get put off even before putting it in my mouth. Then, I sautéed the pieces with onion, garlic, tomatoes and peppers, and smothered them in a heavy spice mix of cumin, cardamom, coriander, turmeric, ginger and paprika. Eaten with flatbread and Toum (garlic sauce), it was adequate, but my mission was to enjoy the taste of liver, not mask it. When it came to actually tasting it on its own though, its metallic, gamey aftertaste, discernible even under all the spices, still triggered my gag reflex.

When eating hawker food, instead of picking out the offending innards as I

was wont to do, I tried to make these more appetising by dousing them in soy sauce and bird's eye chillies before popping them into my mouth.

All this is to say that I have built up an obscene spice tolerance and yet still do not enjoy the taste of offal.

Nevertheless, I would not call this first attempt a complete failure—far from it, in fact. For one thing, I am now much more open to the idea, and went from resolutely *not* eating offal to eating *some* offal *sometimes* under *certain* circumstances. I could now eat small slivers of pig's liver in Char Hor Fun, albeit still with a healthy helping of bird's eye chillies; I could now easily slurp down pig's blood curds in Curry Mee. My mom's Northern Thai larb dish, which is thickened with fresh pig's blood, is a family favourite. Depending on whether one would consider these off-cuts strictly offal, bone marrow, cheeks, oxtail, beef's tongue, foie gras and pork trotters require much less effort to swallow; some of these (cheeks!) are even my favourite parts of an animal. On a recent trip to KL, I had even thoroughly enjoyed a dish of pork intestines fried with dried shrimp—it was spectacular, garlicky and not at all funky. More significantly, I would order it again, and of my own volition.

DÉGUSTATING GUTS

Emboldened by my now-improved relationship with variety meats, and thinking to myself that I cannot possibly write an article about eating offal without actually going all out, I invited an unlucky friend to a popular eatery in George Town that serves pork noodles with all the freaky bits: pork liver, heart, intestines, brain, kidney and tripe.

I started with pork liver, as it is what I am most familiar with—sloshed in soy sauce and bird's eye chillies, its gaminess and pungency still cut through, but it was an expected flavour, and therefore tolerable. Intestines and tripe were a breeze; they did not taste of much (except for the spiciness from the chillies). I could not identify kidney, and have no idea if I did eat any. Brain and heart tasted completely different from the rest and each tasted rank in its own way.

If you have never tried any of the two, and are curious to know what these taste like from someone who does not enjoy eating offal, you have come to read the right article. The brain, which is made up of mostly fat, is jiggly and creamy, but in the worst way imaginable. Despite being of the same ilk, its flavour is surprisingly distinct from that of lard, which I do occasionally enjoy. It tastes simultaneously like mushy wax and nothing. This I scooped up in my spoon and just swallowed.

Tough and sinewy, the texture of heart is the complete opposite of that of brain. I found the taste of iron overpowering and

chewing through it was challenging. Fighting back a mild urge to heave, I wondered to myself how some people could stomach and even enjoy such foul-tasting food so effortlessly—people on the Internet have described these as "nutty", "sweet" and "earthy". And how interesting it is that people could have such disparate opinions on the same food. For example, Bourdain had decreed Chicken McNuggets to be one of the most disgusting things he had ever eaten, which is saying a lot if you remember the fact that he had ingested unwashed warthog rectum in Namibia.

To make matters worse, McDonald's just so happens to be one of my guilty pleasures. And at that instance, I wanted nothing more than to wash down the taste of pig's heart with a safe, comforting, sterile stack of Big Mac. And pickles. As many pickles as it can structurally hold. I also happen to like the homogenous, benign taste of Chicken McNuggets, blissfully unbothered by its oft-maligned mystery meat content because *it tastes just fine*. Considering the fact that McDonald's must have spent a fortune engineering the taste of Chicken McNuggets to appeal to the masses, why are there still people—mostly of the older generation, I have come to observe—who find it revolting?

Is my shameful penchant for McDonald's burgers—vilified and scorned for their tough, flavourless patties, dry buns and plastic-y cheese—a product of having them as a reward as a child? If my reward had instead been a silky smooth bowl of Chee Cheong Chok (pig intestine porridge), would I now still have to practically force-feed myself organ meat? Don't get me wrong, I love a good, juicy, hand-ground burger just as much as another burger elitist; I just happen to also occasionally crave the taste of a "bad" McDonald's burger.

Given the fact that repeated exposure to anything—from food and music to art—generally enhances liking in a phenomenon called the mere exposure effect, one way to learn how to enjoy something is simply to keep trying it. Which is why I occasionally subject myself to the tyrannically intense flavours of offal. But it is not all suffering though—being much more amenable to trying undesirable parts of animals have opened me up to many genuinely pleasurable gastronomic experiences—and will open me up to more in the future, I am sure.



SHERYL TEOH holds a Bachelor of Arts degree from Linfield College, a liberal arts college in the United States, and majored in History with a focus on Classical Greece and Rome. Her interests include the study of philosophy as well as a range of humanities and socio-political issues.

**PENANG AS A
FOOD PARADISE
MAY NEED TO
STRETCH ITS
OFFERINGS**

FROM

STREET FOOD



BACK IN 2017, this tiny island we call home was featured in an article titled “George Town, Penang: Asia’s Greatest Street Food City?”^[1] on *CNN Travel*. In that article, Penang-born Malaysian chef and restaurateur Norman Musa said, “I agree 101% that Penang is the food capital of Malaysia.” Ah, but that’s something no true blue Penang *lang* would not agree to.

If you fancied having a Western-style meal in the late 90s, the go-to would be restaurants housed within the premises of international hotel chains—anyone remember The Brasserie or Tiffins? The Ship was also very popular back then.

More than two decades down the road, the landscape has significantly changed; new cafés and restaurants are now sprawled across the island. Honestly, we have more ice cream shops than our blood sugar levels can handle—but somehow, there’s always room for one more canelé!

Today, we have chefs offering their tasting menus, their dégustation menus, their omakase menus; and we have two

restaurants in town awarded a Michelin star. In the *Tatler Dining Guide 2024*,^[2] we have two restaurants in the Top 20 list, while another seven restaurants are listed. At the time of writing, the winner of Asia’s 50 Best Restaurants for 2023 is planning to open its first restaurant at the heart of George Town.

But really, what is fine dining?

Do you envision picture-perfect plates? It must be Instagrammable, of course. The restaurant must have a stunning interior, and that includes the washrooms. Immaculate service is a must—waiters must adorn themselves in a suit and tie, or at least in a presentable uniform—that is brand identity.

The wine list. THE wine list! No worries, the sommelier will guide you. The atmosphere must be perfect too, and that is decided by the music playing in the background. Did you know that food tastes better if the cutlery are the right weight? Are you being served with crystal glasses?

And when the food arrives, you expect to hear the story about how the ingre-

dients made their way into this dish that you are going to consume. What’s the theme? What’s the chef trying to express? Course after course, the details follow. Is there provenance? Is there creativity? Is there panache? Is there harmony? Is there oomph? Do they grow their own vegetables? Mind you, we’re paying a huge sum of money for the experience! You are paying for an army of humans in the kitchen—the pastry chef, the executive chef, the chef de cuisine, the sous chef, the chef de partie, the commis chef. And don’t forget the maitre d’ who will greet you when you arrive and leave. Indeed, it’s a brigade serving you!

But is Penang really ready for the pomp? As it is, we have locals who saunter into restaurants in flip flops and shorts with the excuse, “It is very hot lately on the island.” There are those who think they can just walk in and order a few dishes. The polite ones would ask if they can bring their own wines, while others go “What? RM80 for the corkage charge?” or “You don’t



LEE CHONG CHEE, better known as CC Lee, co-owner of JUJU Restaurant Lounge, elevates Penang's local seafood through omakase. With a sharp palate for food and wine, CC is unapologetically passionate about delivering dining experiences that speak to the heart.

FOOTNOTES

[1] <https://edition.cnn.com/travel/article/george-town-penang-greatest-street-food-city/index.html>

[2] <https://www.tatlerasia.com/dining/food/top-20-restaurants-malaysia-2024>

[3] Two renowned chefs teaming to create a set menu.

TO BY LEE CHONG CHEE FINE DINING

serve tap water?" or "Why do we need to pay a deposit first?" I've heard whispers from guests who wonder if their bellies can be filled after the meal or if they would have to head to a Hokkien Mee place after dinner for a second round, just in case the menu didn't quite hit the spot.

My next question is: Can Penang attract gourmands with their hunger for new experiences from all over the world? A gourmand would travel the world just for food—not just any kind of food, but for a particular restaurant's spread. KOKS, a restaurant with two Michelin stars set at the edge of the world in the Faroe Islands, Greenland, which can only be accessed by boat, comes to mind. A gourmand would drive a few hours to Ynyshir in Wales for a 30-course dinner that lasts five hours. They do not entertain dietary restrictions and there is no substitution. You must be there by 5pm and no later! That kind of dining isn't for everyone, but the waiting list tells a different story—try booking a table at Disfrutar in Barcelona, where you'll be

lucky to get a reservation within less than a year. Good things are supposed to come to those who wait.

These gourmands, they have a refined and discerning palate. Can Penang meet the standards of this high-flying tribe with their discerning palates and lofty expectations? Do we have the hotels, the service, the sophistication? (Rosewood, I'm looking at you—Penang needs you.) How well is the staff trained in providing world-class, top-notch service. It is hospitality, hospitality and hospitality! It is not to say that we do not have the talent pool—many of our talented chefs have moved to Singapore. Meanwhile, with so many new hotel openings on the horizon in Penang, the industry is scrambling for staff.

The sheer number of cafés and restaurants set up within George Town is an indication that food is indeed big business here. Having fine dining spaces can put our tiny island on the world map. We are already well known for our street food (but someone from KL told me that every time

he comes to Penang for food, the quality seems to be deteriorating). Is banning foreign cooks from preparing local dishes the answer? We need new dining concepts that challenge the traditional, and I don't mean viral trends.

There is an emerging dining scene focused on using local ingredients and presenting them with a contemporary twist. Restaurants are making the effort to ensure the perfect dining experience. I noticed improved services and a more extensive wine list. We see many four-hands collaborations^[3] and pop-ups with fellow chefs from all around the world. The signs are all good.

For all of us in the food and beverages (F&B) industry (so remember to order the B after the F!), we take up the responsibility as Penang's ambassadors. We need to not only impress them with our F&B, but also our warmth and hospitality to make their stay in Penang a memorable one. Of course, we are also obliged to whisper to them our best-kept secret Char Koay Teow spots!

FERMENTED FOOD

A PLATE OF PENANG'S RICH STORY

BY LIANI MK

DO YOU REMEMBER your first taste of *tosai*?

It is an entire experience. A sleepy daybreak sojourn into a nondescript *kedai* under an ageing tree. Uncle offers you a toasty, paper-like piece that overflows from a stainless steel tray with two thick coconut chutneys of white and brown hues, and a liquid-gold *dhal* or lentil *sambar* stew as a gentle sidekick to balance the other textures. Sometimes, if you are lucky, you get the green mint chutney. You sink your hands into the crepe and dunk a tiny cut into these sloshes of curries, mixing them as a painter would blend colours on a palette.

The taste of *tosai* is that of comfort. Like bread, it is prepared through the process of fermentation—from leaving grounded rice and lentil batter in a warm place overnight.

Growing up, Malaysian families like mine would lay claim to the benefits of fermented food—from *sambal tempoyak* made of spicy fermented durian to *pekasam*, a term referring to a range of savoury fermented food enjoyed with rice, like *pekasam pucuk ubi* (fermented tapioca leaves), and *pekasam ikan* (fermented fish).

Fermented foods found in various cuisines in Penang reflect its heterogeneous, *rojak* history, such as the Malay fermented glutinous rice known as *tapai pulut*, and steamed Chinese sweet rice cakes, or *huat kueh*, made from fermenting rice batter with toddy palm wine. These dishes join the long list of fermented foods around the world, such as tempeh, kimchi and kefir, that are touted as soothing for the gut and overall health system.

GUT FEELING

For thousands of years, humans have fermented foods like miso, cheese and yoghurt, mainly to extend their shelf life. Animal meat, such as fish, is also commonly fermented to prevent them from spoiling before refrigeration was available. Even drinks, such as coffee, go through fermentation.

Fermentation is about breaking down food to make them easier to digest. It requires yeast and bacteria to process sugar molecules (lactose in milk, or glucose in plant starch) into smaller substances such as acids and alcohol, resulting in a tangy or sour taste.

Plenty of research has explored the health-giving relationship between fermented food and the gut system, including its connections to brain health—sometimes referred to as the microbiota-gut-brain axis.^[1] For children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) who are prone to gastrointestinal issues, there are certain probiotics^[2]—living microorganisms in fermented foods—that can significantly reduce gut inflammation and improve ASD symptoms related to hyperactivity.^[3] Certain probiotic strains^[4] can even reduce anxiety and depression. In general, fermented foods improve gut health, immunity and prevent diseases.^[5]

TANGY FLAVOURS OF PENANG

Fermentation has always been a part of Southeast Asian culinary culture. In some instances, fermented ingredients are even used in cosmetics, like the tear drop-shaped cooling powder made from rice, known as *bedak sejuk*. In Penang, fermented foods introduce rich and complex flavours from different communities and traditional preservation methods.

CAPTIONS

1. You can still refill your soy sauce bottles at the Kwong Heng Loong Sauce Factory.
2. Madam Khaw sells an assortment of homemade food and sauces at the Ah See Nyonya Food in Pulau Tikus.
3. Lai Weng Foo has been continuing his grandfather's work at the modest Kwong Heng Loong Sauce Factory shop in Pulau Tikus.

Photos by Arief Zafir

FOOTNOTES

- [1] <https://psychscenehub.com/psychinsights/gut-microbiome-and-autism-spectrum-disorder-asd-exploring-the-connection-and-potential-therapeutic-avenues/#:~:text=New%20data%20suggests%20that%20the,this%20disruption%205BLi%20et%20a;https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC9355470/>
- [2] <https://www.frontiersin.org/journals/microbiology/articles/10.3389/fmicb.2023.1123462/full>
- [3] <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC8870536/>
- [4] <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/27413138/>
- [5] <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/22529959/>



Many dishes are made from leaving rice to ferment alone, like *tosai*, *idli*, *apom* and even desserts or evening snacks like *tapai*. Fermented rice staples are found aplenty in South Indian cuisine, with fermented rice batter being steamed or cooked. The addition of fermented *urad dal* (black lentil) into *apom*, a thin, bowl-shaped pancake, and *idli*, fluffy steamed rice cakes, enhances the nutritional value of these dishes while imparting a subtle tanginess best enjoyed with chutney, *sambar* and a variety of spicy curries.

"We have a lot of fermented food in Peranakan cuisine too," adds Madam Khaw, who tends to the Ah See Nyonya Food stall located right in front of Pulau Tikus market. At the morning market feverish with dizzying energy, you can immediately catch a whiff of mixed spices from her stall—specifically the irresistible *perut ikan*, a stew made of pickled fish stomach with ingredients such as pineapple, lemongrass and wild betel leaves, known locally as *dauk kaduk*.

"We even create different curries using the same fermented fish ingredient!" Madam Khaw could not help but gush as she excitedly waits for me to compare the clear stew with another one thickened with coconut milk.

Along with an assortment of side dishes, Madam Khaw also sells bottles of the ubiquitous spicy chilli paste made with fermented shrimp, or *sambal belacan*.

Nyonya cuisine, with Chinese and Malay roots, has an assortment of fermented relishes. This includes *acar awak*, a colourful vegetable pickle made by fermenting vegetables such as cucumbers, carrots and cabbage in a

mixture of vinegar, sugar and aromatic spices like turmeric and mustard seeds. This crunchy, tangy relish is a refreshing contrast to rich curries and grilled meats.

Similar to *perut ikan*, Eurasian cuisine features preserved fish which is cleaned, salted and left to ferment under the sun, producing umami flavours and adding depth to fried rice, curries and stir-fries.

Malay fermented condiments like *tempoyak*, made by fermenting durian, are also used as versatile ingredients in other dishes such as *sambal tempoyak*, where it is mixed with chillies, shrimp paste and other spices. This spicy paste can sometimes turn non-durian lovers into a flexible eater, as it enhances rice and seafood dishes with its distinctively sour profile.

In fact, many Asian sauces rely on fermentation, including soy sauce. "It adds flavour to our food," says Lai Weng Foo, who dedicates his time to selling fermented soybean condiments at Penang's famous Kwong Heng Loong Sauce Factory.

A tiny shop at the fringe of Pulau Tikus market, Kwong Heng Loong Sauce Factory has been selling soy sauce since 1955. Where people would prefer to bring their own bottles to refill in the past, today, the shop is filled to the brim with sealed bottles of soy sauce from thicker (*kicap sos pekat*) to thinner consistencies, and with varying grades to distinguish its quality and saltiness.

"Some people want it saltier, so they will go for grade 2," he says with a shrug, adding that grade 3 is less salty and grade 1 is "just nice".

In addition to soy sauce specially made in Butterworth, Lai sells imported *cuka beras* (rice vinegar), homemade *sambal asam* (plum sauce) and even *taucheo* (豆瓣醬), a fermented yellow soybean paste often used with steamed fish.

PRESERVING THE PROCESS

For hobbyist brewers Julian Frederick and Michelle Glory, fermentation is intrinsic to their culture. Together, they brew *tuak*, the Bornean alcoholic beverage made from fermented glutinous rice.

"Many people in peninsular Malaysia didn't know that we make our own wine in Sabah and Sarawak, so we try to share our culture with people here—the ones who can drink at least," Julian says, crinkling into a laugh.

Hailing from Sarawak and Sabah, along with their friend Allister Changat, they are part of the well-loved O'Haus stall that sells *tuak* cocktails at the Sunday Hin Market.

"*Tuak* is a cultural drink primarily made during Borneo's harvest festivals from May to June," says Julian while serving their popular fruit punch, a sunrise-coloured *tuak* cocktail with mango, pineapple, passionfruit and orange puree to ease the weekend heat. "We make everything from scratch—including the *ragi*, or yeast."

"It's from our ancestors—*turun temurun* (passed down)," adds Michelle, who divulges that they both use their parents' recipes. "We need to continue what they've taught us."

In a way, fermentation is like Penang's story of change—that continues to shift and yet, still connects the past to the present. It is also a process of giving time and care, of letting things take their course and then taking a step in to pass it forward. Fermenting, cooking and eating becomes a way to carry on that legacy of change.



LIANI MK is an independent writer, journalist and artist whose works span areas of language, film, culture, indigeneity and migration in Southeast Asia.



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VISUALISING PENANG'S ESSENCE THROUGH PENANG MONTHLY

BY FAM KAI-CONG
& KEVIN TEH

WHEN THE *PENANG MONTHLY* team approached us to revamp the design of the magazine, they had already garnered a base of readers who had familiarised themselves with the tone, look and feel of the magazine—after all, it has been in existence for more than 10 years.

With the magazine's long-term goal of expanding readership, especially among younger audiences, we saw this as a chance to emphasise the “Penang” in *Penang Monthly*. We hope to create an ownable style and identity that not only reflects the thought-provoking, cerebral content, but also the culture, energy and warmth of Penang. What you are looking at today is the culmination of over a year of discussions, dialogues, iterations and collaboration that started with the question: How do we visually convey Penang through the lens of *Penang Monthly*?

CAPTIONS

1. The new masthead's letterforms are inspired by the geometric-influenced block-letters of Penang.
2. A multi-script signboard where the English shop name is set in condensed letters to be able to fit below the Chinese shop name.
3. There is a unique “G” found on many old Penang signboards where the spur (bottom right corner of the letter) is delicate and has a curve. It is also common to find a diagonal cut on its top half terminal.



PENANG'S TYPOGRAPHIC VOICE

If you walk down the heritage area in Penang, you will see that many of Penang's old shop signs are still up on display. Sometimes you will even see juxtapositions and overlaps of signage styles from different eras.

This typographic heritage inspired us to curate a set of uppercase typefaces in different weights and proportions to typeset the magazine's headlines. The headline's length and the article's layout help dictate which font to use for a given article. Leveraging on typography as the key driver of the magazine's art direction avoids dependency on illustrations, stock images and photography for every article. In turn, the choice of photography becomes more intentional—if it does not elevate the subject, we won't use it. This becomes true also for photo editing and typography in relation to photography.

THE COLOUR OF PINANG

When it came to picking a new colour, we wanted to remain in the orange family, but with a local twist. As we were informed that the original orange colour used in *Penang Monthly's* branding materials was inspired by the Pinang fruit (Areca nut) colour, we explored different hues that the fruit naturally carried. From the more reddish vermillion to the more yellowish marigold, we sought for an orange that feels fresher, richer and more vibrant. From a technical point of view, we also needed a shade of orange that has a high contrast against white backgrounds as the logo will also be used on the web. The final choice is an energetic, ripe orange that we are proudly calling the Pinang Orange.

A MASTHEAD INFLUENCED BY PENANG SIGNAGE CONVENTIONS

For *Penang Monthly's* masthead, we zoned in on the details of letterforms found in Penang's signages. We realised that because of the mixing of Chinese and Latin scripts on signboards, it is common to find condensed Latin letterforms paired with the more squarish and often larger Chinese scripts of shop names.

The use of condensed letters is even more evident when Malay words are used too. As these tend to be longer, condensed type allows for an economical display of multilingual typography. The condensed Latin letters also tend to be blocky letterforms that show the influence of its underlying geometry. Letterforms with rounded corners especially, would evoke the shape of a rounded rectangle. The masthead's letters reflect this quality, but with minor optical adjustments applied.

It also seems that in Penang signages, there are other conventions preferred by signmakers. Take the "E" for example, there is more widespread use of the full length middle bar rather than the short bar that emphasises the rectangularity of its letterform. The letter "G" in many Penang signages, on the other hand, has a delicate spur has a curve on the bottom that leads to a pointy corner. It is also common for this "G" to have a diagonally cut terminal at the top of the letter.

Penang Monthly's identity is larger than the publication itself. When you read the magazine, you are taking a peek into the hearts and minds of Penangites, and with "Penang" in its name, the magazine adopted the duty to represent the state in various ways. Of course, it is impossible to completely represent a culture and a place, but we hope that a small part of Penang's typographical and visual memory can be sensed in the design of the magazine.

OPG



1



2



3

***Note:** We would like to express our gratitude to the *Penang Monthly* editorial team and Penang Institute for the opportunity as well as the mutual trust and respect we have experienced. Special thanks to our type designer friends, Tan Sueh Li and Louie Lee Wei Yi (both of whom love Penang dearly) for sharing their design insights and guidance on the redesigning of the masthead.



FAM KAI-CONG is a vegetarian graphic and type designer based in KL, Malaysia. He holds a postgraduate certificate in Type Design from the Type@Cooper Condensed.



KEVIN TEH is a non-vegetarian graphic designer with a focus on brand, web and editorial. His work has been awarded and recognised by D&AD (Design & Art Direction), Type Directors Club and Art Directors Club.

HONOURING PENANG'S CREATIVES

BY BERNARD LOKE

**AS PENANG'S
CREATIVE INDUSTRY**
continues to gain
more prominence,
it is essential to
recognise the
unsung contributors
working tirelessly
to propel its growth.
I spoke to four
inspirational figures
to unpack their
stories and glimpse
into their journeys:
Paul Charles
Augustin, Janet Pillai,
Aida Redza and
Leong Kwong Yee.



PAUL CHARLES AUGUSTIN

Paul Charles Augustin is a proud Penangite and a polymath in the music industry, widely noted for orchestrating initiatives to put Penang on the world map. For the past 40 years, Paul has embraced a broad spectrum of roles—musician, events manager, festival director and mentor, among others.

His fervour and experience in the entertainment industry led him and Chin Choo Yuen to start The Capricorn Connection (TCC) in 1996, an events and venue management company, which managed a portfolio of events—from sports to conventions, carnivals, concerts and festivals.

In 2004, the duo formed The Penang Island Jazz Festival, an independent festival which started without backing from corporate patrons or the government. The festival rose in popularity and became a spotlight event locally and internationally, attracting creatives to flock to Penang just for the occasion.

Paul has since scooped a string of awards, including the 17th BOH Cameronian Arts Awards Gamechanger and the recent Hai-O Lifetime Achievement Award for Culture & Arts 2024. Under his dynamic stewardship, he has provided platforms to many local musicians, creating opportunities for them to perform in international festivals in Korea, China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, South Africa, etc.

While commenting on the challenges faced by the creatives, Paul says that it varies, depending on what one aspires to achieve. However, the common roadblocks he has noticed are the lack of funding models, weak forward-looking visions and insufficient government support.

“What would really help is a group of experienced people from the arts community acting as an advisory—to advise on who to fund, as well as monitor and assist the creatives in their ventures. This would create a ‘bigger voice’ for the industry. Another possibility to build a stronger ecosystem is the unity of all groups; although, this is highly improbable as everyone has their own agenda. It can only happen if there is someone strong and charismatic enough to gather everyone on a level playing field,” he says.

“This is going to be a difficult job. Not a popular one,” he adds. However, this creative pioneer is determined to march on, always reminding himself to keep an open mind and heart.

“Quite a number of things which I’ve embarked on were never planned—I just went with the flow. I enjoy the challenges of the industry and love to make things work. It’s not a lucrative path and often a thankless one; in this industry, one is often judged on one’s failures, not one’s successes. In many ways, my survival is the outcome of me keeping quiet and doing what I think is right. Let my work speak for itself. Enjoy what you do. Passion has always been the driving force. One needs to believe, persevere and eventually be patient—very, very patient.”



What could really help is a group of experienced people from the arts community acting as an advisory—to advise on who to fund, as well as monitor and assist the creatives in their ventures. This would create a ‘bigger voice’ for the industry.”



JANET PILLAI

A veteran theatre director, Janet Pillai, has produced over 25 major creative works in the commercial, educational and community spaces. Currently an independent consultant, she is fronting the arts and culture education and the cultural sustainability domain. Janet specialises in cultural mapping and community engagement, which often sees partnerships from a wide pool of stakeholders, uniting communities, government agencies, artists, academics and professionals through the arts.

Three decades of work has seen Janet designing a range of programmes and trainings, apart from her notable contributions to research and articles about community-engaged arts practices in Asia. She also serves as an expert resource person with international organisations including UNESCO Bangkok, APCIEU Korea and GETTY Foundation, US.

Janet’s foray into the creative industry dates back to as early as the 1980s when she played a role in helping the state activate the arts scene in Penang. During these engagements, she noticed that the industry saw bursts of new activities and initiatives, which often fizzled out as time went by. She believes that it stems from the lack of long-term vision and stakeholder collaboration in nurturing homegrown talent and a creative ecosystem.

“This lack and the promise of community cultural resources in the George Town World Heritage Site prompted me to start a non-profit arts education organisation, Arts-ED, dedicated to training young people in the appreciation and practice of place-based culture and heritage education. Arts-Ed is 24 years old now!” she exclaims.

As the local creative scene continues to develop, Janet views George Town’s UNESCO World Heritage Site inscription as a unique selling proposition for Penang. “It is a culturally rich site with a unique history and architecture, occupied still by diverse communities. This environment continues to provide inspiration for modern creatives. However, the unique practices and products are fast disappearing as cultural practitioners and practices are neither protected nor nurtured by policy,” Janet explains. To ensure sustainable artistic growth, Janet advocates for a more robust ecosystem that fosters community engagement, appreciation and active participation in creative activities, learning, collaboration, and the production of events, performances and creative products.

LEONG KWONG YEE

Born and raised in Taiping, Perak, Leong Kwong Yee is a management consultant who has lived and worked in major cities including Singapore, Hong Kong and Shanghai. On days when he is not consulting French luxury brands, Leong is an avid art collector and gallery owner who hustles to raise Penang's profile on the international arts landscape.

Leong founded Blank Canvas in 2022, a not-for-profit independent experimental exhibition space nestled in Lorong Argus. He has since adopted Penang as his home. The inspiration behind Blank Canvas came when Leong noticed the lack of a contemporary art space in Penang to showcase conceptual artwork from regional or international artists, let alone a white cube gallery—a space which displays art in its best possible condition.

“By recognising this gap between Penang and the world, coupled with great encouragement from friends in the local arts community, I decided to start Blank Canvas. I was also confident that I could provide content and programming, considering that I have networks in the international art world, consisting of museums, galleries, curators and artists,” he explains.

Through Blank Canvas, Leong aims to engage local audiences and promote Penang to a global crowd. Consequent to this philosophy, this collaborative art space hosts artists, curators and museum directors from around the world.

“I have learnt a lot as a citizen of the world. Everywhere I go, I have always felt very welcomed by the art community, from people who eventually became my friends. Hence, I really want to share this knowledge and exposure with everyone,” he elaborates.

Leong's next ambition is to level-up Blank Canvas' accessibility. On top of the existing public and outreach programmes, other considerations are the addition of public spaces and a visual arts library in Blank Canvas to encourage more participation from laymen and local communities.



I still struggle financially to make ends meet as an artist. I could easily support myself with a more stable job or other work with a more consistent income, but I am stubborn this way. I am still a performer and I must be on the ground working.”



BERNARD LOKE is currently a Consultant at a multinational corporation, having transitioned from the oil and gas industry and a notable tenure as a Special Officer for government officials.



AIDA REDZA

Aida Redza is one of Malaysia's leading contemporary dancers and choreographers, noted for cementing Penang's dance industry. Aida is the founder of WindRiver Productions, where she creates inclusive and collaborative performances aimed at raising awareness for the causes she believes in.

On top of being named as the Kakiseni 15th Boh Cameronian Arts Award Gamechanger in 2018, Aida's repertoire of creative pursuits has also reached many countries and continents, including Australia, Britain, Denmark, Germany, Hong Kong, Indonesia, Japan, the Netherlands, Portugal, Thailand and Singapore.

This seasoned creative stalwart seeks to leave a lasting impact by promoting the arts and positively influencing the lives of those she works with. Aida is driven to make art inclusive, intergenerational and intercultural by nurturing its adaptive and collaborative nature.

“I want to highlight the different perspectives of things, people and issues which we take for granted. I want to advocate for their fights and causes through my creations. *Semangat* is the spirit of survival and the fire that is burning within us to make change. To make right the wrongs drives me to continue. I want to express for the voiceless, the marginalised and the displaced by highlighting the grey areas that people don't see. I want to make dances of the unseen, the unsung and the forgotten, a norm both in society and on stage,” she explains.

Despite being an arts advocate and pioneer her entire life, Aida thinks she has not developed the local creative scene enough.

“I still struggle financially to make ends meet as an artist. I could easily support myself with a more stable job or other work with a more consistent income, but I am stubborn this way. I am still a performer and I must be on the ground working. I want to be physically present in the studio to immerse myself in different creations. Sustaining myself by teaching dance classes means that I don't have the luxury of time to take on more than what I already am doing. I also can't take on more because most projects are self-funded, voluntary or with low budget. The arts scene can never improve if artists are always expected to do things for free or with a low budget,” she adds.

Nonetheless, this creative pursuit is a choice she gracefully and happily embraces. Whatever the case, Aida's unparalleled fervour and passion is a source of inspiration to many.

As Penang transforms into a creative capital fueled by strong creatives, we must learn from the experiences of our inspiring predecessors. Their stories of resilience, determination and success serve as navigational stars. Ultimately, it is individuals who are the most valuable assets in a robust and sustainable creative ecosystem.

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IS PENANG READY FOR A BIENNALE?

A COMPARATIVE REVIEW OF RECENT ART EVENTS

BY IVAN GABRIEL

AS A VIBRANT hub for arts and culture, Penang has seen a surge of events in recent years. Those like Palai Penang and Beyond Contemporary Art Penang (BCAP) showcased the island's potential as a cultural destination. However, these have also sparked debate about whether Penang is ready for a Biennale.

A Biennale is a major international art exhibition held every two years, showcasing contemporary artworks from a diverse array of artists across various mediums, including painting, sculpture, installation, video and performance art. The primary purpose of a Biennale is to act as a platform for presenting cutting-edge artistic practices, fostering dialogue around current issues and promoting cultural exchange on a global scale. It serves as a venue for both emerging and established artists, while curators are given the chance to experiment with thematic exhibitions.



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Hosting a Biennale can enrich a city's cultural landscape, boost tourism and stimulate local economic development through increased visitor spending and job creation. This enhances the city's international profile, its global status, investment opportunities in the arts and cultural sectors, and local community engagement.

PALAI PENANG: A BOLD STEP FORWARD

Palai Penang, held in March 2024 at Homestead, one of Penang's grand colonial mansions, was a significant highlight in the island's art calendar. This third edition of Palai, an itinerant exhibition organised by the Paris-based Galerie Balice Hertling, brought international contemporary artworks into a heritage setting. The first two editions were held in a historic palazzo in Lecce, Italy, making Palai Penang its first presentation in Asia.

As with previous editions, Palai Penang sparked dialogue about the contemporary artworks displayed by the participating international galleries and the historical architecture of the venue.

This edition of Palai brought together a selection of international art galleries from East and Central Asia, the Americas and Europe, offering local visitors the rare opportunity to engage with artistic practices from around the world. In addition to Penang's Blank Canvas and Balice Hertling (Paris, France), participating galleries included Delgosha (Tehran, Iran), Ermes Ermes (Rome, Italy), LC Queisser (Tbilisi, Georgia), Isla Flotante (Buenos Aires, Argentina) and PHD Group (Hong Kong, China).

These galleries presented an eclectic array of contemporary artistic practices, and Homestead's colonial architecture

provided a striking backdrop for the contemporary works, contrasting the historical with the present. Some of the works were transient and ephemeral, while others, particularly by Penang artists Okui Lala, Chan Kok Hooi and Hoo Fan Chon, were deeply influenced by and directly responded to the architectural and historical significance of the exhibition's venue.

However, some key players noted that while the selection of works was undeniably impressive, Palai Penang felt somewhat inaccessible to broader audiences, partly due its relatively exclusive nature, coupled with a lack of information in relation to the artworks, or the absence of such, for that matter. This left many visitors struggling to fully engage with the works on display. Additionally, the limited representation of local artists was widely regarded as a missed opportunity by some practitioners, given the wealth of artistic talent in Penang.

Regardless, Palai Penang left a significant mark. The quasi-art fair featured pieces that might not have otherwise been displayed in Penang, thanks to the exceptional efforts of Balice Hertling Gallery and Blank Canvas Penang. The video works and installations, in particular, offered compelling entry points for visitors to engage with contemporary art in a fresh and immersive way. These mediums oftentimes take a backseat to traditional paintings, so their presence at Palai Penang showcased a dynamic range of artistic expression that extends beyond conventional mediums.

This self-funded initiative by these incredible patrons demonstrated a strong commitment to the arts; Palai Penang succeeded in attracting visitors from around the world, contributing to what can be described as "micro tourism"—a term that



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refers to the phenomenon where smaller, niche events draw visitors from different regions. Personal anecdotes from attendees revealed that friends from Singapore and Thailand visited Penang specifically for this exhibition, further emphasising the potential for future events. It successfully demonstrated Penang's capability to attract international visitors and the potential it holds for a more robust arts ecosystem, further reminding us that Penang could indeed become a major player in the art world.

BEYOND CONTEMPORARY ART PENANG (BCAP): A CHANCE TO IMPROVE

In stark contrast, the Beyond Contemporary Art Penang (BCAP) was a government-backed initiative aimed at integrating art, business, tourism and education. Held in November 2023 at St. Giles Wembley, BCAP featured over 500 art pieces from 17 countries and comprised four programmes: Art Summit, Art Expo, Art Auction and Art Award Gala Dinner. With hundreds of thousands of ringgit in state funding, BCAP was advertised as an initiative that can create a new ecosystem for the Asia Pacific art economy.

BCAP promised to be a groundbreaking art fair, as stated by its founder, yet it struggled to deliver on its ambitious goals. The fair's execution could have benefited from a more creative approach to boost its impact on Penang's art scene. Despite the substantial funding, BCAP experienced a lower turnout than expected and lacked desired engagement. The works presented also failed to resonate with both local and international audiences.

The disparity between BCAP's intended impact and its actual outcome raises questions about how stakeholders and the state

government measure success and allocate resources. The significant investment did not translate into the expected creative or economic benefits anticipated, highlighting that substantial funding does not guarantee successful outcomes.

While Palai Penang, despite its conceptual leanings and limited local representation, generated buzz and attracted visitors, BCAP struggled to deliver. BCAP's shortcomings underscore a missed opportunity to foster creativity and support deserving practitioners, emphasising that vision and execution matter more than funding alone.

HOSTING A BIENNALE

Penang's rebellious spirit and burgeoning art scene positions it well for its own Biennale. The success of Palai Penang demonstrates a demand for high-quality, innovative exhibitions, suggesting that a Biennale could provide a structured platform to further this interest and refine the state's approach to large-scale art events. Palai Penang's success in attracting international visitors highlights the island's potential to host significant art exhibitions.

Conversely, BCAP's challenges reveal the complexities associated with large-scale, government-backed initiatives and highlights the need for careful planning and execution to ensure that a Biennale meets its objectives and provides value to the local community.

Penang's vibrant art scene has shown resilience and creativity, but the success of such a Biennale would depend on not only substantial investments but also a supportive environment for artists and visitors. Government support and infrastructure development are still crucial to sustaining

and expanding Penang's artistic growth. However, the government's focus must not be merely following the trends set by the art industry, but on fostering a robust ecosystem that supports its organic growth. By channeling funds to create an environment where the burgeoning artistic community can thrive with key initiatives in infrastructure, a supportive framework, access to resources and policies that nurture and sustain artistic practices, the government can enable the art scene to flourish naturally, rather than imposing constraints or mimicking existing practices.

Palai Penang and BCAP offer valuable insights into the island's readiness for such an ambitious undertaking, providing an important framework for future planning. As Penang continues to evolve culturally, the prospect of a Biennale remains an exciting possibility. With thoughtful planning and strategic execution, Penang can indeed be on the path to creating a significant cultural event that reflects its own distinctive identity.



CAPTIONS

1. "The House you live in, 2008-2022" by Thea Gvetadze.

2. "Grandpa 2024" by Shi Liu features a writing robot programmed with AI to replicate the artist's late grandfather's writing. It continuously writes letters, using technology and memory to preserve one's essence beyond mortality.

Photo credit: Contemporary Art Library

IVAN GABRIEL is a curator with a curatorial approach committed to making art accessible to diverse audiences. He views each showcase as a chance for inadvertent education, using art as a powerful platform to initiate conversations about contemporary issues, provoking audiences to think and reflect.

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BIRDING IN AIR HITAM DALAM EDUCATIONAL FOREST



BY
ANDREW
& KAREN
JORDAN

AIR HITAM EDUCATIONAL FOREST, or AID as it is affectionately known amongst the birding community and photographers alike, is located in Seberang Perai Utara. It is a freshwater swamp spanning approximately 10ha named after the nearby river which is “deep” (*dalam* in the Malay language) and “dark” (*hitam*, meaning black). We discovered this amazing place after reading an article on *Penang Monthly* way back in 2017 and decided to check it out for ourselves. We have been regular visitors since then.

The area has two observation towers connected by a canopy walkway hanging bridge, which gives the keen birder an up-close look at wildlife up on the trees. The tranquil, green place with meandering riverside boardwalks appeals to all birders, whether they are just starting out or seasoned enthusiasts.

Time and weather have inevitably altered the environment from what it used to be when we first visited, but it is still a place we really enjoy visiting. Here is a small selection of the birds we have photographed over the years—and if you do visit, these are what you are likely to see.



1. BANDED WOODPECKER

Probably the most popular woodpecker around AID, the Banded Woodpecker can be heard long before it is seen—it has a very loud, distinctive and high-pitched call that sounds like “weeek”. Follow the call, and you are likely to find them. The male and female differ slightly in colour and tend to be seen together. Once they settle on a tree trunk, they are great subjects for photographers.

2. BLACK AND RED BROADBILL

The striking Black and Red Broadbill is quite an elusive bird, and is a prized sighting for any birdwatcher. This bird appears anywhere within AID, so keep your eyes peeled for the distinctive turquoise beak and flashes of red.



3. BLUE WINGED PITTA

The Blue Winged Pitta, also known as the nine-colour bird, is one of three Pitta super-species. It has been a regular visitor to AID over the past few years and can be spotted around May, June and July. The best location to spot it is around the lesser-known car park (not the front car park with the info kiosk). It is extremely photogenic and will often sit on the low stone wall waiting to feed on mealworms. The resident Abbotts Babbler has worked out that if he follows the Pitta, he is sure to get a “free meal”.

4. SPOTTED WOOD OWL

The Spotted Wood Owl has been seen here for many years, but disappeared after its nesting tree was felled by harsh weather. Fortunately, it has returned and has since nested and birthed an offspring, much to the delight of visitors. Consider yourself very lucky if you can see all three of them perching together. They can often be seen among the trees overlooking the river-side walk. It can be difficult to spot them in their own habitat, but once you chance upon them, expect to see them roost at the same location for quite some time.

5. PURPLE HERON

This elegant bird is often seen along the riverside, fish pond or at the very top of small trees when roosting. The plumage of the Purple Heron is a beautiful dark red, and is most vivid when captured in bright sunlight.

6. BRAHMINY KITE

This resident raptor is a great bird to photograph as it tends to stay put for some time, especially while eating its prey. The observation towers are one of the best places to get good close-ups. The Brahminy Kite usually tries to roost in the same tree as the territorial Spotted Wood Owls.



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7. LINEATED BARBET

The Lineated Barbet is a popular resident bird. It has a distinctive call and can be seen everywhere within this forest. It nests in holes in tree trunks and frequently perches on exposed bare branches, making photographing them very easy.

8. GREEN BILLED MALKOHA

This Green Billed Malkoha has very swift movements when hopping from branch to branch, making it quite a challenge to photograph. But every so often, it will sit out in the open to give you a chance to snap a good picture. One can catch the sight of them in the trees along the riverside. Therefore, watch out for the green bill, grey head and long black tail feathers adorned with white chevrons.

9. MANGROVE BLUE FLYCATCHER

The Mangrove Blue Flycatcher is a beautiful, vibrant blue and orange bird often seen around the same car park as the Blue Winged Pitta. It frequents the area when the Pitta is around to "join the table" for mealworms. This tame bird has intelligently deduced that when photographers are present, there is also likely to be food.

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10. COLLARED KINGFISHER

The Collared Kingfisher is a very vocal bird usually seen in pairs along the riverside, and is a constant resident at AID. This bird usually nests on the river embankment and in holes of tree trunks. Its striking blue plumage is easily seen when it flits from tree to tree, making it an easy shot for the discerning photographer.





11. BLUE THROATED BEE-EATER

With a distinctive long beak and very colourful plumage, the Blue Throated Bee-Eater can be seen along the riverside, perching on bare branches. When it spots its prey, the Bee-Eater would catch it swiftly before returning to the same branch to feed. You can sometimes see it resting and feeding on overhead cables. It is one of our favourite birds to watch and photograph for its stunning colours.

12. PLAINTIVE CUCKOO

12A. MALE & 12B. FEMALE

The Plaintive Cuckoo is quite an elusive bird. However, if you hear their call (the male has several different whistles) you are likely to spot them right away. When it appears in the open, often anywhere around AID, it will sit for a while, giving photographers time to take more pictures. The male and female have distinctly different plumage, with the male being more colourful.



13. YELLOW BELLIED PRINIA

The Yellow Bellied Prinia is a beautiful songbird often found on low-level foliage by the riverside. This is another bird that is often heard before it is seen as it frequently bursts into birdsong. It can sometimes be difficult to get an open shot of it, but it is worth the wait.



ANDREW and **KAREN JORDAN** are originally from the UK but have lived in Penang since 2016. They discovered Penang back in 2005 during their first trip to Asia, where they celebrated their Silver Wedding Anniversary. They started birding and photography in 2017 when they got their first camera. Since then, this fantastic hobby has taken them to some stunning places to see amazing birdlife and nature, along with meeting really interesting people around Malaysia and Southeast Asia, whilst travelling around on a 650cc motorbike.

PENANG

THE CROWNING JEWEL OF
PENANG'S FLORAL DIVERSITY

SLIPPER



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

THE LUSH AND VERDANT hills of Penang are home to a plethora of flora and fauna, which have enthused many naturalists over the generations. Much like some local fauna which have inspired awe and popular appeal, certain species of flora too have aroused fascination and intrigue. In Penang, it is the native orchid, *Paphiopedilum barbatum*, or commonly called the Penang slipper orchid. Mention it to any serious plant enthusiast and they would brim with excitement. The exotic appearance of this orchid has given it a “celebrity status”, it features on the logo of the Friends of Penang Botanic Gardens Society (FoPBGS) and appears prominently in any brochure or book describing the flora of Penang Hill.

Slipper orchids belong to the subfamily of orchids called Cypripedioideae, which is distributed across several continents, consisting of five genera, of which only one, *Paphiopedilum* occurs in Peninsular Malaysia (East Malaysia is treated separately as it has distinct floristic components).

BY
PRAKASH CHACKO

ORCHID





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WHY SLIPPER ORCHIDS?

They are called slipper orchids because the flowers have a highly modified petal called a lip, which is shaped like footwear (or a pouch), giving it a very unique and exotic look. Beautiful they might be, but in fact, slipper orchid flowers are elaborate trap mechanisms. They lure insects to perch on specific parts of the flower, from where the unsuspecting insect tumbles down into the lip. Unlike carnivorous plants which trap insects with the intention of consuming them, slipper orchids only trap them temporarily, since these insects are trapped with the aim of facilitating pollination. The insect that falls into the lip finds a narrow escape route—an aperture in the lip which passes below the anthers. As the insect passes through this passage, they get smeared with pollinia which they carry to the next flower, in the process pollinating the flower.

Six species of *Paphiopedilum* occur in Peninsular Malaysia, of which only *Paphiopedilum barbatum* occurs in Penang, mainly on Penang Hill. Each plant usually produces one flower at a time (very rarely two), which measures about 8-10cm across, being borne on an erect inflorescence. The epithet *barbatum* means “bearded”, a reference to the short hairs on the warts at the margins of the petals. While it is commonly called the Penang slipper orchid, ironically *Paphiopedilum barbatum* is neither endemic to Penang (but is native) nor was the type specimen (first described) collected in Penang. It is distributed in Sumatra and much of Peninsular Malaysia, and was first discovered in Gunung Ledang in Johor. In Malay, it is sometimes referred to as *Bunga Kasut* (shoe flower). It is possible that the term “Penang slipper orchid” became popular because Penang Hill was, in the past, one of the easiest places to spot a *Paphiopedilum barbatum*. On the Hill, they were commonly spotted growing on rocks or slopes near streams.

A PRECIPITOUS DECLINE

While it was once common on Penang Hill, finding a *Paphiopedilum barbatum* in the wild today is extremely difficult. Long time resident of Penang Hill, Ahmad Chik recalls poignantly how when he first started living on the Hill in 1988, *Paphiopedilum barbatum* was still common in the wild. However, collection of the orchid was already rampant at that time; Ahmad even recalls how a particular foreign collector came to Penang Hill to buy slipper orchids, paying for them by the gunny sack! Sean Liew, who used to hike Penang Hill regularly in the early 1990s, recalls a similar tale. There were a few hidden spots on the Hill where the slipper orchids were so abundant that trying to trek through these areas would mean that you will unsuspectingly step on one as they were all over the ground. Alas, 30 years on, slipper orchids have almost entirely disappeared from these same spots.

Globally, all *Paphiopedilum* species are under immense poaching pressure as they have great horticultural value. As for *Paphiopedilum barbatum*, both the Peninsular Malaysia Plant Red List and the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species list the species as an Endangered (EN) species.



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CAPTIONS

1. *Paphiopedilum barbatum* flower photographed in Johor.

2. A blooming Penang slipper orchid plant seen in the garden of a farmer on Penang Hill. This, and many other plants in private collections, once scientifically determined to have originated in Penang, can be used for reintroduction into the wild.

3. Sean Liew.

4. Short hairs on the warts at the margins of the petals. The epithet *barbatum* means "bearded", which is a reference to this characteristic.

5. An insect, which was trapped by the flower, crawling out from behind the staminode (the disc-shaped surface in the middle of the flower).

6. Penang slipper orchid leaves are usually mottled.

7. Yang Kok Lee.

8. Brian Yap.



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A GLIMMER OF HOPE?

While extirpated from much of its original habitat on Penang Hill, the Penang slipper orchid continues to survive in the private gardens of farmers and residents on the Hill, albeit as potted plants. This provides an opportunity where plants from these private collections can be leveraged for a reintroduction programme into the wild. However, before reintroduction is done, it is important to ensure that the genetic makeup of the plants which are to be reintroduced matches that of what was historically found in Penang.

Brian Yap, a Senior Lecturer at the Centre of Research for Sustainable Uses of Natural Resources, Universiti Tun Hussein Onn Malaysia, concurs that while there is growing interest to reintroduce *Paphiopedilum barbatum* to Penang Hill, the exact origin of plants from private collections, which are to be used for reintroduction, needs to be verified to prevent genetic pollution. His planned research involves generating DNA barcodes for *Paphiopedilum barbatum* from Penang, which can then be used to determine whether plants from private collections are indeed originally from Penang and hence, suitable to be used for reintroduction.

The listing of the Penang Hill Biosphere Reserve (PHBR) under the UNESCO Man & Biosphere programme in 2021 is also an encouraging step which paves the way for active management of the Hill's natural ecosystems. Yang Kok Lee, Senior Project Officer of PHBR at the Penang Hill Corporation, explains that with the listing, it enables habitat protection, anti-poaching initiatives through increased ranger presence, expertise engagement and conservation awareness programmes, which would foster public awareness in relation to the importance of protecting Penang slipper orchids. With this, the core area of PHBR, which today is strictly protected and regulated under the PHBR provisions, can be a refuge for existing, fragmented populations of the Penang slipper orchid to rebound and thrive.

It is hoped that with concerted effort to preserve and conserve the natural heritage of Penang Hill, the Penang slipper orchid would once again bloom in pride on the Hill it was once well known for.

***Note:** Special thanks to Ong Poh Teck for reviewing this article.

IN AWE OF
TREASURES UNDER THE

SOUTH CHINA

BY
**HANIS
RAZALLI**

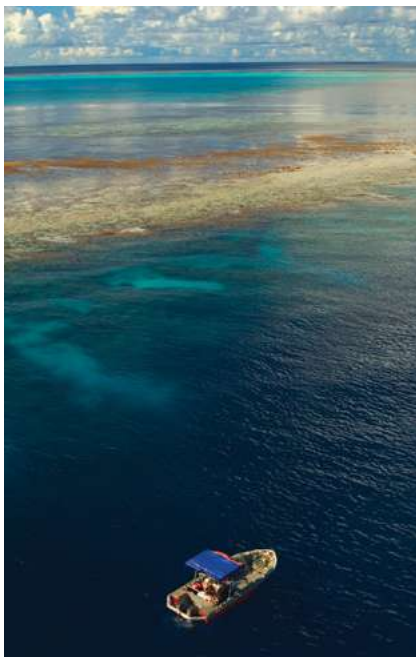
THE SOUTH CHINA SEA (SCS) is a breathtaking expanse of crystal-clear blue waters, spanning approximately 3,500,000km² with an average depth of 1.2km. This marginal sea of the Western Pacific Ocean is bordered by China in the north, Vietnam in the west, Taiwan and the north-western Philippines in the east, and encircled by Borneo, the east coast of the Malay Peninsula and the southern limit of the Gulf of Thailand in the south. It is adorned with hundreds of small, uninhabited islands, islets, cays, shoals, reefs, atolls and seamounts. The SCS is a treasure trove of marine life and natural resources, making it a focal point for several countries and a spark for complex territorial claims.

SEA

Malaysia, Indonesia, Brunei, the Philippines, Vietnam, China and Taiwan all lay claim to parts of the SCS. There is still much to learn about the SCS; in fact, significant scientific contributions have come from several joint expeditions between Universiti Pertanian Malaysia and Kagoshima University aboard the research vessel Kagoshima Maru. These “Matahari” expeditions (1985-1989) provided valuable data on SCS resources and sediments, but covered only small coastal areas at a time.

In the 1990s, the South East Asian Fisheries Development Centre (SEAFDEC) expanded its research effort into the Gulf of Thailand and the waters off Peninsular Malaysia. In 1995, SEAFDEC’s Marine Fishery Resource Development and Management Department (MFRDMD) in Malaysia launched more ambitious efforts with their Thai counterparts aboard the modern research vessel *M.V. SEAFDEC*, exploring the Gulf of Thailand and waters off Malaysia’s eastern coast, Sabah, Sarawak and Brunei.

Malaysia’s first comprehensive biodiversity expedition in the SCS was the ROSES Expedition (Research On the Seas and Islands) in 2004, which started as an idea among marine scientists returning from Antarctica. Led by Universiti Sains Malaysia marine biologist, Zulfigar Yasin, aboard the *MV Allied Commander*, it was a pivotal step in understanding and preserving Malaysia’s rich marine biodiversity in the SCS and Strait of Malacca.



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SAILING INTO THE DRAGON'S REALM

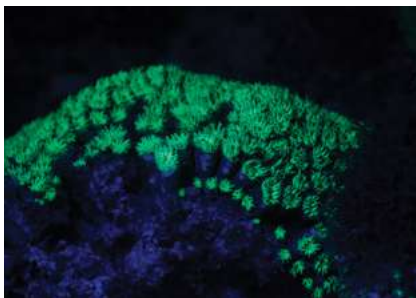
The expedition commenced at the bustling port of Penang, and navigated through the historic and strategic waterway of the Strait of Malacca. Once into the open waters of the SCS, our ship headed towards the Luconia Shoals, historically known as Gugusan Beting Raja Jarum and Gugusan Beting Patinggi Ali—designations for the north and south parts of the shoals. These submerged shoals lie around 100km off the Sarawak coast within Malaysia's exclusive economic zone (EEZ), covering a hefty several thousand square kilometres.

The first stop was Terumbu Saji, also known by its British name, Herald Reef. As we approached, the reef appeared a lighter shade of blue, barely noticeable in the vast expanse of the sea. Located in the South Luconia Shoals, this seamount rises from a depth of about 100m, forming several terraces before reaching its submerged peak just below the sea surface at about 5m to 12m deep.

The anticipation was palpable as we geared up for our dive in the Coral Triangle. Renowned for its unparalleled biodiversity, it offers some of the richest underwater experiences in the world. Diving here is on many divers' bucket lists, and for most of us, this was also our first wall dive, adding an extra layer of excitement to the adventure.

Wall diving involves exploring underwater vertical cliffs or drop-offs, giving the sensation of flying alongside the vertical face with the ocean stretching out before you. Mastering buoyancy and maintaining awareness of your depth and surroundings are crucial to such a dive.

The crystal-clear water provided astonishing visibility, even at 25m deep—a stark contrast to what we were accustomed



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to in the Strait of Malacca, where visibility is often limited to just a few metres, even on the best of days.

Taking a deep breath, I rolled backwards off the dinghy. The cool water enveloped me, and my expectations were high as I descended to the top of the seamount, but instead of vibrant corals of every shape and hue, we were greeted by a landscape dominated by broken corals and rubble—signs of fish bombings. We exchanged uneasy glances, understanding that danger might be lurking nearby.

I recalled a harrowing incident being struck by shock waves at another dive off the Sabah coast. One moment, I was facing the seabed, noting the marine life on the sea floor; the next, I was on my back staring at the surface of the water, the sun's flickering lights glistening above. The force of the explosion had thrown me off balance, leaving me disorientated. We were fortunate that the shockwave did not cause any immediate physical harm: none of our eardrums burst and we did not pass out underwater, which would have been fatal.

The coral diversity was disappointingly poor at Terumbu Saji, with an estimated live coral cover of less than 10%. Despite the lacklustre coral cover, there were several coral fish species. We encountered rabbitfish, angelfish, surgeonfish and small groupers. Crinoids or feather stars adorned the coral bommies, and two black-spotted sea cucumbers of about a foot in length were seen roaming on the seabed. These sifted through the sediment with their paddle-like tentacles, feeding on the sand, adding a touch of life to the otherwise barren scene.



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As we made our way into deeper waters, we reached the wall and the diversity of life increased. Encrusting corals clung to the lithified rubble, while soft corals and small sea fans dotted the wall, creating a vibrant tapestry of marine life. Deeper down, we encountered larger fish, such as leather-jackets and trumpetfish. We could not see the bottom, not even diving deep. The nautical charts portrayed the edge of the reef as a series of terraces extending into the abyss.

The wall dive was both mesmerising and sobering. The vibrant marine life was contrasted by the stark evidence of human impact even this far from land. Emerging from the dive, I could not help but feel a mix of awe and concern. With its pockets of vibrant life amid areas of damage, the reef highlighted the delicate balance of marine ecosystems and the urgent need for their protection.

Our adventure had just begun, and we looked forward to the next dives with renewed excitement and profound respect for the mysteries beneath the waves. We had six more days to explore the remaining 13 reefs in this expansive shoal, each promising unique encounters and experiences.

THE PRISTINE REEFS OF LAYANG-LAYANG

Terumbu Layang-Layang, also known as Swallow Reef, is a small oceanic atoll about 300km northwest of Kota Kinabalu, or roughly an hour by local flight from the city. From the deck of the *Allied Commander*, it appeared as a ring of deep turquoise set against the endless blue expanse of the SCS.

As the ship drew closer, the details of the atoll began to emerge, revealing a stunning contrast between the vibrant, shallow

waters of the lagoon and the darker, deeper ocean surrounding it. Fringed by a delicate halo of coral reefs just beneath the surface, the waves broke softly on the outer reefs. The lagoon, protected by the encircling reef, resembled a calm, natural swimming pool—it was easy to see why Layang-Layang is often referred to as the “Jewel of the Borneo Banks”.

An atoll, such as Layang-Layang, forms from a volcanic island that had gradually sunk over millions of years. As the island subsides, coral reefs grow around its edges, forming a ring-shaped barrier reef. Eventually, the central island erodes, leaving a lagoon surrounded by reefs. Layang-Layang is not that large—it only covers an area of 14 km²—but its compact size is packed with natural beauty and marine biodiversity.

Pulau Layang-Layang is home to several important facilities: the Malaysian naval station (Station Lima), an airstrip, the marine research facility, MARSAL and the Layang Layang Island Resort. This island serves not only as a strategic base but also as a significant site for economic activities such as tourism.

My task for the day was to assess the conditions of the seagrass bed, and I was delighted to report that the live coverage was perfect, with a full, uninterrupted cover. At a depth of 2m, the meadow stretched before me like an endless underwater lawn, its lush greenery extending beyond the horizon. A full cover such as this is increasingly rare.

The narrow-leaf seagrass formed a dense carpet, swaying gently with the underwater currents and providing a vital habitat for countless marine species. Small fish darted in and out of the blades while crabs, sea horses and other crustaceans scurried along the seabed. The clarity of the water allowed me to observe this vibrant ecosystem in all its glory, a testament to the pristine conditions and the importance of preserving such environments.

Leaving this island was difficult, but I had to make my way to the next destination, farther away from civilisation and deeper into “Dangerous Ground”.

“Dangerous Ground” is the notation on this vast area southeast of the SCS seen on nautical charts. It is characterised by many low islands, cays, sunken reefs and atolls that often rise abruptly from ocean depths greater than 1,000m. We were at the edge of the Sunda shelf and here lie deeper waters. This region is poorly charted, making navigation exceptionally hazardous. The Admiralty Sailing Directions issue the following warning:

“...charted depths and their locations may present considerable error in the less-known regions of this area. Avoidance of ‘Dangerous Ground’ is the mariner’s only assurance of safety.”

THE MYSTICAL TERUMBU SIPUT

Of the four reefs we visited in “Dangerous Ground”, Terumbu Siput intrigued me the most. This small, almost circular atoll has an outside radius of only about 1km and dries entirely at low tide to enclose a shallow lagoon. A few rocks remain visible on the east side at high water, but no other obvious reference point exists. The lagoon is shallow, and the outer reef features a steep slope descending into very deep water.

Since 1999, the Royal Malaysian Navy has maintained an offshore naval station here called “Station Sierra”. Interestingly, the station was constructed in Penang at the ship dockyard in Pulau Jerejak. The completed barge was then tugged over a month under heavy naval escort, and the contractors had to wait for high tide before securing the barge with rocks and concrete at Terumbu Siput, also known as Erica Reef. Many reefs in the region were named after ships that had foundered on them, reflecting the historical influence of British maritime exploration in the area.

This reef is among the best preserved we explored during the ROSES Expedition. We spent considerable time here, experiencing the low tidal conditions, walking on the seemingly unstable rubble, and doing our night dives. The reef profile is typical of the Layang-Layang group: the northern reef exhibits an extended reef flat that slopes gently before reaching the edge and the wall, while the southern area is a wall that extends steeply to the bottom. The reef boasts high biodiversity, particularly among hard corals, which form pristine formations along the edge. Remarkably, there are no signs of fishing activity or bombing, and the natural beauty and ecological integrity of the reef seemed preserved.

The top is exposed during low tide, revealing several features. The floor of the lagoon is mostly sand with clumps of boulder corals. The outer band adjacent to the reef slope is composed of coralline rock covered with branching corals with thick, stout branches to withstand the pounding waves. Walking in this area during low tide becomes difficult because the coral rubble, interspersed with pools of water, can collapse to about six inches underfoot. These shallow pools are home to bright blue damselfish, juvenile groupers, eels, mantis shrimp, sea urchins and the intertidal horse hoof giant clam, *Hippopus hippopus*.

The south wall of the reef, rich in hard coral diversity, revealed even more life during our night dives. The upper slope is covered in branching corals, while massive bommies dominate below. Soft corals and sea fans are found here, and deeper down where only dappled light penetrates, a special type of coral, *Tubastrea*, or sun coral, flourished. Despite the bright orange colour of the polyps, like that of the sun, they do not require sunlight

for nourishment like other corals. Instead, they feed on zooplankton, which allows them to reside in deeper reef areas. Many species of invertebrates were also unveiled, including the giant soft-bodied sea slug known as the Spanish dancer. Its bright, blood-red body resembles a flamenco dancer, undulating its body to propel itself through the water. Here, too, resides fluorescent corals that display a greenish glow at night. Shine an ultraviolet torch here, and you will be rewarded with a glowing carpet of fluorescent wonder.

Exploring the outer reef soon led to a steep wall that descended into the great depths, often referred to as the “endless bottom”. Hovering, as divers do, you will not see the deep bottom, only the dark abyss of blue and black. Parts of this wall are covered with sand that has drifted from above. I dared not look down at the pitch-black bottom as scenes from *Jaws* raced through my mind, filling me with a sense of foreboding. Maybe it was the narcosis that was becoming apparent. These affect divers at depth.

REFLECTIONS ON THE SOUTH CHINA SEA

As our expedition came to an end, I found myself reflecting on the incredible diversity and richness of the SCS. Each island and reef we visited offered something unique, from the vibrant underwater worlds to the serene landscapes. Layang-Layang has great giant clams that are the biggest in the world; Terumbu Siput is an underwater haven yet unspoiled by man; Terumbu Ubi is home to large pelagic fishes; and the reef flats of Mantanani revealed many species of marine life setting new records here. These experiences deepened my understanding of marine ecosystems and ignited a passion for their preservation.

In the words of marine biologist Sylvia Earle, describing the fragility of the seas that need our care and their relationship to mankind, “No water, no life. No blue, no green.” This journey has reinforced the truth of these words and the vital importance of protecting our oceans if we are to survive. As I packed up my gear and said goodbye to the mesmerising underwater vistas, I could not help but think that while our voyage might be over, the call of the ocean never truly fades.



CAPTIONS

1. (Cover spread) A diver with a gorgonian coral.
2. The coral reef atoll at Terumbu Siput.
3. The fluorescent coral on the SCS reefs.
4. A school of fish.
5. Research scientists descending the wall at Terumbu Siput.

Photos by Zulfigar Yasin

HANIS RAZALLI is a Research Officer in CEMACS, USM and a consultant specialising in the marine environment. Her present research focuses on creating and maintaining marine reserves in a sustainable manner. She is currently working on Penang’s islands and marine sanctuaries towards meeting the goals of SDG 2030.

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RESPONDING TO LOCAL TASTES AND GLOBAL VALUES

BY CAROLYN KHOR

IKEA BATU KAWAN



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

IKEA BATU KAWAN first opened its doors on 14 March 2019. Since then, it has remained committed to sustainability and making a positive impact in the community, especially with its eco-friendly and waste reduction practices. As it launches its IKEA Blueprint 2025, *Penang Monthly* speaks to Store Manager, Takeshi Murai.

Takeshi started his journey with IKEA in 2008 as a storekeeper in Osaka, Japan before moving on to become Store Manager at IKEA Tachikawa in Tokyo. After a stint in Europe as Market Manager in Sweden and Finland, Takeshi returned to the East to take charge of Malaysia's northern state stores and collection points seven months ago.

He resonates deeply with IKEA's values and vision. "The focus on togetherness, caring for people and the planet, and striving for simplicity perfectly aligns with my personal values and my Japanese roots." Working for a company that strives to make a positive impact on society and the environment is also immensely fulfilling to him.

Takeshi shares that IKEA believes home is the most important place in the world, and attributes his experiences living abroad to reinforcing this belief—each place that he has lived in has contributed to his growth, unique experiences and perspectives. But despite the constant change, Takeshi is grounded by family ties. "Family provides an anchor, a sense of belonging..."

Penang, which is rich in traditions, culture and heritage with a strong emphasis on family and hospitality embodies this perfectly, Takeshi finds.

IKEA PENANG TAILORS HOME SOLUTIONS WITH A LOCAL TWIST

IKEA's goal to improve customers' life at home involves adapting to local ways of life and preferences. Takeshi explains that while the company's business operations, design philosophy, values and commitment to sustainability are consistent across all markets, there is no one size that fits all. They work hard to understand Malaysians through home visits and by frequently conducting "Life at Home" surveys. "We try to understand our customers' frustrations, hopes and dreams, and then brainstorm a solution for them."

As we walked through the Batu Kawan store, Takeshi points out that showrooms and furniture here are designed to fit the

Penang lifestyle. "For instance, this showroom is designed for heritage houses, and that one is suited to Muslims who need space for their prayers and praying mats." He wants to ensure that IKEA's solutions are localised, functional and sustainable.

"We see the lack of storage as a common issue in Penang; in part due to the phenomenon of multigenerational households. There is also strong demand for products that are not only functional but also affordable," he reveals. Other than that, IKEA's room sets, which incorporate elements of Penang's architectural heritage, also ensures that their products seamlessly blend with local aesthetics.

After all, its founder Ingvar Kamprad's guiding principle for IKEA was to create a better everyday life for most people. Takeshi says that this principle is internalised in all of IKEA Batu Kawan's operations, from their home solutions to constantly improving customers' shopping experiences. "We are always exploring new ways to ensure a seamless shopping experience across all touchpoints, offline and online."

COMMITMENT TO A GREENER TOMORROW

Sustainability is a quintessential Swedish value and is also exemplified in the Swedes' way of doing business. IKEA Batu Kawan, too, adopts such practices. "Our three core aspects are health and sustainable living, circular and climate, and fairness and equity; and we seek to set a good example for the community."

In line with theme D of Penang2030's strategic initiative to invest in the built environment, IKEA was the first company in Malaysia to eliminate single-use plastic bags in 2011. It also phased out alkaline batteries and led the transition to LED lighting, which has a longer lifespan and is more energy efficient.

"We also introduced a plant-based menu last year. Hopefully, this will inspire Malaysians to adopt a healthier and more sustainable diet."

Moreover, all IKEA stores have recycling facilities where 70% of the waste generated is sorted into several categories, such as general, paper, metal and plastic; anything that can be reused will be recycled to minimise waste.

"Our employees contribute to our recycling efforts, and we invite our customers to do the same," Takeshi says. To reduce food waste, leftover food is made into bird feed,

and they collaborate with a local hydroponic farm to repurpose food waste into fertiliser.

On top of that, IKEA Batu Kawan collects rainwater and stores it in a water tank for bathroom flushing and watering plants. More recently, it installed approximately 3,700 solar panels on its rooftop to convert sunlight into electricity, resulting in an estimated cost savings of 16% of their electricity bill.

IKEA'S VISION FOR THE FUTURE OF HOME FURNISHING

According to the Department of Statistics Malaysia, retail sales in the country grew by 8.7% in May 2024 year-on-year. Together with the positive outlook on GDP growth of 4% to 5% announced by Minister of Investment, Trade and Industry, Tengku Zafrul Aziz, recently, this signals Malaysians' healthy appetite for spending. While Bank Negara Malaysia expected household spending to expand in 2024, it had said that consumers would remain cost-conscious and seek to reduce unnecessary expenses.

"With these factors in mind, we are constantly challenging ourselves to keep our costs low while providing the best possible quality products to our customers. No doubt, many of our prices are dependent on the global supply chain. However, it is important that our supply chain complies with all our sustainability and safety standards," says Takeshi.

At the same time, customers now want seamless online and offline shopping experiences and there is a rising demand for e-commerce. "Customers want ultra-fast and efficient delivery, and we hope to meet those expectations. That is why we have pop-up stores and collection points all over the country now."

"Our next focus for the Batu Kawan store is to prioritise sleep. From September 2024 until the following year, we will be emphasising a good night's sleep in our product offerings."

At the end of the day, Takeshi has his sights set on taking IKEA Batu Kawan to the next level. "I see myself being here for at least the next decade. I won't be going anywhere yet." To be sure, IKEA has never been a one-man show, but a community effort. "This is made possible only with the outstanding effort of our coworkers and the unwavering support from our customers. This, in my opinion, is the IKEA experience," he concludes.

GOT A STORY TO TELL?

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ARTISANAL CANDLE

BRINGING CALM INTO
MALAYSIAN HOMES



MAKERS

BY EMILY GOH

“For many candle makers, scented candles can also be a way to express creativity in designing unique blends of scents and in experimenting with local ingredients.”



EMILY GOH is a freelance copywriter, content strategist and aspiring fiction writer. When she's not writing, you can find this cosy homebody reading, experimenting in the kitchen or indulging in some obsessive cleaning.



THERE IS SOMETHING undeniably enchanting about the simple act of lighting a scented candle. Whether it is the first thing we do in the morning to ease into the day or a ritual to mark the end of a long, exhausting day, candles have a way of making a space feel more homey and cozy. Since the Covid-19 pandemic, there has been both a significant global growth in candle sales—and in candle-making hobbyists.

Audrey Hon, the founder of Asian Scents Co, together with the founders of Nildeco, a Penang-based candle brand, are among those who turned a lockdown hobby into thriving businesses. “We started our business during the pandemic because we knew many people were feeling stressed and anxious; some even had trouble sleeping. We built our brand with the hope that our candles would create a comfortable and tranquil environment for our customers,” the latter say.

BEHIND THE SCENES OF CRAFTING ARTISANAL CANDLES

Mel, co-founder of Borneo Candle Studio, recalls discovering soy candles at a weekend market abroad. Soy wax, being 100% natural wax, does not contain pollutants the way paraffin and other waxes do, and produces less soot, making it a better choice for indoor use.

When Mel started Borneo Candle Studio, which operates in Sarawak and Brunei, she was inspired to offer candles made from safer, eco-friendly materials like soy wax, beeswax and coconut soy wax. She sources sustainably grown soy wax from the US, noting its clean-burning properties and plant-based, renewable nature. “We take pride in sourcing professional-grade, phthalate-free ingredients that comply with International Fragrance Association’s (IFRA) safety standards.”

But the materials are only part of the story. The craft of candle-making, while seemingly straightforward, can take years of experimentation to master. For example, other than just melting wax, adding in fragrances and dyes and settling the wax in a mold, Vicky, the founder of Me Time Handmade Studio, a Penang-based candle maker

and certified Korea Candle Craft Association (KCCA) candle instructor, emphasises the importance of maintaining optimal temperature during the process. At too high a temperature, the wax will scorch and start turning an unpleasant brown.

SCENTED CANDLES—CURATING A SENSORY EXPERIENCE

From the citrus blends that uplift your spirits to floral scents that help you relax your mind, the right fragrance can transform a space as well as your mood. For many candle makers, scented candles can also be a way to express creativity in designing unique blends of scents and in experimenting with local ingredients.



Asian Scents Co’s collection of scented candles are inspired by beloved Malaysian flavours like Nasi Lemak, Teh O’Ais Limau, Ondeh-Ondeh and Syrup Bandung. One of their candles also features a familiar scent in Asian households—Tiger Balm, whose minty, fresh and herbaceous aroma revitalises your senses.

Meanwhile, Borneo Candle Studio draws inspiration from the rich natural landscapes of Malaysia. Their Coastal Waves candle is meant to evoke memories of the seaside breeze of Borneo’s coastal towns, while Borneo Oudh, which is a rich, earthy blend of agarwood, leather and elemi, celebrates the region’s lush tropical rainforests.

Like many finer things in life, artisanal scented candles can be seen as an indulgence, or even as overconsumption spurred by social media. However, there is no denying that it can improve moods and promote mental wellbeing. It transforms a house into a home and helps induce sleep or relaxation.

Personally, I have gained a deeper appreciation for the meticulous care and thoughtfulness that go into each candle when learning from these local artisans. And I hope that this simple ritual of lighting a candle will bring as much joy into your daily life as it does mine.

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THREE MONTHS AGO, Hong Leong Bank (HLB), one of Malaysia's most established financial institutions with a 120-year heritage, proudly unveiled its HLB Light Street Branch in the heart of George Town, Penang. The restoration and reimagining of No.1 Light Street, an iconic heritage building constructed in the 1860s, which is now painted a charming light blue, generated significant buzz even before its grand opening.

Steeped in history, No.1 Light Street stands as a testament to Penang's rich history. This landmark has now been transformed into HLB's "Iconic Branch", poised for growth, innovation and connection. Equipped with modern amenities to ensure a seamless and convenient banking experience, these facilities are not limited to the interior; customers can also enjoy various bicycle parkings, easily accessible elevators and even EV-charging stations.





AN ENHANCED BANKING EXPERIENCE

The redesigning goes beyond a mere facelift. By incorporating expansive spaces designed to foster openness and community, the branch offers more than just banking services. Visitors can explore curated art displays, enjoy a meal or attend events, all within the same location. This transformation elevates what might have been an ordinary visit to the bank into a uniquely enriching and memorable experience.

Kota Dine, a Peranakan-themed cafe run by the acclaimed Kota Bistro (Michelin Bib Gourmand 2023 and 2024 recipient), introduces a communal touch to the branch. The café offers indoor and al-fresco seating for a casual space to network or simply unwind.

The second-floor exhibition hall encircling the double-volume atrium offers a panoramic vista of the branch below, promoting a sense of spaciousness and ease. Furnished with cozy armchairs and coffee tables, it invites visitors to unwind while appreciating the art on display. A convertible conference room adjoining the exhibition hall further enhances the space's adaptability, allowing the branch to host a range of customer events. In conjunction with the launch, the space showcased a pop-up art gallery, transforming the branch into a vibrant cultural hub.

HLB Light Street exemplifies HLB's commitment to be "Your Digital Bank Plus Much More" by seamlessly integrating cutting-edge digital innovation with personalised, face-to-face service. Complementing the HLB Connect digital banking platform, the branch provides enhanced banking experiences, including a Priority Banking lounge specifically designed to facilitate networking and collaboration among its esteemed clientele.

According to HLB's Managing Director of Personal Financial Services, Andrew Jong, banking today transcends financial transactions. It is about trust, relationships and personalised services. "We believe that



banking and financial services require both digital efficiency and in-person interactions to create greater value for the customer," Jong explains.

CATERING TO HIGH-NET-WORTH CLIENTS

The HLB Light Street branch also offers a distinct priority banking experience tailored to the discerning needs of high-net-worth individuals. This encompasses an elevated level of service, personalised attention and exclusive access to a range of financial solutions.

The branch's sophisticated ambiance, coupled with the availability of private meeting rooms and a dedicated Priority Banking lounge, foster an atmosphere conducive to confidential discussions and personalised financial planning.



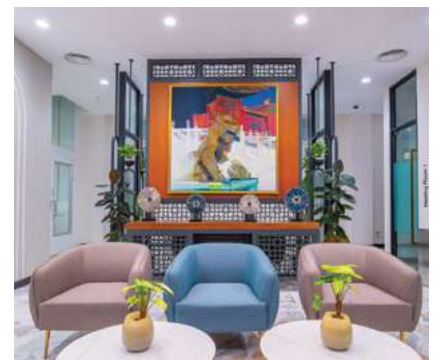
Moreover, the branch provides a unique platform for high-net-worth clients to network with like-minded individuals. The art exhibitions, community events and curated talks held on its premise offer opportunities to engage in meaningful conversations and explore shared interests.

HLB'S STRATEGIC POSITION IN PENANG

The HLB Light Street branch is a strategic move to position itself at the heart of Penang's burgeoning economy. Penang boasts a robust diversified economy, with a GDP that consistently outpaces the national average. The state is particularly renowned for its thriving manufacturing sector, especially its semiconductor and electronics industries.

HLB recognises the immense potential of Penang's economic landscape. The HLB Light Street branch, with its dedicated Business and Commercial Banking hub, is poised to play a crucial role in this endeavour. With its strategic location, tailor-made financial solutions and unwavering commitment to customer service, HLB is well-positioned to partner with businesses, both large and small, to navigate the complexities of the market.

As Yow Kuan Tuck, Managing Director of Business and Corporate Banking at HLB, puts it, "Penang is a vibrant hub for commercial and SME activities, and our new Business and Commercial Banking hub at Light Street is perfectly positioned to help businesses thrive."



HLB's commitment to the SME sector, whose role is vital in driving economic growth and innovation, is particularly noteworthy; the bank is an award-winning champion for SME banking, having recently been named Malaysia's Best SME Bank of the Year at the Euromoney Awards for Excellence 2024 and the Asian Banking & Finance (ABF) Retail Banking Awards 2024.

HLB Light Street branch is a testament to the bank's commitment to community-building and to serving the needs of Penangites. By combining the best of digital and in-person banking within a space that honours Penang's heritage, HLB is shaping the future of financial services in the region.

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US-CHINA TENSIONS & THE TRANSFORMATION OF PENANG'S TECH INDUSTRY

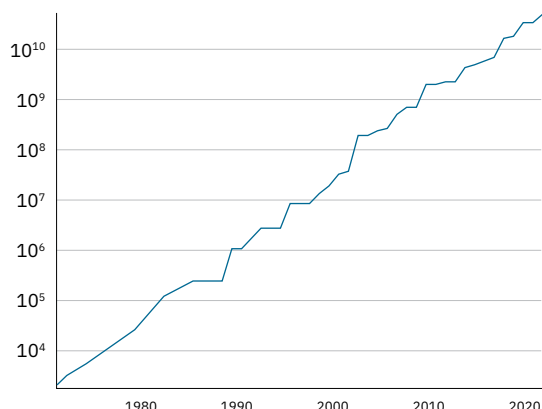
BY PHILIP KHOR

TINY SEMICONDUCTORS ARE the hidden engines in today's tech marvels, from artificial intelligence (AI) to electric cars. The semiconductor industry continues to cram an increasing number of elements onto integrated circuits.^[1] In 1965, Gordon Moore, a founder of Intel, predicted that the number of transistors on chips would double every two years, a phenomenon referred to as Moore's Law. Remarkably, the industry has mostly kept pace with Moore's prediction—Apple's M2 Ultra, for example, contains a staggering 134 billion transistors.

Miniaturisation may be hitting a wall, but chip advancements are surging ahead. Design innovations like improved architecture and 3D stacking are cramming more power into existing transistors. For instance, Apple's groundbreaking M-series chips condense immense processing power for next-generation smartphones and laptops. Specialised AI chips further accelerate application-specific performance, while innovations in compound semiconductors, like silicon carbide and gallium nitride, promise breakthroughs in data centres, cars and communications.^[2]

THE NUMBER OF TRANSISTORS ON CHIPS HAS GROWN EXPONENTIALLY

NUMBER OF TRANSISTORS PER MICROPROCESSOR, 1971-2021 (LOG SCALE)^[3]



Data source: Karl Rupp, Microprocessor Trend Data (2022); Our World In Data (2024)

FOUR MAIN TYPES OF SEMICONDUCTOR DEVICES

Semiconductor Device Type	Description	Example
Logic	Processes information to complete tasks	Central Processing Unit (CPU), Graphics Processing Unit (GPU)
Memory	Holds programmes and data	RAM (volatile), Flash memory, ROM (non-volatile)
Analogue	Generates or modifies signals	Used in power management, automotive sensors and audio applications
Discrete	Performs specific electronic functions	Transistors

Adapted from the UK National Semiconductor Strategy

CHIP MANUFACTURING

A marvel of engineering and a poster child for globalisation, the semiconductor industry thrives on a complex geographically distributed supply chain. No single country reigns supreme; specialised firms around the world contribute to different parts of the supply chain. While cutting-edge fabrication plants (fabs) are concentrated in a few regions, other parts are scattered globally.

As miniaturisation nears its limits, value is migrating from shrinking transistors in the front-end of semiconductor manufacturing to maximising their efficiency through clever design. Design contributes a majority of the industry's value, according to a 2021 BCG report.

Take NVIDIA, the world's current most valuable chip company. They design chips but outsource manufacturing to giants like TSMC (Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Company) to handle the actual production. This "pure-play foundry" model empowers tech giants like Microsoft, Google and Meta to design their own chips without fabs—as "fabless" chipmakers.

OVERVIEW OF THE SEMICONDUCTOR MANUFACTURING PROCESS^{*}

Design	Front end	Back end
The chip's design is planned to balance factors like cost, power use and features, tailored to the chip's requirements. Key inputs: design software, intellectual property	Based on chip designs, foundries form circuits on silicon wafers Key inputs: materials and chemicals, manufacturing equipment	After wafers are diced, the resulting chips are layered, assembled into packages and tested
Adapted from "The future of semiconductor procurement—The changing semiconductor supply chain" (Okabe, 2023), "Visualizing the Global Semiconductor Supply Chain" (Wallach, 2021), "Mapping the Semiconductor Supply Chain: The Critical Role of the Indo-Pacific Region" (Thadani & Allen, 2023)		

Chipmaking starts with slicing ultra-pure silicon into wafers. These wafers are etched with intricate designs using cutting-edge photolithography equipment, commonly procured from the Dutch manufacturer ASML. Once etched, the chips are assembled and tested in locations like China, Vietnam and Penang. Finally, the packaged chips are integrated into circuit boards for everything from phones to smart sensors.

While chip assembly—the back-end—is traditionally seen as less valuable, innovations like 3D stacking are boosting its importance. Packaging-related innovations allow for more powerful chips despite miniaturisation limits. As a result, the future may see value more evenly distributed across all chipmaking stages, with each playing a crucial role in maximising performance.

A GEOPOLITICAL PIVOT CREATES OPPORTUNITY

Despite short-term weakness from a supply glut, the chip industry's future looks bright. As of Q1 2024, microelectronics industry association SEMI reports positive trends in sales, inventories and factory capacity. While demand recovery varies by sector,^[4] leaders see automotive and AI as 2024's growth engines,^[5] with AI infrastructure^[6] (especially data centres) following closely. The sluggish consumer electronics market, particularly smartphones, is looking to on-device AI, powered by neural processing units (NPUs), for a comeback.

In spite of the global chip slowdown, Penang's electronics sector has soared. In 2021, foreign approved manufacturing investment skyrocketed to RM74bil, a tenfold increase from the past decade's average of RM6bil, where 98.7% (in 2021) was attributed to the electrical and electronics (E&E) sector. This surge accompanies double-digit production growth (GDP) for Penang's electronics industry in both 2021 (+16.5%) and 2022 (+21.8%).

Penang, a leader in back-end processes since the 1970s, is a prime beneficiary of the electronics industry's shift towards geographical diversification. KPMG's 2024 survey reveals that 53% of firms plan to diversify their supply chains in the coming year.^[7] The Covid-19 pandemic and the accompanying 2021 chip shortage highlighted the need for stronger supply chains. Concerns about future disruptions, from extreme weather to tensions around Taiwan, further emphasise this need.

FOOTNOTES

[1] Moore's 1965 paper was titled "Cramming More Components onto Integrated Circuits".

[2] <https://semiengineering.com/unleashing-the-potential-of-compound-semiconductors-industry-leaders-collaborate-at-semicon-taiwan-2022-to-create-ecosystem/>

[3] Each mark on the y-axis shows order of magnitudes. In other words, it takes just under seven years to go from 10,000 transistors to 100,000 transistors, another seven to get to a million, and so on.

[4] <https://www.semi.org/en/news-media-press-releases/semi-press-releases/key-measures-of-global-semiconductor-manufacturing-strength-improve-in-q1-2024-semi-reports>

[5] <https://kpmg.com/kpmg-us/content/dam/kpmg/pdf/2024/global-semiconductor-industry-outlook.pdf>

[6] <https://www.spglobal.com/marketintelligence/en/mi/research-analysis/state-and-outlook-for-semiconductor-supply-chains-2024-beyond.html>

[7] <https://kpmg.com/kpmg-us/content/dam/kpmg/pdf/2024/global-semiconductor-industry-outlook.pdf>

[8] <https://kpmg.com/kpmg-us/content/dam/kpmg/pdf/2024/global-semiconductor-industry-outlook.pdf>

[9] <https://fortune.com/asia/2024/05/29/malaysia-prime-minister-anwar-ibrahim-touts-country-neutral-nonaligned-home-chip-companies-semiconductors-us-china/>

[10] <https://www.ft.com/content/929541ce-32fc-4f5f-9b9e-714b62f6e712>

[11] <https://www.themalaysianinsight.com/s/483829>

[12] <https://www.bcg.com/publications/2023/navigating-the-semiconductor-manufacturing-costs>

The shift is expedited by the US-China “chip war”, where the US has tried to limit China’s tech growth with export restrictions and the CHIPS Act, which funds US chip production but restricts recipients from expanding in China. Since then, construction of electronics-related manufacturing in the US has grown 15-fold,^[8] although slow grant disbursement and talent shortages threaten to slow US chip projects.

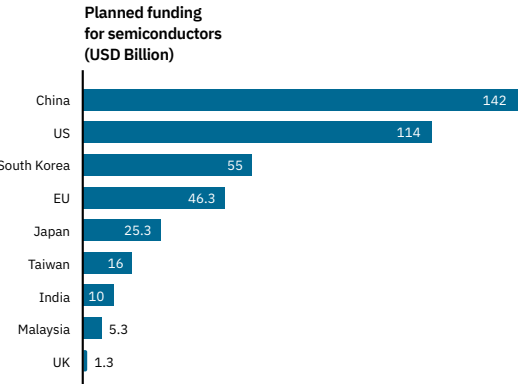
On the other hand, China has been heavily investing in its chip industry, aiming for self-sufficiency by subsidising domestic companies and recruiting foreign talent. While Chinese firms excel in mature chips, it is unclear how much the US has managed to slow China’s progress in advanced chip development.

THE NATIONAL SEMICONDUCTOR STRATEGY

Amid intensifying rivalry between these two great powers, Malaysia, with its neutral position in regards to US-China relations, is well-placed to accommodate both Western allies seeking to diversify supply chains as well as Chinese firms trying to dodge American sanctions. In launching the National Semiconductor Strategy, Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim touted Malaysia as the “most neutral and non-aligned location for semiconductor production”,^[9] and in an interview with the *Financial Times*, he expressed Malaysia’s position to maintain “good stable relations with the US [while] looking at China as an important ally”.^[10]

While Malaysian observers have celebrated the launch of the strategy, in reality, Malaysia is playing catch-up to a heated global semiconductor subsidy race. Anwar’s May 2024 announcement comes a full year after the UK, a leading chip design economy, launched its semiconductor strategy, following local chip bosses’ threats to move out of the UK if a plan was not launched.

MALAYSIA’S NATIONAL SEMICONDUCTOR STRATEGY PALES IN COMPARISON TO OTHER STATES’ CHIP INVESTMENTS



Adapted from Bloomberg May 2024 reporting; Nikkei
Sources: <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/features/2024-05-12/chip-technology-spending-gets-81-billion-boost-in-china-rivalry>; <https://asia.nikkei.com/Business/Tech/Semiconductors/Malaysia-to-train-60-000-engineers-in-bid-to-become-chip-hub>

Malaysia’s strategy is ambitious, targeting each portion of the semiconductor supply chain. Talent has been identified as a critical factor for the success of the local semiconductor industry, with plans to increase semiconductor talent tenfold. While substantial, the RM25bil (USD5.33bil) allocated pales in comparison to other countries’ spending on chips: equivalent to just 13 ASML extreme ultraviolet (EUV) lithography machines at RM1.9bil each, as pointed out in an opinion piece by semiconductor employee Ooi Tze Howe.^[11]

As part of the strategy, Putrajaya aspires to be at the cutting edge of semiconductor manufacturing across all stages of manufacturing. With the ballooning costs of building semiconductor fabs, Malaysia’s competitiveness in cutting-edge fabs is unclear, particularly as Malaysia competes against generous state subsidies targeting fab construction.^[12] Indeed, the prime minister’s address specifically mentions trailing-edge chips and power chips—which are less capital intensive to produce—for the first phase of the strategy.

Considering the high resource intensity of the fabrication process, expansion of the semiconductor industry requires responsible forward-looking stewardship of environmental resources in the face of climate change.

By some estimates,^[13] an advanced fab:

- Consumes several million gallons of water daily,^[14] equivalent to a small town, and
- Utilises as much as 100 megawatt-hours of electricity per hour, or around one-eighth of peak energy demand on Penang Island, and
- Produces thousands of tonnes of chemical waste annually.

Alongside Malaysia’s bullish posture towards data centres, it must consider if it has the means to support the resource needs of its fab aspirations.

On the other hand, commentators have pointed out the potential of scaling up Malaysia’s chip design industry—though as a highly knowledge-intensive industry, there are substantial barriers to entry. Thus far, only one chip design company, Oppstar, a Penang-based company, is listed on the Malaysian stock market. As with chip fabrication, Malaysia competes with substantial public investments by countries with a first-mover advantage at the design stage.^[15]

In line with these aspirations, Penang’s Chief Minister Chow Kon Yeow has announced plans for the Penang Silicon Design@5KM initiative, which includes facilities catered towards high-value activities—in particular chip design and research and development (R&D)—and talent development strategies ^[16]^[17]

What is certain is that multinationals will continue to drive Malaysia’s semiconductor industry. In the past, Penang’s back-end ecosystem has created opportunities for local companies in automated equipment and services. Intel’s establishment of its first 3D packaging facility outside the US in Penang comes alongside the increased importance of advanced chip packaging, potentially raising the value of back-end operations. This collaborative approach, combining home-grown talent with the expertise of global players, positions Penang for future success.

[13] <https://fortune.com/2024/01/29/chips-act-semiconductor-factories-environmental-impact-water-electricity-carbon-chemical-waste/> Some semi-conductor manufacturers have made great strides towards reducing their water use: Intel’s Penang plant, for example, returned and restored 89% of its water use in 2023, and some Intel sites actually return/restore more water than used (2023-24 Intel Corporate Responsibility Report).

[14] Some semiconductor manufacturers have made great strides towards reducing their water use: Intel’s Penang plant, for example, returned and restored 89% of its water use in 2023, and some Intel sites actually return/restore more water than used (2023-24 Intel Corporate Responsibility Report).

[15] <https://web-assets.bcg.com/3f/b4/d84ccd46dc8a381bd61a648105/bcg-the-growing-challenge-of-semiconductor-design-leadership-nov-2022-r.pdf>

[16] Penang’s state-level talent development framework is outlined in *Penang STEM Talent Blueprint: A Roadmap for Workforce Development* (2024), available at <https://penanginstitute.org/publications/reports-and-papers/penang-stem-talent-blueprint-a-roadmap-for-workforce-development/>

[17] <https://www.thevibes.com/articles/news/102874/penang-on-target-to-becoming-global-integrated-circuit-hub-says-kon-yeow>



PHILIP KHOR is a Visiting Data Scientist at Penang Institute with a background in financial sector regulatory modeling, technical writing and enterprise data science training. His interests include labour and health economics, the ethics of artificial intelligence and climate policy.

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PDC’S EMPOWERMENT OF GBS AND SMES

MALAYSIA’S ECONOMY IS significantly propelled by the contributions of Global Business Services (GBS) and Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises (SMEs). In a global comparison, Malaysia solidified its position as the world’s third most competitive GBS location in 2022, behind only large-population countries like India and China.

Meanwhile, 2021 statistics show that 97.4% of all registered businesses in Malaysia are SMEs, comprising a staggering 99% of all business establishments in Penang. Through Penang Development Corporation’s (PDC) infrastructural developments and growth initiatives in Penang, prospective entrepreneurs and specialists are able to tap into the state’s economic growth potential.

HARNESSING PENANG AS A GBS DESTINATION

The evolution of Malaysia’s GBS landscape is gravitating towards complex and specialised domains like finance, IT and engineering, which complements Penang’s 50-plus years of manufacturing and industrial experience. To harness the potential for greater growth, PDC has assisted in pioneering a network of GBS buildings, also known as GBS Nodes, to nurture a vibrant ecosystem for digital innovation.

While there are currently more than 70 companies with GBS operations in Pen-

ang employing around 17,000 staff members, PDC has and is evolving this network to house a whole new generation of integrated circuit (IC) design and digital industry players with premium and functional office spaces.

GBS@MAYANG	
LOCATION	Jalan Mahsuri, Bandar Bayan Baru
COMPLETION	2018

This refurbished single-block, four-storey space is a GBS centre that spans 127,000ft² and is home to 11 MNCs with 1,200 employees. Tenants include prominent names such as Jabil, Swarovski, Tech Mahindra, Siemens, StarFive, Bitsilica and Synapse Design with operations largely centred around GBS, IC design and R&D (research and development).

GBS@MAHSURI	
LOCATION	Jalan Mahsuri, Bandar Bayan Baru
COMPLETION	2018

GBS@Mahsuri is a double-storey office with a gross area of 102,452ft² and a net lettable area of 80,116ft². Now fully occupied by four multinational companies with approximately 1,000 employees,

namely Cisco Systems (M), Clarivate (M), Aerticket Global Services and Teleperformance Malaysia, its scope of operations includes GBS, data science and networking.

GBS BY THE SEA	
LOCATION	Technoplex Area, Bayan Lepas Industrial Park
COMPLETION	Q4 2024 (estimate)

GBS by the Sea is a RM200mil high-end complex, comprising nine-storey offices and 837 parking bays, with a total net lettable floor space of approximately 294,000ft². It is the first phase of Penang’s mega 1,000,000ft² IC Design and Digital Park at the Bayan Lepas Industrial Park. It is slated to create approximately 3,000 jobs for locals with its most notable being AMD Global Services, taking up almost 70% of the building’s floor space and furnishing it with a state-of-the-art office and laboratory facilities.

GBS TECHSPACE	
LOCATION	Technoplex Area, Bayan Lepas Industrial Park
COMPLETION	Q3 2024 (estimate)

Complementing the first phase is the GBS TechSpace, which will feature a three-storey office block with 60,000ft²



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net lettable space and 153 parking bays, designed for use by IC design, digital GBS, R&D and engineering service tenants.

GBS@TECHNOPLEX

LOCATION	Technoplex Area, Bayan Lepas Industrial Park
COMPLETION	2027 (estimate)

As part of the second phase, GBS@Technoplex is envisioned as a RM308mil, cutting-edge, nine-storey office with a multi-storey car park. Upon completion, it will provide an additional 500,000ft² rentable space to the entire Bayan Lepas Industrial Park, accommodating high-impact initiatives that function as a circular digital economy ecosystem.

FACILITATING SME ENTREPRENEURIAL GROWTH AND SUCCESS

As SMEs form the backbone of Penang's economy, PDC helps to cultivate a vibrant ecosystem geared towards their success through development projects, funding opportunities and skills training.

BATU KAWAN SME VILLAGE AND CENTRE: FOR SMIS AND SMES

PDC is conducting a multi-stage development project called the Batu Kawan SME Village, which encompasses 150 acres of the Batu Kawan Industrial Park, with factories and warehouses furnished with excellent logistics and road networks. 50 plots totalling 100 acres have been allocated to SME companies, and 83 acres have been sold to investors in the equipment and machinery, medical devices, aerospace, and the engineering and electronics industries. Adjacent to these plots is the Batu Kawan

SME Centre, currently occupied by Walta Engineering Sdn Bhd as their Walta Centre of Excellence (WCOE). WCOE houses an on-site teaching factory dedicated to producing skilled labour.

KOMPLEKS RASA TROPIKA BUKIT TENGAH: FOR ENTREPRENEURS

Kompleks Rasa Tropika Bukit Tengah caters to F&B operations. A business premise consisting of 24 stall units, each measuring at 179.22ft², it is located at a high-traffic location adjacent to Bukit Tengah Industrial Park. The monthly rental rates are RM250 for food businesses and RM300 for beverage businesses.

MICRO CREDIT LOAN MANAGEMENT: SKIM PINJAMAN HARAPAN (SPH) AND TABUNG USAHAWAN TANI (TUT)

SPH provides efficient financing facilities to micro-entrepreneurs to kick-start and expand their businesses. It provides two scheme options with loan amounts ranging from RM5,000 to RM50,000 and repayment tenures of 50 to 200 weeks or 12 to 48 months. The scheme is ideal for small enterprises such as F&B providers and suppliers, physical and online vendors, education centres, service providers such as auto workshops, laundromats, computer and phone repair shops, among others, as it is collateral free. As of July 2023, 4,061 entrepreneurs have benefitted from loan funds totalling around RM26.51mil.

TUT, however, is a loan-based fund for farming and agriculture micro-entrepreneurs. The two 24-month terms each of RM5,000 or RM6,000, and RM10,000 ran from 2015 to 2024—a joint project between PDC, the Penang state government, and relevant government departments. There were

195 beneficiaries, facilitating economic activity and yield productivity. PDC acts as an administrative body that oversees the distribution and collection of loans.

SKILLS TRAINING AND EQUIPPING

In line with Penang2030's vision of sustainable growth, PDC actively organises programmes and courses that help entrepreneurs hone a wide range of business and marketing skills suited for today's digital era. Some popular topics in 2024 include halal entrepreneurship awareness and guidance, accounting, taxation and business financing. PDC will soon run programmes such as the 2024 Penang Export Day, a business matching session between Penang and China traders, and AI and TikTok workshops.

MAJOR PLANS FOR THE FUTURE OF SMES

PDC has two projects on the horizon, the Entrepreneur's Square in Bandar Cassia, a 4.2-acre hub with 51 shop lots and the Penang Science Park (PSPN) Halal Hub, built on 7.75 acres of PDC land to leverage Malaysia's world-class halal export industry. Both projects are slated for completion and operation by Q1 2027, providing another productive avenue for Penang's SME-driven advancement.

CAPTIONS

1. GBS@Mahsuri, a 3.1-acre development, was completed in October 2023 at a cost of approximately RM21mil.
2. Entrepreneurs attending the Jerayawara/Taklimat Bergerak Pulau Pinang 2024 workshop co-hosted by PDC and PUNB. It was officiated by Hj. Roslan Hassan, Deputy CEO (Operations) of PDC (second from the right on the front row).

PENANG'S MANUFACTURING FUTURE: A BALANCING ACT BETWEEN GROWTH AND TALENT

BY ONG
WOOL LENG

THE EVOLVING GLOBAL trade landscape presents numerous opportunities for Malaysia to capitalise on. Penang, with its robust electrical and electronics (E&E) supply chain, is particularly well-positioned to attract multinational corporations and local businesses.

Recent trends such as friendshoring^[1], de-risking^[2] and the China Plus One strategy^[3] have prompted multinational corporations to reconfigure their supply chains. Countries with established industrial capabilities, supportive government policies and a skilled workforce—like Malaysia—are becoming increasingly attractive destinations.

Penang has witnessed a surge in manufacturing investments over the past five years, with approved investments more than doubling compared to the previous decade (RM66bil vs RM184bil for 2019 to 2023). This influx has generated substantial job growth, particularly in the E&E sector, which accounts for 60% of new positions (approximately 78,000 jobs).

HIGHER VALUE CREATION

A critical question is whether Malaysia, specifically Penang, is transitioning from a low-value to a high-value manufacturing base. The E&E sector in Penang is a significant contributor to Malaysia's overall E&E value, with each employee generating impressive annual output.

A general rule of thumb is that one technologist should be equal to five technicians and 25 craftsmen in production engineering. Based on the approved manufacturing investment, the state generates an average ratio of 1.2 craftsmen and 2.3 plant or machine operator positions for every high-skilled job created from 2021 to 2023.

This indicates that the nature of investments is shifting towards higher-value activities, such as research and development and engineering services. However, this transition is accompanied by a growing skills gap between university graduates and industry demands.

Value creation is poised to increase due to the influx of investments and market adjustments on compensation. Companies are offering higher wages to appeal to talent. However, this may lead to a wider productivity-pay gap, where the mismatch of skills and competencies between university graduates and industry requirements is debatable.

CHALLENGES IN THE STEM TALENT PIPELINE

The manufacturing industry's demand for skilled talent is outpacing the supply. Universities struggle to fill engineering and technology programmes due to declining science enrolment at the secondary school level. This trend is exacerbated by a shrinking birth rate.

Form 6, foundation and matriculation programmes are the direct sources of supply for university admission. A dramatic decline in science students entering Form 6 is a primary indicator of the STEM talent shortage. Similarly, matriculation enrolments in science and technical programmes have also decreased.

In Penang, the number of science students enrolling in Form 6 plunged significantly to 381 students in 2023 from 2,138 students in 2013. Meanwhile, Malaysia's matriculation intake for science and technical programmes declined by 5.8% to 16,990 students in 2023/24 from 18,037 students in 2018/2019.

FOOTNOTES

[1] The act of manufacturing and sourcing from countries that are geopolitical allies.

[2] The phenomenon of financial institutions terminating or restricting business relationships with clients or categories of clients to avoid, rather than manage, risk.

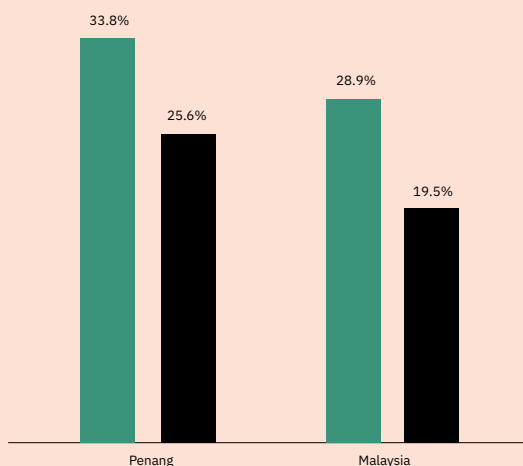
[3] The strategy involves expanding manufacturing and sourcing beyond China to include an additional country, thus mitigating risks and reducing dependence on a single market.

The overall decline in public secondary school enrolment further exacerbates the issue, as these institutions are the primary feeder for public universities. The drop in science students is disproportionately higher than the overall decline in secondary school population. For instance, while the total number of students in Form 4 and 5 in public schools in Penang experienced a drop of 18.5% to 36,778 students in 2023 compared to a decade ago, enrolment in pure sciences plummeted at a faster rate of 38% to 9,411 students for the same period.

Several factors contribute to the decreasing number of students in public schools, including the rise of international and private schools and parental dissatisfaction with the public education system. Furthermore, attractive educational opportunities in neighbouring countries like Singapore are another factor, where the ASEAN scholarship offers financial support to eligible Malaysians at various levels to study in Singapore's secondary schools. This continues to attract Malaysians to study abroad.

These trends have resulted in a significant reduction in the proportion of science students in both Penang and Malaysia. Proportionately, the size of science students in Penang shrank from 33.8% in 2013 to 25.6% in 2023; at the national level, it shrank by 9.4% to 19.5% in 2023 (Figure 1).

FIGURE 1: PERCENTAGE SHARE OF SCIENCE STREAM STUDENTS IN FORM 4 AND FORM 5 IN PENANG, 2013 AND 2023



Source: Malaysia Educational Statistics, Ministry of Education



ONG WOUI LENG
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KEY HIGHLIGHTS BY COMPANIES IN PENANG AND KULIM

Talent acquisition emerged as a primary challenge during a Penang and Kulim semiconductor study tour organised by Penang Institute and Research for Social Advancement (REFSA) in 2024. Most companies participating in the tour emphasised the intense competition for skilled workers, particularly those with expertise in advanced packaging and chip design.

To address this critical shortage, companies proposed several recommendations. Firstly, government subsidies for foreign talent hiring could accelerate the establishment of new technology ventures. Secondly, incentivising STEM and TVET programmes focused on advanced packaging technologies through tax reliefs or special income tax rates is crucial. Furthermore, TVET curricula in semiconductor technology should encompass a comprehensive skill set, from installation to operation and maintenance. Streamlining work visa processes, such as increasing flexibility for Professional Visit Passes (PVP) for startup teams, is also essential to attract skilled foreign talent.

The chip design industry is beset by unique hurdles. A limited talent pool hinders rapid growth, exacerbated by a dearth of industry-focused training programmes and specialised university courses in chip design. Moreover, government support for the high-growth chip design sector lags behind initiatives for Outsourced Semiconductor Assembly and Test (OSAT) and manufacturing. Establishing cultivation and incubation centres dedicated to chip design is also necessary.

Malaysia's chip design industry faces stiff international competition. While Penang boasts approximately 5,000 chip design engineers, regional rivals like India, with an estimated 30,000 engineers, are poised to see this number grow to 80,000 within five years. Meanwhile, Vietnam's substantial investments in the chip industry, backed by government support, further intensifies the competitive landscape.

A STEM TALENT DEVELOPMENT PLAN

The Penang STEM Talent Blueprint is a collaborative effort between state agencies and industry leaders designed to bolster the state's economy by prioritising workforce development and skill alignment in STEM. The blueprint aims to cultivate a highly skilled and sustainable STEM talent pool to drive long-term success in the evolving industrial and technological landscape. Aligned with the New Industrial Master Plan (NIMP) 2030 and the National Semiconductor Strategy (NSS), the blueprint seeks to transform Penang into a global innovation hub.

To achieve this, the blueprint adopts the THRIVE framework, which emphasises collaboration among government agencies, industry and academia. Six key principles are outlined in the framework: Transforming the education system to meet industry needs; enhancing STEM talent hiring; Attracting and retaining STEM professionals; Investing in STEM education and upskilling; Optimising value creation through technology adoption; and Enabling a supportive governance framework for the STEM ecosystem.

The blueprint identifies key challenges hindering STEM talent development and proposes policy recommendations for state and federal governments. A cornerstone initiative is the establishment of the Penang Chip Design Academy, aiming to train 100 engineers annually and complement the Penang Silicon Design @5km+ initiative. Other than the academy, the initiative comprises other main projects such as the Integrated Circuit Design and Digital Park, and the Silicon Research and Incubation Space.

By implementing these initiatives, Penang can significantly contribute to Malaysia's overall STEM talent pool. Effective collaboration among stakeholders is essential to attract, retain and develop top talent while addressing the skills gap.



THE PSDC-VAT GLOBAL SUPPLIER PROGRAMME: FURTHER EMPOWERING PENANG'S LOCAL SMES

BY CAROLYN KHOR



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

THE GLOBAL SUPPLIER PROGRAMME, originally launched in the late 1990s by the Penang Skills Development Centre (PSDC), has returned as a collaborative effort between PSDC and VAT Group. This initiative is geared towards enhancing Penang's local SMEs by aligning them with global standards and bolstering their competitiveness internationally. *Penang Monthly* delved into the specifics of this revamped programme with Paraveen Singham, Managing Director of VAT Group and committee member of the PSDC Management Council, and Chew Khian Kee, Head of Strategic Sourcing for VAT Malaysia.



Paraveen Singham

The tailor-made programme commenced in March this year. The VAT Group identifies the needs within the industry—particularly in quality assurance—and collaborates with PSDC to develop the necessary training modules for the participants. It endeavours to strengthen Penang's industrial ecosystem and support the export potential of locally manufactured products. "We hope to bridge the skills gap for suppliers and multinational corporations (MNCs) by increasing the overall skills and knowledge of the participants who are directly involved with the quality control of the products supplied," says Paraveen.

VAT Malaysia is part of VAT Group, a Swiss-based company with almost 60 years of experience, specialising in designing and manufacturing vacuum valves for semiconductors, displays, photovoltaics and vacuum-coating industries as well as for the industrial and research sectors. VAT Malaysia is akin to a pilot project for the new Global Supplier Programme, which was re-branded to Global Supplier Programme + (GSP+). The company reported net sales of CHF885mil (approximately RM962mil) in 2023 and employs some 2,700 people worldwide, with representatives in 29 countries and manufacturing sites including Malaysia, Switzerland and Romania. Its global operations are doubling their production capacity with a new factory in Malaysia in 2024. To complement this expansion, the PSDC-VAT Global Supplier Programme is training supplier participants, enhancing supply chain communication and equipping them to meet global market demands.

Paraveen is confident that the Global Supplier Programme will cultivate highly skilled employees capable of scaling operations to deliver services and components to international customers. He further posits that a key differentiator for attracting Foreign Direct Investments (FDI) lies in maintaining a robust and comprehensive supplier ecosystem.

"Such human capital assets present a strategic advantage to our economy by creating an environment that attracts MNCs, especially those in high-end equipment industries, to establish manufacturing plants here. With a fortified supply chain, we are setting the stage for even more investments to pour into Penang."

Precision and efficiency in the manufacturing sector usually result from process optimisation, cost reduction and improved

product reliability. Similar to the Six Sigma or the Lean Manufacturing methodologies, the Global Supplier Programme focuses on identifying and addressing sources of error to reduce variability—improving diagnostic accuracy and reliability, decreasing turn-about times and errors, and minimising false rejections and reruns.

Penang boasts over half a century of industrialisation and hosts more than 350 MNCs and over 4,000 SMEs, of which, more than 200 have achieved the Malaysian Digital Status. This recognition, granted by the Malaysia Digital Economy Corporation (MDEC) under the Ministry of Digital, provides eligible companies with a set of incentives, rights and privileges from the government.

However, the success of the Global Supplier Programme also hinges on the commitment of the participants. "It is imperative that the suppliers commit to implementing the knowledge imparted to their entire organisation. This commitment ensures they reap the benefits through improved product quality, reduced escalation and better quality management," Chew shares, adding that this would justify the continued participation of suppliers in sending their employees to this programme.

However, the rather lean workforce of supplier companies makes it arduous for SMEs to allocate employees for full-day training sessions. Chew also highlights the varied organisational cultures and disparate communication protocols of each vendor, complicating the standardisation of training methodologies and collaborative efforts.

To this end, Chew says that all feedback has been provided to PSDC for further refinements. "This is the first year we are launching this programme, and we will continue to review its effectiveness and make changes based on feedback from participants and internal stakeholders at VAT."

The Global Supplier Programme Quality Track comprises five modules: Seven Quality Control (7QC) tools, Statistical Process Control (SPC), Failure Mode and Effect Analysis (FMEA), Control Plan, and the Eight-Day (8D) Problem-Solving Process. "The 7QC tools, 8D problem-solving, and statistical and analytical tools are crucial in enhancing supplier quality performance by enabling early detection of potential issues," Chew says.

Trainers are selected based on their expertise and recommendation by PSDC. Chew credits the success of the programme to the trainers, commending the experts who are directly involved in the manufacturing sector and who possess hands-on experience and the know-how to conduct the training programme. "Their in-depth knowledge of the industry certainly accentuates the value of this programme."

According to Paraveen, the effectiveness of the programme is measured by evaluating the improvements made by the participants in their quality performance and competitiveness. "In the long run, the improvements will be reflected through their audit rating, response time and content of the 8D report. And more importantly, the quality and delivery of the products," he stresses. After each module, feedback from participants help improve the programme and keep it relevant.

Interested participants will need to have prior knowledge on the programme modules and objectives as they are required to possess fundamental knowledge about quality control. While the targeted participants are VAT Group's major local suppliers, Paraveen acknowledges the need for Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) and Limited Liability Companies (LLCs) that want to improve their competency in the quality skillset. He highlights that similar programmes can be created based on each MNC's unique requirements, and interested suppliers can get involved by contacting PSDC or VAT.

"Participation fees are based on the rate provided by PSDC. I believe it is worth the investment, based on PSDC's training track record. Furthermore, eligible companies may apply to the Human Resource Development Fund (HRDF) for reimbursement of training expenses," explains Paraveen.

HRDF, managed by HRD Corp under the Ministry of Human Resources, provides financial assistance to employers for employee training. Companies with more than 10 employees contribute a monthly levy to HRDF, which is then redistributed to eligible employers to help improve employee skills and contribute to the country's socio-economic development.

The Global Supplier Programme offers comprehensive support, which comprises in-person classroom training and a robust knowledge base, to educate and offer guidance to vendors. Furthermore, the trainer is available for consultation with participants even after training sessions. "In this respect, VAT will also follow through with the implementation of some quality control tools that the suppliers choose to implement," clarifies Chew. Beyond that, all participants will receive certification from PSDC upon course completion.

Established in 1989, PSDC has trained over 271,000 participants through more than 14,000 courses, with more than 135 qualified trainers and industry experts in its midst. Situated in Bayan Lepas, Penang, this institution has been at the forefront of talent development and vocational education in Penang, and attained recognition as a successful example of shared learning and as a model institution for human resource development.

A PENANGITE'S
SCIENTIFIC VOYAGE
TO ANTARCTICA

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A MAESTRO COMES
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A PENANGITE'S SCIENTIFIC

BY
ZULFIGAR
YASIN

VOYAGE TO ANTARCTICA

ZULFIGAR YASIN is one of the nation's most illustrious marine biologists and marine environment ecologists. In his extensive career, he had contributed to the establishment of many of Malaysia's marine parks, led national expeditions to catalogue the marine biodiversity in the region and had a new species of sea cucumber, *Euthyonidiella zulfigaris*, named after him in 2022, in recognition of his long-standing work at Penang's Middle Bank since 1990. In 2002, he headed a team of Malaysian scientists on a 10-week marine expedition to Antarctica. This is his exclusive account of the once-in-a-lifetime expedition.

ANTARCTICA—which lies at the bottom of the world—is really a continent of superlatives. It is the southernmost land mass, the coldest, driest, windiest, most isolated and least populated continent on Earth. It was also the last to be discovered.

I was there more than 20 years ago, in 2002, on board the scientific vessel, the *Aurora*, to study the characteristics of the Southern Ocean—a tempestuous stretch of sea that divided Antarctica from Australia—extracting samples along the depth of the water that extended several kilometres down and learning about its ecosystem.

THE SOUTHERN OCEAN'S TANTRUM

The Southern Ocean, with its fierce storms and high waves, is dreaded by all visitors to the southern continent. Here, the Antarctic Circumpolar Current, unhindered by any continental land mass, pushes the water around the globe, producing the longest, strongest and deepest current on Earth.

Sailors in the 16th century who navigated these latitudes coined the term the “Roaring Forties” to describe the squalls that predominate in this ocean. The strong westerly wind helped sailors cut across the ocean’s expanse, where maximum wind speeds of more than 200km/hour have been recorded. An old sailor’s saying lamented, “Below 40° south, there is no law, and below 50° south, there is no God.”

As you journey south, fierce winds cause the temperature to feel colder and increase the risks of exposure. In addition, a wind speed of just over 100km/hour can lift an average man. In such inclement weather and sea conditions, the ship has to be sealed, and no one is allowed on deck.

Meanwhile, monster waves here reach the height of an eight-storey building. In 2017, a 1,900-tonne patrol vessel, the *Otago*, nearly capsized with 75 souls on board. The following year, the largest wave in the southern hemisphere was measured by a scientific buoy during a deep storm, recording an incredible 23.8m. Scientists predict that worsening climate may result in even bigger waves in the future.

It was thus an unenviable task working in the cold “shifting” deck. But Antarctica and the Southern Ocean drive the world’s climate—and as one scientist put it: “What happens in Antarctica, doesn’t stay in Antarctica.” Rather, because the global ocean current moves like a conveyor belt from the Southern Ocean to temperate regions and beyond the equator to the north, the world’s temperature system and its life support are intricately connected to this part of Earth. Here is where we understand the impact of global warming, ice melting and the changing climate of the world.

My room on board the *Aurora* was on the lower decks, and as she made her

way south, we were struck by bad weather several times. On these occasions, the bow was heaved clear out of the water by huge waves, only to crash back onto the foaming sea. At night, you could be lifted clear off your bed and, if you failed to brace tightly to whatever firm props were available, you could also end up on the floor. Sleep came intermittently, and as you gazed out of your porthole, one moment, you were looking out at the sea from a high-rise block, and the next, as you came crashing down, you were underwater. On one particularly bad day, the steward announced on the intercom that the movie chosen to be screened after dinner in the common room was *The Perfect Storm*—“and it will be in 3D,” he laughed. We had to keep our spirits up somehow.

In spite of the horrors described, we were in safe hands. The captain of the *Aurora* was an old sea dog who had been leading Antarctic voyages for the past 30 years. I watched him on the bridge as he



1

stood in silent concentration. All was quiet here, and conversations were in measured whispers as we traversed safely into the Southern Ocean. As a token of appreciation, later in the voyage, the scientists presented him with a handmade plank rail that they fabricated—to stop him from falling out of bed in bad weather.

The *Aurora*, which seemed sizeable in port at Hobart, looked minuscule in the Southern Ocean as it bobbed across the huge waves. Cross this ocean, and you might just reach Antarctica.

ENTERING NEPTUNE'S DOMAIN

As you transit the 45 parallel you come closer to the south pole than to the equator. Sailors and mariners find any excuse to break up the monotony of routine on board, and a tradition was concocted. On the *Aurora*, “south virgins” had to pay their dues to King Neptune; these included dousing by the seniors and some light entertainment for the rest.

“Everyone is called to trial guilty of deeds against the ocean,” said one captain. For a while, it made us forget the storm outside.

Soon, there was a plummet in temperature. At times of fair weather, probes were extended into the depths of the Southern Ocean to measure its salinity and temperature, water samples containing plankton were taken, and the occasional whales were spotted, sometimes very close to the ship. We were, after all, in one of the richest ecosystems in the world.

One important resident here is the krill—small shrimps up to about 6cm in length that swarm the ocean’s surface in such multitudes that they can colour the sea orange. A super-swarm can be more than 10km-wide and extend to a depth of over 100m. There are records of swarms over 450km-wide and 200m-deep with an estimated 2 million tonnes of krill. These are important sources of protein in an otherwise sterile sea. Krill swarms are the reason whales are here—a blue whale can devour 16 tonnes of krill in a single day.

A team of biologists on board the *Aurora* were interested in the cetaceans and were tasked to collect DNA samples from the whales as they surfaced to breathe. The DNA library is necessary to build up an atlas of whales across the world, giving a better picture of the health and migratory preferences of these endangered mammals.

The *Aurora* slowed down and lowered an inflatable boat with scientists on board whenever a pod was discovered. A spotter team from the bridge of the mother ship would guide them to the whales by radio, whose skin samples were taken with a modified spear. This had to be done fast before the animals dived into the depths again. It was a sight to behold as we watched these “bronco” scientists chase whales on their inflatables.

Whales are important links in the food chain of the seas, and waste from these large mammals provides food to invertebrates and other marine animals that live in the Southern Ocean. Both whales and krill are however under threat from over-hunting and fishing. In 1982, the International Whaling Commission (IWC) indefinitely prohibited the commercial killing of large whales. Despite these, many of the living resources of the Southern Ocean are still threatened by over-exploitation. Krill, the main food source in the Southern Ocean, is increasingly harvested for nutraceuticals and fish food by the aquaculture industry.

ENCOUNTERING THE FIRST ICE

The ship edged south, stopping just to lower scientific probes into the depths or to collect samples from the surface waters. Soon, we spotted the first ice on the sea

surface—the remains of larger ice formed in Antarctica that have floated north and have since melted down in size. They were the first signs of the approaching continent.

While working outside, we were equipped with layers of warm clothing and leather caps. The number of ice patches continued to grow, and soon littered much of the open ocean. Sea ice surrounds Antarctica and completely freezes in winter. In that dark, frigid season, the ice sheets may extend 1,000km from land. In the austral winter, about 19,000,000km² of sea ice surrounds the continent of Antarctica. This melts in the warmer months, and only 3,000,000km² remain in late summer.

Thinner ice sheets break off and float into the Southern Ocean. It is during this period of low sea ice from February to April that the Antarctic research stations on the continent are accessible by sea. As we headed closer to the continent, fields of sea ice reduced the swell of ocean waves, and the sea became deceptively calm. The *Aurora* is an icebreaker with a reinforced bow. The crashes and cracks of breaking ice droned on, all day and into the night, as she made her way through the ice fields.

Antarctica is vast, and in winter, as the sea freezes, it doubles in size, covering an area of 14,200,000km²—or about twice the size of Europe. In spite of its land mass, depending on the season, Antarctica has a population of only about 1,000 to 5,000. Compare this to over 743 million people living in Europe and you will get an idea of the profound isolation felt here.

THE FLOATING ICEBERGS OF ANTARCTICA

Scattered on the ice fields and calmer seas were icebergs. I remembered my first encounter with an iceberg. Until then, my knowledge of these was limited to reading about the fateful accident that sank the *Titanic* in 1912 and that was immortalised by the Hollywood film of the same name. The image of Leonardo DiCaprio and Kate Winslet on its bow stuck in my mind, but the film never conveyed the true size of icebergs.

Icebergs are floating masses of ice carved out of Antarctic glaciers—which are essentially frozen rivers of ice that flow towards the sea at continental margins. They come in many sizes, shapes and colours, and are basically categorised into two types: large, tabular icebergs and smaller, domed or blocky ice carved by the wind and waves. The latter may also be part of larger icebergs that have broken up.

Tabular icebergs can be monstrous in size. The largest, with an unassuming name of B15, off the Ross ice shelf, was measured at 300km-long by 40km-wide. It covers a total area of 11,000km², or about 11 times the size of Penang Island. It is even more

awe-striking when you realise that only a tenth of the mass of that ice is visible above the surface of the ocean.

Icebergs that are smaller are a hazard to ships. As we negotiated the Southern Ocean while avoiding the fate of the *Titanic*, teams of navigators on board the *Aurora* took turns scouting the way ahead for a safe passage.

These floating ice blocks are important for life in the Southern Ocean and Antarctica. Like rivers, they transport minerals and food from the continent and bring sustenance to the sea as they melt. Algae that feed the krill thrive on these nutrients and, in turn, as we have seen, feed the rest of the marine life here in a complex food chain.

A RESCUE MISSION

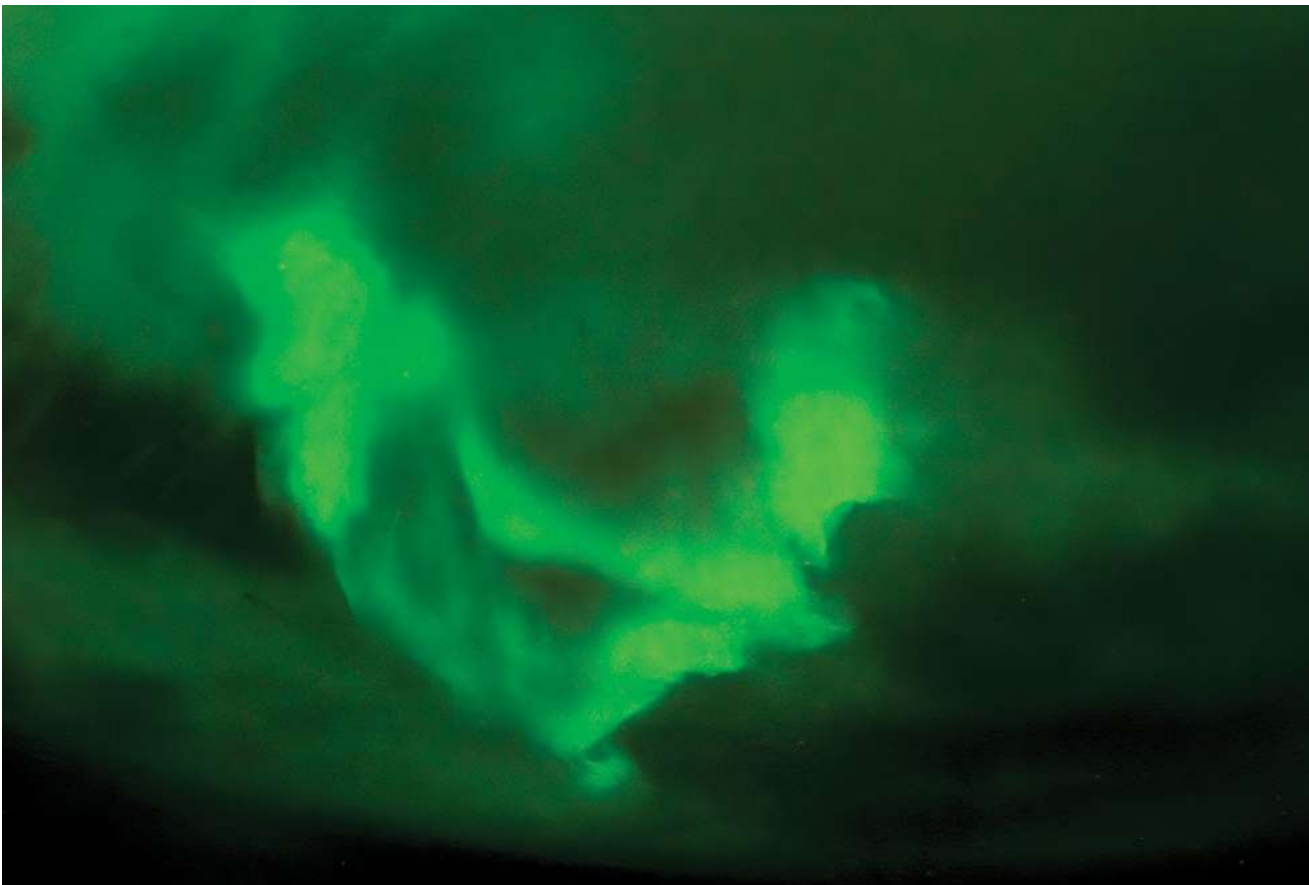
One day, the *Polar Bird*, another ship, had radioed for assistance; it had gotten stuck in an ice field. The *Aurora*, being an icebreaker, could create a passage for her to get out again into the open water—the

only problem was the detour to free that ship would leave us with insufficient fuel to complete our journey home.

Nevertheless, the rescue was arranged and turned out a success. The *Polar Bird* graciously transferred some of its fuel to us, and we were good to sail to the Mawson Station.

At Mawson, we picked up a few Australian scientists who were homebound after a year in Antarctica. Another set of dedicated scientists took their place—I remember the look on their faces as we left. Almost all the habitations in Antarctica are inaccessible during these cold nights that last for four to six months, depending on your latitude. What does one do in those dark winter months, and what if there was an emergency? There had been fatalities at a few of these scientific stations during these periods, as evidenced by the rocky mounds of graves here. In any case, help would not be available until the next summer when the sea ice had melted.





3

THE WONDERFUL AND WILD BIODIVERSITY OF ANTARCTICA

The air here was clean, and there was a sense of tranquillity in knowing that you were on one of the last-discovered continents on Earth, where most of its surface had not been experienced by man. Even close to Mawson, penguins and seals treated you as part of the natural backdrop. The former had even hilariously tagged close to us, inquisitive about our work on the ice. On one occasion, I was told that a particularly curious rookery surrounded scientists who were coring some ice and, following a quiet moment, decided in concerted unison to shake their heads vigorously, as if saying, “You won’t find anything under there, we’ve tried.”

Perhaps it was the cold going to our heads—for it can be very cold here. At Vostok on the highlands of Russia, the lowest recorded temperature in the world was -89°C , while the Antarctic coast is a balmy -60°C . Still, by far and on average, Antarctica is the coldest continent on Earth. Temperatures drop fast in the driving wind during winter storms, and the wind chill has to be factored in when working outside. Often, ice crystals form on your eyelashes and nose. Goggles are necessary to prevent injury.

Despite the extreme climate, Antarctica is a beautiful place. In the austral summer, the sight of the almost-setting sun

colours the landscape amber gold. The air is crisp and clean with almost no evidence of pollution, and the beaches may be covered in sculptures of glistening ice. If you are lucky in that subdued hour, you may be treated to a dancing display of the *aurora australis*—mesmerising southern lights glowing green in the evening sky.

Travelling along the coasts on the continent, you may occasionally chance upon elephant seals. A single adult male can span more than 20ft and weigh nearly four tonnes. These gather on the shores during the breeding season to stake their claim on prospective pods of 40 to 50 females. Rival males vocalise their dominance over other males, and if this does not work, aggressive posturing and even fights break out. Scholars studying their behaviour show that after a violent and gory battle, pieces of skin are scattered, and bloodied bodies are frequent. The dominant champion then faces the challenger in a striking pose of an upright nasal trunk (hence the name “elephant seals”), while the loser signals defeat with a lowered head and moves away.

They ignored my intrusions as I carefully photographed these giants—perhaps my size and nasal appendage were not found threatening.

After what seemed a lifetime on board the ship, our vessel turned north back to Australia, and in two weeks, we arrived at

the port of Hobart. Families and children were waiting and cheering at the dockside, trying to spot their loved ones. It took some time to berth the *Aurora*, but everyone waited patiently. It had been more than a year since some of them last saw their families.

Later that evening, after disembarking, I happened into a Chinese takeaway in town, craving dim sum. I must have stumbled awkwardly to the counter, because the old waiter, recognising the trademark waddle of someone who had spent months at sea, chirped, “Back from Antarctica, is it?”



4



5



6

CAPTIONS

1. Scientists chasing whales on inflatables.
2. An ice cave.
3. *Aurora australis*.
4. An elephant seal.
5. Penguins on sea ice.
6. Saying goodbye.



PROF. DATO' DR. ZULFIGAR YASIN is a marine environmental scientist who is an Honourable Professor at Universiti Sains Malaysia and a Visiting Senior Analyst at Penang Institute. His work now focuses on the sustainable development of the marine environment.

A MAESTRO COMES HOME



1

BY LIM WAN PHING

WHEN SOPRANO Loh Siew Tuan first began singing in a Methodist church choir as a child, little did she imagine that that would someday lead her to perform at London's Wigmore Hall.

Music was not in her blood, or so she thought. But all that changed when the choirmaster gave her a small solo and an aunt gave her her first piano lesson. That opened her eyes to classical music.

THREE ISLANDS AND A LOVE FOR MUSIC

Born on the island of Gulangyu off the coast of Xiamen in China, Loh's father migrated to Penang in the 1940s when she was a child. They settled on Lebuhan Pantai. The fourth of nine siblings, Loh would later discover that Gulangyu is dubbed the "Town of Pianos" due to its rich heritage in Western classical music.

Today, Gulangyu and Penang share one thing in common: a UNESCO World Heritage badge—and Loh's classical music link followed her from these islands in China and Malaysia to a third, Britain.

For close to 60 years, Loh made London her home, first as a Trinity College stu-



2

dent, then as a singer and vocal teacher. Her career in Europe has been nothing short of illustrious as she studied with world-renowned Hungarian singer and voice teacher, the late Vera Rózsa.

For four decades, Loh performed all over the globe—from Penang to Paris, and appeared solo with the likes of the Hong Kong Philharmonic Orchestra and the Collegium Musicum of Bonn. At 60, she retired from singing and began teaching at summer schools and music camps in Belgium, Portugal and Thailand.

COMING HOME AND COMING FULL CIRCLE

Now in her early 80s, Loh is back in Penang for good, for her retirement. However, she has wasted no time in establishing Music Makers, a community that meets for monthly soirées at her home. These meetings have led to the group performing quarterly at the Cheong Fatt Tze Mansion.

"Musicians don't ever retire because you love music so much, and it's a part of your life," says Loh, whose passion is to see younger ones come together more often to play music, exchange ideas and develop a strong, supportive community.

As a song recitalist, Loh loves performing the works of Mahler, Hugo Wolf, Fauré, and particularly the opera *Der Rosenkavalier* by Strauss. She cites Mozart, Brahms, Lieder and Schubert as her favourite composers.

"Music is the expression of a person's emotions, and it's so life-enriching," says Loh. "That's why I love to gather people to make music as an enjoyment of life, not just as a specialised art form."

GUARDIAN ANGELS AND GUIDING LIGHTS

Loh knows the importance of community as she has been the recipient of sound guidance and influence throughout her career. She attributes her success to three people in her life; her father, her teacher Vera Rózsa and Penang architect-botanist Lim Chong Keat, whose residence on Macalister Road welcomed performers back in the 80s.

"My father was very supportive and said he would try his best to fund me," Loh recalls, recounting her teenage years in Methodist Girls' School and a short stint

as a music teacher at St. Xavier's Primary School. "It was a lecturer at the Malayan Teachers' Training College who encouraged me to go abroad to study music," she says.

So, in 1965, she set off for Trinity College to major in piano and vocal teaching. But things were not all smooth sailing. "I changed my singing teacher three times because I was going nowhere. My father was paying my tuition, and there were no results. I used to sing freely and without a care, but after formal training, I was going breathless, and my voice was hoarse."

Loh recalls writing a letter to her father saying she wanted to give up. But his reply surprised her, encouraging her not to worry if singing would ever become a career. "He gave me an open ticket and said, 'That's what you love to do, so just continue to enjoy it,'" she says.

Thankfully, she found Vera, who listened to her qualms and decided she was "confused" by all the head knowledge she was receiving from different teachers. "From there, I learnt that a teacher with a big name is not always a good thing," says Loh. "Teachers must be able to speak your language because music is so personal to the student. There is no 'Hungarian school' or 'Italian school'; it isn't dependent on a school!"

THE REMAINS OF HER TIME

Despite her six-decade career, Loh is not one for boasting about her international CV, saying, "I'm still discovering new repertoires every day, and with the remains of my time here in Penang, I want to do something useful for younger musicians and music teachers."

She recalls Penang's vibrant classical music scene in the 70s and 80s, including festival concerts in KOMTAR and Dewan Sri Pinang, and hopes to see such shows revived. Back then, Loh performed with world-famous Penang-born pianists like Sylvia Wang and the late Dennis Lee.

Loh also lived in Caracas, Venezuela, for six years in the 80s, where she glimpsed a payback model of inviting foreign musicians to perform in return for educating local musicians. This, she suggests, is a sustainable form of music as education and not just entertainment, which could work well in Malaysia.



3



5

MUSIC AS A JOY AND NOT A CHORE

Today, she is doing the best she can with Music Makers, arranging for more concerts for the rest of 2024. "The opportunity to perform is so important for young musicians," she explains, "because every performance, no matter how small, will have a great impact on their confidence and career."

Loh has led a colourful life, performing in various parts of the world while being known as a world-renowned vocal coach. "I suppose I've realised my dream as a singer, and in the later years, I was able to share my knowledge with the younger generation, watching them grow and become successful artists in their own right," she says.

"If you're a singer, your body is your instrument, so you have to take good care of it," she concludes. "Make music, enjoy music and be truthful to music. Learn to collaborate, be open-minded and be part of a group. Don't learn music because you have to, because ultimately music is a joy and not a chore."

CAPTIONS

1. At the European Opera Centre in Alden Biesen, Belgium in 1985.
2. During the European summer centre school.
3. Loh Siew Tuan (soprano) with Maurice Till (piano) at the State Trinity Centre at Christchurch, New Zealand in 1991.
4. A flyer of Henry Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas* held in Penang in 1988. Loh was the soprano.
5. Loh with Lee Kum Sing, a Canadian classical pianist and piano pedagogue, in their youth.
6. Photo taken after an interview with a journalist when Loh was living in Caracas, Venezuela circa 1985-86.



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



6

1



EXPLORES PENANG'S CULTURAL DEPTHS

BY JULIA TAN

CAPTIONS

1. Pierre Bismuth
Chocolate, 2021. Milk
chocolate produced from a
recipe by the artist.

2. Pierre Bismuth in
action.

3. Fried Chicken
Flavoured Polyethylene,
2015. Extruded
polyethylene LL6910AA
with 1% industrial chicken
flavouring additive.

Photos by Pierre Bismuth



JULIA TAN is a former
editor of *Penang Monthly*.
She remembers her time
with the magazine with
great fondness.

RENOWNED FRENCH VISUAL artist and filmmaker Pierre Bismuth has a career spanning decades. His impressive list of accolades includes an Academy Award for his work on *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*.

Bismuth is now embarking on a new chapter of creativity in Penang and his project here is far from conventional. In a recent interview, Bismuth shared his inspirations, his thoughts on Penang and his latest experimental film venture—a project that is as much about people and food as it is about storytelling.



2 A NEW PROJECT, A NEW SETTING

Bismuth's journey to Penang was not a random occurrence. His visit was sparked by an invitation from Blank Canvas, a local independent, non-profit art institution owned by art enthusiast and collector, Leong Kwong Yee, also known as KY, who is aiming to present in George Town local and international artists usually seen in much larger capital city museums. However, the idea of coming to Penang was not just to put on another exhibition, but to explore new artistic possibilities.

"KY told me about the food culture here," Bismuth recalls. "And I immediately thought, I could do something with this multi-cultural context."

Penang's vibrant street food scene and its unique blend of Chinese, Malay, Indian and Nyonya influences offer an ideal backdrop for Bismuth's new experimental film. He envisions a short, unscripted movie about food, people and life in this dynamic city—a project he had originally imagined for Hong Kong but, owing to circumstances, that is now pivoted to Penang.

"I've always wanted to do a film about food and cooking, and I thought maybe I could do it here—a short film, maybe 10 to 20 minutes," Bismuth explains. "It's a project that's very close to my heart because I'm fascinated by the process of making food and the cultural significance it holds in this part of the world."

FOOD AS THE CENTRAL NARRATIVE

Food is not just sustenance in Penang—it is a way of life. For Bismuth, this omnipresence of food, from humble hawker stalls to high-end restaurants, is both fascinating and inspiring.

"What I think is actually very interesting in this part of the world is that food is everywhere," he notes. "There are so many restaurants, so many places where you can have food."

What draws Bismuth to Penang's food culture is not just the diversity of cuisines but the way food is embedded in everyday life. In Europe, he explains, dining out is often reserved for those with disposable incomes. But in Penang, the accessibility to dining out cuts across socioeconomic lines.

"In Europe, restaurants are quite expensive and in the end, it is mainly for the well-

off people," he says. "Here, it's much more democratic. It's so nice to see all those small-scale vendors cooking for everybody, and to see just everyday people of all ages and social backgrounds enjoying their breakfast soup in the morning. That's the way it should be."

This egalitarian approach to food is what makes Penang such a rich environment for Bismuth's new film project. The artist is particularly interested in the human element of food preparation and consumption—how chefs, cooks and street vendors interact with their environment, and how food brings people together. "I'm just seeing chefs and cooks, doing location scouting just to try to understand better what the scene here is, and what kind of people we have and what the place looks like," he says.



3

EXPERIMENTING WITH REALITY AND FICTION

Bismuth's new film in Penang continues his exploration of challenging conventional narratives and blurring the line between reality and fiction. His 2016 directorial debut, *Where Is Rocky II?*, was an unscripted narrative that garnered critical acclaim for its unique approach to storytelling. The film follows real people in real situations, yet it is structured in a way that makes it feel like scripted fiction. Now, in Penang, Bismuth hopes to push this experiment even further.

"The principle is to say that anything can become an interesting story to watch," Bismuth explains. "If you adopt the right methodology and the right cinematic vocabulary, anything can become a movie." His goal with the Penang project is to "lose control as much as possible", allowing real-life events to unfold naturally in front of the camera without giving any direction or script.

This method of filmmaking requires Bismuth to detach from conventional storytelling techniques. "In a film production, it involves money and a team of people, and so it's very difficult not to have everything written down beforehand," he says. "But here, the goal is to actually lose control and follow people, to let the series of events unfold before your eyes."

THE CHARM OF PENANG'S PEOPLE

Though Bismuth came to Penang with a specific focus on his film project, he could not help but notice the warmth and open-

ness of the local people. "People, it seems to me, [are] extremely kind. I'm nearly shocked about how kind and welcoming people are here," he shares. "Always saying hi, even starting to talk to you without knowing who you are."

This friendliness, which Bismuth finds charming, is something he appreciates in Penang's smaller, less hectic environment compared to other large cities in Southeast Asia. "Each time we go to a restaurant, or each time we take a taxi, we are having conversations. People are very open."

His son, Kosta, also shares his fondness for Penang. "Kosta says that Penang is his favourite place next to Bangkok," Bismuth notes, acknowledging the special connection they have developed with the city during their stay of 10 days.

NAVIGATING THE ART SCENE

Despite being a world-renowned artist, Bismuth admits he is still unfamiliar with the art scene in Penang. However, he remains open to the possibility of future collaborations within the Southeast Asian art world, expressing interest in museum shows and gallery exhibitions in the region.

Bismuth's detachment from street art—our public spaces are adorned with eclectic and, at times, eccentric artwork—is notable. "I was never into what is called street art," he says candidly. Public art installations also do not hold much interest for him. Instead, Bismuth is more focused on conceptual and cinematic experiments that allow him to play with the idea of reality, fiction and the role of the artist.

LOOKING FORWARD, NOT BACK

As Bismuth reflects on his career, he is clear that nostalgia plays no part in his creative process. "Nostalgic, certainly not. I'm just trying to continue my work, which is not always easy," he says. As an older artist, he acknowledges the challenges of remaining relevant in a world that often prioritises "young blood". But Bismuth is not concerned with that—he is more interested in what comes next.

His next visit to Penang, scheduled for 2025, holds one such future project. Although details are still under wraps, Bismuth is excited to return and explore more of what the city, with its reputation as a cultural and creative hub, has to offer. As he continues to push the boundaries of art and cinema, Penang serves as the perfect setting for his latest creative endeavour.

Bismuth's time in Penang may have been short, but his impact is sure to resonate long after he departs. As he says, "I'm only thinking about the next thing I'm going to do." With his eye firmly fixed on the future, there is no doubt that whatever comes next will be as unconventional and thought-provoking as the man himself.



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A high-contrast, artistic photograph. In the foreground, the back of a red leather chair is visible, showing a fine texture and a white stitching line. The chair is positioned diagonally. The background is a floor with a complex pattern of large, light-colored tiles interspersed with smaller tiles featuring dark, stylized floral or geometric motifs. The lighting is dramatic, with deep shadows and bright highlights, creating a sense of depth and texture.



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SILAT

AN ESSENTIAL
MALAY MARTIAL ART AND
PERFORMANCE

SILAT IN THE Malay language refers to martial arts, similar to how Wushu means martial techniques in Chinese. Traditionally, Malays would refer to Karate or Judo as Silat Jepun (Japanese martial arts) and kung fu as Silat Cina (Chinese martial arts). Indonesians call it Pencak Silat, while Malaysians term it as Silat, both of which are recognised as references to a UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage. Silat encompasses native martial arts practised across the Nusantara region, including Malaysia, Indonesia, Brunei, Singapore, Southern Thailand and the Philippines.



1

BY
MUHAMMAD
AMIRUL NAIM

PULUT

There are two essential elements in Silat—*buah* (fruit) and *bunga* (flower). Malays regard Silat as an art form connecting the soul and body. *Buah* represents the practical aspects of martial arts, involving rehearsed combat scenarios with predetermined responses. *Bunga* refers to the movements of the entire body, akin to a dance.

Silat Pulut is traditionally performed at Malay weddings. The performance follows strict etiquette, with the couple being considered as the *raja sehari* (royalty of the day). The performers must never turn their backs on the “raja”, point a weapon in their direction or raise their feet above their knees.

In an interview, Guru Mohd Azlan, a traditional Silat practitioner and certified Silat judge in Perak, informs us that Peninsular Malaysia is home to three distinct Silat styles:

1. Silat Tari or the ceremonial/artistic Silat style
2. Silat Tangkas or the agile Silat style
3. Silat Buah Pukul or the combative Silat style

Each style is rooted in specific local traditions. Silat Tari is predominantly practised in the northern and eastern regions of the peninsula, in areas like northern Perak, Kedah, Penang, Perlis, Kelantan, Terengganu, Pahang and even southern Thailand. This style is sometimes referred to as *bergayung* or *bersendeng*. Examples include

Silat Gayung Fatani, Tari Angin and Silat Jawi, where combative techniques are subtly integrated into artistic movements. Practitioners of this style can interact with other schools of Silat by adhering to universally accepted principles of Silat Pulut.

The Silat Tangkas, also known as Pencak, is more common on the western coast of the peninsula, from central Perak to Selangor, Negeri Sembilan and Melaka. This region, influenced by Malay descendants from Sumatera, Java and Borneo, is home to dynamic Silat styles like Silat Seni Gayong, Silat Lincak and Lintau.

Silat Buah Tukul is practised mainly in the southern parts of the peninsula, particularly in Melaka and Johor. Styles such as Buah Melaka, Lian and Sendeng focus on rapid and layered attacks.

THE ART OF SILAT PULUT

Silat Pulut is a performance art and a method of creating forms (*buah*). While it is not mandatory for all Silat practitioners, it is traditionally practised within Silat communities, especially in village-based gatherings. Silat Pulut is now part of the Malay Silat curriculum in Peninsular Malaysia. It involves a series of bodily movements aimed at self-defense and physical exercise, believed to improve blood circulation, respiratory systems, stamina and endurance.

CAPTIONS

1. Haji Su and his son, Mat Nor, both well-known masters of Silat from Kelantan demonstrating Kelantanese Silat moves. Photo from the *Straits Times Annual*, 1958. Photo credit: Sabri Zain's *Malaya History Society Official Facebook Page*, 11 July 2024
2. Silat Pulut performed during North Malaysia Week 1977 in Adelaide, Malaysia, in conjunction with the visit of the British monarch, Queen Elizabeth II and Prince Philip. Photo credit: Tun Dr. Lim Chong Eu Foundation.





3

Nik Iznan Musyahmi Mohamed, a black belt in Silat Seni Gayong and a practitioner of traditional Silat styles from Kelantan, noted that Silat Pulut is also a form of ceremonial performance deeply embedded in Malay customs. It is accompanied by traditional Silat music such as the *gendang ibu*, *gendang anak*, *gong* and *serunai*. It is called Silat Pulut because, traditionally, Silat performances at weddings featured the presentation of sticky rice (*pulut*) adorned with *bunga telur* as a token of gratitude. Practitioners would symbolically feed the bride and groom the *pulut*, linking Silat to Malay wedding traditions.

The origins of Silat Pulut are rooted in ancient traditions. Though its history is not well-documented, several theories about its inception exist. After the fall of the traditional Malay kingdoms, Silat lost its prominence in royal courts and military defense, which had adopted Western military systems. Malay warriors returned to their villages and continued teaching Silat informally. To avoid detection by colonial authorities—both the British and the Japanese—they disguised their martial skills as a traditional game, leading to the emergence of Silat Pulut. This form of Silat emphasises non-injury, adherence to strict conduct codes and the preservation of cultural essence.

The essence of Silat, despite its gentle and graceful movements, was known only to those who had mastered it. Some theories suggest that when a practitioner has his opponent in a lock, any movement made would further tighten the hold, much like the sticky nature of *pulut*.

Silat Pulut practitioners, paired in twos, begin by paying respect to the audience with Bunga Sembah or Lela Sembah before engaging in strategic moves such as *pecah langkah* or *belebat* Silat. The performance begins with graceful moves like *sikap jual* and *sikap beli*, where practitioners attack and defend without causing harm, demonstrating intricate techniques that conceal deep combat skills.



4

Silat Pulut encompasses various secret techniques, most of which are not publicly displayed. However, its basic techniques can be learned with practice, though mastering them may take time. One foundational technique involves practitioners facing each other in a square, performing a respectful salutation around the perimeter before moving to the central area for a series of circular movements known as *melilit* (encircling the opponent).

Following this, the *Galah Panjang* technique mimics a traditional Malay game of the same name. Practitioners move in tandem, attacking and defending in unison, creating a beautiful interplay of motions. They then engage in three fundamental attacks: *tikam* (stabbing), *belah* (splitting) and *parang* (chopping). The stabbing technique simulates sharp weapon use and is executed in a controlled, deliberate manner, unlike the faster, more aggressive moves seen in Silat Tangkas.

The opponent intercepts the attack and counters by locking the attacker's leg behind the knee while neutralising the stab by pushing the attacker's arm upward. The attacker then attempts to break free using a technique known as *sisipan* (weaving), leading to defensive and offensive exchanges such as *sagang* (blocking) and *buang* (releasing). The performance continues with alternating moves, showcasing fluidity and complexity.

Today, some deem Silat Pulut to be “outdated”; many now prefer the more aggressive, sports-oriented martial arts. Cultural assimilation has led to a blending of traditional practices with modern interpretations, which has affected traditional Silat performances at weddings and social gatherings. Modern preferences, it is feared, may lead to a loss of deeper cultural understanding.

In short, like a gemstone, Silat Pulut needs to be mined, polished and set to reveal its true brilliance. Its rich traditions and symbolism demands patience to be fully understood. Passed down through generations, this sophisticated and profound heritage reflects the refined sensibilities of Malay culture.

CAPTIONS

3. Guru Mohd Azlan practising Silat Tari in a river in Perak.

4. Guru Nik Iznan Musyahmi Mohamed.



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PENANG'S MAGAZINES PRESERVE THE PAST AND SHAPE THE FUTURE

BY EUGENE QUAH TER-NENG

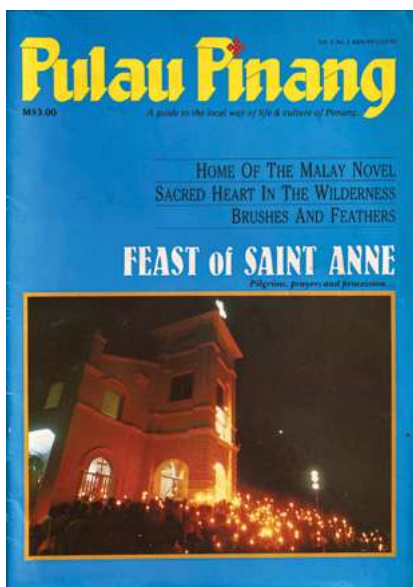
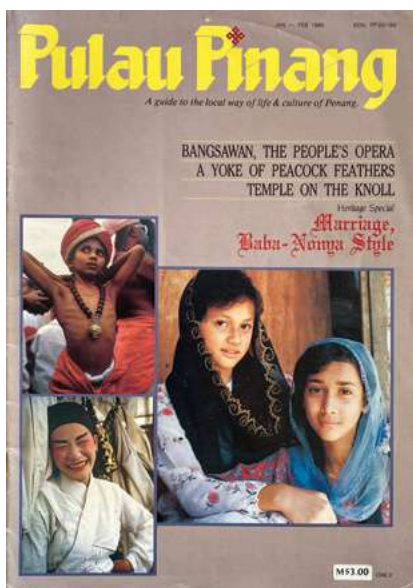
IN EARLY 1989, Ganesh Kolandaveloo, a Form 5 student at St. Xavier's Institution, would visit his grand-uncle's newsstand on Prangin Road after school. Located at a bustling intersection, it was here that he first encountered a new publication. The new magazine featured a simple design with three artfully taken photographs of youths in traditional costumes against a light brown background.

The title was equally unpretentious and to the point, *Pulau Pinang*. The subtitle, "A Guide to the Local Way of Life & Culture of Penang," hinted at its content. The titles of the articles all have a theatrical ring to them—"Bangsawan, the People's Opera", "A Yoke of the Peacock Feathers", "Temple on the Knoll" and "Heritage Special—Marriage, Baba-Nyonya style".

This inaugural issue of *Pulau Pinang* also featured an article on the Thai Pusam festival. Unlike the usual touristy magazines, it delved deep into Penang's culture and history with a refreshingly accessible tone. This encounter marked a turning point for Ganesh, sparking his passion for Penang's heritage. Today, he calls himself a "heritage enthusiast" and has amassed a collection of Penang's historical photographs and writings, including the complete set of *Pulau Pinang*.

STORE OF KNOWLEDGE

The first publication resembling a magazine, according to the Encyclopaedia Britannica, "appears to have been the German *Erbauliche Monats-Unterredungen*" or *Edifying Monthly Discussions*, started by the Hamburg theologian and poet Johann Rist. It ran from 1663 until 1668.



1

How the word "magazine" came to mean a periodical in English is fascinating. It first appeared in Middle French in 1389 as *maguesin*, which was borrowed from the Arabic word *مخازن* (*makāzin*), meaning storehouses or depots. *Makāzin* itself is derived from the verb *كَزَنَ* (*kazana*), meaning "to store".

In January 1731, an intrepid English printer and publisher, Edward Cave, published *The Gentleman's Magazine: Or, Trader's Monthly Intelligencer*. He came up with the idea of a new kind of periodical or "magazine"—the first use of the name in this sense—which contains "the essays and intelligence which appeared in the two hundred half sheets which the London press then threw off monthly". The magazine was a hit and "a vast improvement

upon the gossiping and abusive papers of the time". On the title page of its annual compilation was the Latin motto, *E Pluribus Unum*—Out of many, one.

Penang has always been pioneering when it comes to printed words. In *Penang Monthly* in 2010, the historian Geoff Wade noted, "Penang can lay claim to many firsts, but one of the most illustrious is that it was the place where the first newspaper in South-East Asia was published."

Before the introduction of printed periodicals, information in Penang—and elsewhere—was shared by word of mouth among individuals, "through meetings or gatherings, or through manuscripts copied and recopied".

Penang's first newspaper was the *Government Gazette*, later renamed the *Prince of Wales Island Gazette*. By the time it was renamed *Pinang Gazette and Straits Chronicle* in 1838, its editor was the celebrated Penang lawyer and ethnologist, James Richardson Logan. Logan, whose monument still stands today opposite the High Court, published and edited a ground-breaking periodical called the *Journal of the Indian Archipelago*, a vast depository of scholarly articles about Malaya.

ONE FROM MANY

The publication of *Pulau Pinang* in January 1989 marked a significant milestone for Penang and Malaysia. It was the first magazine dedicated solely to documenting and sharing the culture, history and events of a Malaysian state. Unlike the typical tourist guide-style magazines, *Pulau Pinang* set itself apart by being a bimonthly mainstream publication with high production standards and exceptionally well-researched content. It was a middle-brow magazine, something that is still uncommon today in Malaysia.

The first issue was well-received. Soon, a flood of appreciative letters reached the editor. "*Pulau Pinang* is a very good production, and promises to be of greater interest than the usual brochures," wrote Brother Anthony McNamara of St. Xavier's Institution. "I'm especially pleased to know the heritage of Penang is being researched and written by local people," added Cheah Jin Seng from the National University of Singapore.

In hindsight, the sheer quality of articles produced in the magazine was expected; after all, the contributors to the first two issues included the illustrious Ghulam-Sarwar Yousof, raconteur extraordinaire Khor Cheang Kee, artist and art critic Chew Teng Beng and the heritage architect Laurence Loh.

The editor of the magazine—who did a brilliant and difficult job bringing all the many pieces together as one coherent whole—was a 26-year-old freelance writer

CAPTIONS

1. The first (Vol 1. No. 1 January-February 1989) and last issue (Vol 3. No. 2 March-April 1992) of *Pulau Pinang* magazine. Altogether, 14 issues were published from January 1989 until March 1992.

2. The *Pulau Pinang* magazine featured in-depth but accessible articles about Penang centred around George Town. The photography, mostly done by the editor, Khoo Su Nin, was exceptional.

Source: Author's own collection.



2



3



4

named Khoo Su Nin. She had returned home after studying at Duke University in the US. Back in Penang, she realised her passion was “to get people to appreciate Malaysian heritage, and especially built heritage”. Today, going by the name of Salma Khoo Nasution, she is a well-known figure among the heritage circles in Penang as a writer, publisher and activist. Unfortunately by late 1990, the magazine began to have publication delays. In replying to a subscriber sometime in the middle of 1991, the editor explained, “The publication of the magazine has been delayed for quite some time, but we’re still in existence.” *Pulau Pinang* ran from 1989 to 1992. The final issue was Vol. 3 No.2 in 1992; it was the only issue where Khoo was not the editor, but she did contribute a final piece about wildlife artist Choo Beng Teong.

PENANG MONTHLY

For the next decade, there were no Penang magazines in publication except for a brief period in 1998. The Penang State Museum produced a high-quality trimonthly magazine called *Penang Past & Present*. Its editor was the historian Ooi Keat Jin. Only three instalments were ever published.

Around 1997, the Socio-economic and Environmental Research Institute (SERI), a Penang state think tank, was formed. SERI produced a regular research brief called the *Penang Economic Monthly*. However, it was a niche publication mainly for academics and policymakers. The organisation changed its name to Penang Institute in 2011.

The magazine you are reading now, *Penang Monthly*, “began with a preview version in September to December 2009” as an “overhauled and commercialised” version of this research newsletter. It was sold for

RM10. Historian and prolific blogger, Ooi Kee Beng, the magazine’s editor-in-chief since its inception, said *Penang Monthly* was created “to inspire positive action among readers towards attaining a Penang Renaissance”. Born and raised in Penang, Ooi Kee Beng left in the ‘70s to study, work and live in Sweden after briefly working as a sub-editor for *The Star* and *The Straits Echo*.

“You are holding the first issue of the revamped *Penang Economic Monthly*. For that reason alone, I would suggest that you seriously consider it a collector’s item,” Ooi confidently proclaimed in his inaugural editorial. One of the feature articles in that issue was “Tun Lim Chong Eu: The Past is not Passé”, an interview with the second Chief Minister of Penang.

3. Salma Khoo Nasution @ Khoo Su Nin. The editor and photographer of the pioneering *Pulau Pinang* magazine. The bi-monthly was the first magazine devoted to all things Penang. Seen here at her bookshop and publishing house, *Areca*, in 2018.

4. The short-lived tri-annual magazine, *Penang Past & Present*, was produced by the Penang State Museum and edited by Ooi Keat Jin. Source: Ganesh Kolandaveloo

5. In late 2009, Ooi Kee Beng became the founding editor of the revamped *Penang Economic Monthly*, which was later renamed *Penang Monthly* in 2009.



5



6

It is not surprising that *Penang Monthly*, helmed by a Penang-born historian, has always been strong when it comes to featuring in-depth articles about Penang's history, culture and heritage. Like its storied predecessor, it has, throughout the years, received contributions from many notable writers, including Malaysian luminaries such as Cecil Rajendra (2005 nominee for the Nobel Prize in Literature) and Tan Twan Eng, the award-winning novelist.

The magazine wisely dropped the word "Economic" from its title when it realised readers thought it was "purely about economics". Ooi credits the rebirth of *Penang Monthly* to Liew Chin Tong, who "crucially secured steady funding" for the project and for bringing him and others on board to kick off the effort. In June 2015, the magazine became a free publication. "The magazine will thus be surviving on donations and advertisements," he explained.

PENANG CITY EYE

A year earlier, another Penang magazine came onto the scene. *Penang City Eye* (城视报) would become the first Chinese language Penang magazine. The byline in its 2019 English compilation sums up its scope—"People, Places and Practices That Define Penang". The quarterly was the brainchild of a husband-and-wife team of former correspondents from a Penang Chinese daily. The couple, Chong Lee Choo as the editor and Chng Kar Guan who handled the design, decided to get out of their comfort zone.

The initial idea for *Penang City Eye* came about in 2012 when Leung Man-Tao, a prominent Hong Kong writer and critic, asked Ng Wei Aik, then a Penang parliamentarian, "How could Penang be promoted to an international city when it does not have a Chinese language magazine of its own?" Spurred into action by the remark, Ng gathered a group of writers to prepare a Chinese community pictorial focusing on the life and culture of George Town. By chance, Lee Choo and her husband, then both senior journalists, were approached to carry out the work. Their involvement eventually led to the creation of *Penang City Eye*. They quit their jobs to pursue starting the magazine, which was later funded by Michael Lim Soon Huat, the owner of Asia File Corporation Berhad.

Penang City Eye is published quarterly. The production team is now based at COEX @ Kilang Besi within Hin Bus Depot. 8,000 copies are circulated for each issue, exceeding the print run of *Penang Monthly*, which is in the 4,000s, although the latter still has a wider online viewership. The magazine recently celebrated its 10th year of publication.

PAGES OF PROGRESS

Throughout the years, these Penang magazines have not merely been passive recorders of history and culture. Rather, they have

7. The inaugural issue of *Penang City Eye*, first published in May 2014 and an issue from more recent times which carry some articles in English. Source: *Penang City Eye*



7

actively shaped the cultural landscape of Penang, fostering a deeper appreciation for the state's heritage among both locals and visitors. By continuing to explore the state's history, celebrate its cultural diversity and engage with contemporary issues, they help foster a sense of shared identity and common purpose among Penangites. They can also serve as a bridge between generations, ensuring that the wisdom of the past informs the innovations of the future.

In a testament to Penang's enduring spirit of cultural preservation and cross-cultural exchange, *Penang Monthly* has begun to breathe new life into classic articles from *Pulau Pinang*, while *Penang City Eye* has undertaken the task of rendering select pieces from *Penang Monthly* into Mandarin. Such collaborative efforts that bridge generational and linguistic divides have long been a hallmark of Penang's diverse society.

The state of Penang has the unique distinction of sustaining two vibrant publications devoted to its own narrative, highlighting its cultural and mercantile heritage. The story of Penang's magazines is a testament to the island's rich cultural tapestry and its enduring commitment to self-reflection and collective memory. From the landmark debut of *Pulau Pinang* 35 years ago to the contemporary voices of *Penang Monthly* and *Penang City Eye*, these publications have served as both mirror and beacon for Penang's evolving story.

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8. The co-founders of *Penang City Eye*, editor-in-chief Chong Lee Choo and her husband Chng Kar Guan. The couple left their jobs as senior journalists at a local Chinese daily to pursue their dream of starting their own magazine. They are seen here in front of their office and bookshop, Book Island. Source: Chong Lee Choo



8



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

HERITAGE TRACKING IN THE PAST DECADE

THE CASE OF LEBUH CHULIA

BY FIRDAOUS BOUHASSOUN



1



2



3

LEBUH CHULIA is one of the earliest roads to be built in Penang, constructed shortly after the city was founded in 1786. The street has a diverse cultural heritage, reflecting the influence of the Indian Muslim and Chinese communities. Today, it remains a hive of activity, lined with cafés and restaurants.

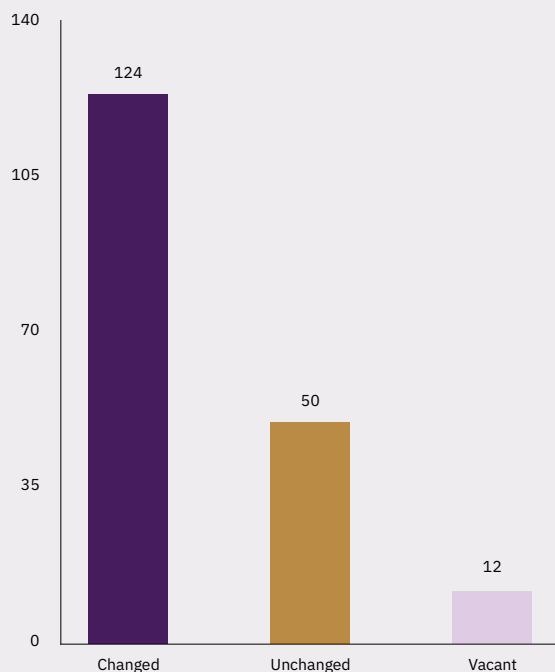
CAPTIONS

1. Interior of Hang Chow Kopitiam on Lebuhi Chulia.
2. NJ EXPRESS SERVICES frontage on Lebuhi Chulia.
3. The colourful facade of YEAP Noodles Café.
4. Example of the gentrification along Lebuhi Chulia.



4

FIGURE 1: COMPARISON OF ESTABLISHMENT STATUS IN 2015 AND 2024



Note:

1. VACANT refers to dwellings that were vacant in 2015 and remain vacant in 2024.
2. UNCHANGED refers to the same establishment conducting the same business in the same dwelling in both 2015 and 2024.
3. CHANGED refers to change of establishment between 2015 and 2024.

In 2015, the Urban Studies Programme at Penang Institute conducted a thorough study of Lebuhi Chulia, focusing on how the public realm was affected by the walkability of the street and the various businesses lining it—including restaurants, hotels and vehicle rental companies. All the signs on this street, including blockages (permanent or temporary) on walkways, from the intersection with Jalan Penang in the west to Jalan Masjid Kapitan Keling in the east, were identified.

Almost a decade after the first survey was done, we revisited Lebuhi Chulia. This time, it is to observe the significant changes that have taken place. By cataloguing the current businesses on the street, we are able to assess their evolution and explore the underlying sociological and economic factors.

A CHANGING LANDSCAPE

We note that several dozen shops have disappeared over time, while others have appeared to offer a new range of services. Of the 186 dwellings recorded in our survey, there is a significant increase in occupancy over the decade—79 new establishments had taken root on previously vacant dwellings. Of course, there are those that have ceased their operations—9, to be exact.

OCCUPIED IN 2015 BUT VACANT IN 2024

ESTABLISHMENT NAME/STATUS (2015):

1. AM Sinar Enterprise:
Bus transportation and Internet café
2. Crystal Guesthouse
3. Galeri Seni Lukis
4. Hock Kim Hin Kedai Besi
5. Junk Café
6. KOMTAR Tours & Travels Sdn. Bhd.
7. Pak Hock Chicken Rice
8. SAS Malaysia Tours & Travel Sdn. Bhd.
9. Swiss Travel

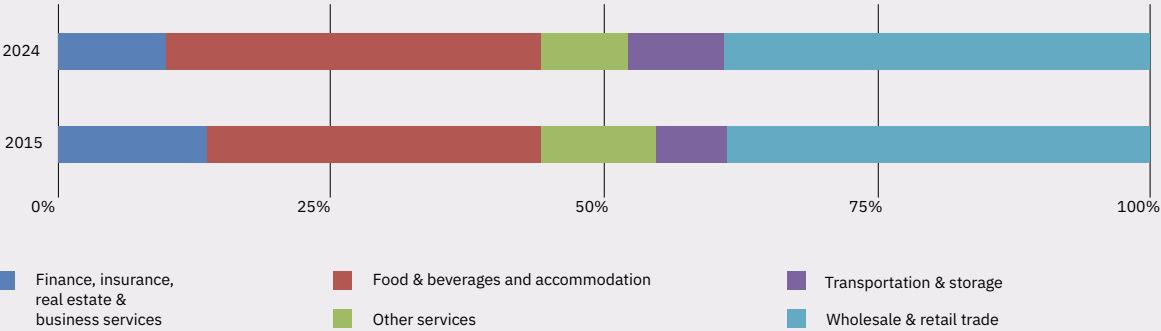
This begs the question: What led to the economic boom in Lebuhi Chulia? Why did new businesses choose to set up business on this street? Is this street part of an urban planning programme implemented by the Penang Island City Council (MBPP)? The issues are both multiple and cross-cutting, and we'll leave that for another day. In any case, we can be sure that Lebuhi Chulia plays a key role in the economic health of George Town and in maintaining its international appeal.

We also identified the types of retail that have flourished between 2015 and 2024. Two types have particularly flourished:

- a. Food & beverages (F&B) and accommodation
- b. Wholesale and retail

It is worth noting that the F&B sector has experienced a significant increase compared to accommodation as shown in Table 1 & 2. The F&B increase is not surprising, given Penang's reputation as Malaysia's kitchen, but what has driven the wholesale and retail trade to maintain so many dwellings on this street, especially given the increasing growth in online shopping? We do not have the answer, just yet!

FIGURE 2: COMPARISON OF CATEGORIES OF ESTABLISHMENTS IN 2015 AND 2024



OLD AND NEW

In the last nine years, many traditional shops such as tailors and hardware shops have gone out of business, especially with the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. Research findings indicate a shift towards foreign food offerings: the opening of Halab restaurant in 2018 offers high-quality Levantine cuisine, De Garden Tomyan offers a diverse Thai menu, and Vegan Falafel Penang has delighted vegetarian palates, catering to those who want to taste Middle Eastern food.

What these restaurants have in common is that they did not exist at all before 2015 and are now established entities on Lebu Chulia.

Curious about the factors that contributed to the continued success of the long-operating businesses on this street, namely NJ EXPRESS SERVICES, Hang Chow Kopitiam and Rainforest Bakery, we spoke to them and found out that they are family-run businesses. This generational management has played a significant role in their longevity.

TABLE 1: FOOD & BEVERAGES BUSINESSES

	2015	2024
NO. OF ESTABLISHMENTS	16	40
ACTIVITIES	• Bars and night clubs • Western cafés • Coffee shops and kopitiam • Restaurants providing Chinese, Indian Muslim and fusion cuisines	• Bars and night clubs • Western cafés • Coffee shops and kopitiam • Bubble tea shops • Restaurants providing Chinese, Indian Muslim, Thai, vegetarian, fast food and fusion cuisines



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TABLE 2: ACCOMMODATION BUSINESSES

	2015	2024
NO. OF ESTABLISHMENTS	13	16
ACTIVITIES	• Guest houses and cafés • Hotels: Boutique, budget and hotels with 3-5 stars (less than 70 rooms)	• Guest houses and cafés • Hotels: Boutique and hotels with F&B • Hostels and indoor lodgings

The three managers from the businesses mentioned also told us that this significant change on Lebu Chulia happened quite recently. Tan, the manager of Hang Chow Kopitiam, expressed concerns about Lebu Chulia’s future. His outlook was largely pessimistic, focused as it was on the socio-spatial gentrification of the street and its detrimental effects on the George Town community.

The other two managers, however, were rather optimistic about its future. They observed a steady increase in tourists and backpackers from around the world, and desire to see the development of new budget hostels. At the same time, they hope that the cost of lot rentals will not rise to the crescendo that it did in the past.

Some businesses, despite changing their pseudonyms and names, retain the same function nine years on—if the unit was used as a restaurant, it is likely that the next business would remain in the F&B line. If it was a hotel, the unit(s) will continue to run somewhere along the lines of hospitality. It may be due to the interior makeup of the building, but it would be interesting to explore deeper and alternate possible reasons before we do another round of study—maybe in the next decade.

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