

PENANG MONTHLY

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COVER STORY

TOWARDS
CULTURAL REVIVAL
AND HISTORICAL
RECOGNITION:
PENANG AND ITS
CLAN HOUSES

FEATURE

THE QUIET
DISCIPLINE BEHIND
THE MUSIC:
MEETING PIANIST
VINCENT ONG

FOR ARTS' SAKE

MANIFESTED
FORMS OF
THE PAST AND
FUTURE: A REVIEW
OF *A SONG OF
CROSSING TO THE
SOUTHERN SEA*

PENANG CLAN HOUSES ON THE MOVE



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

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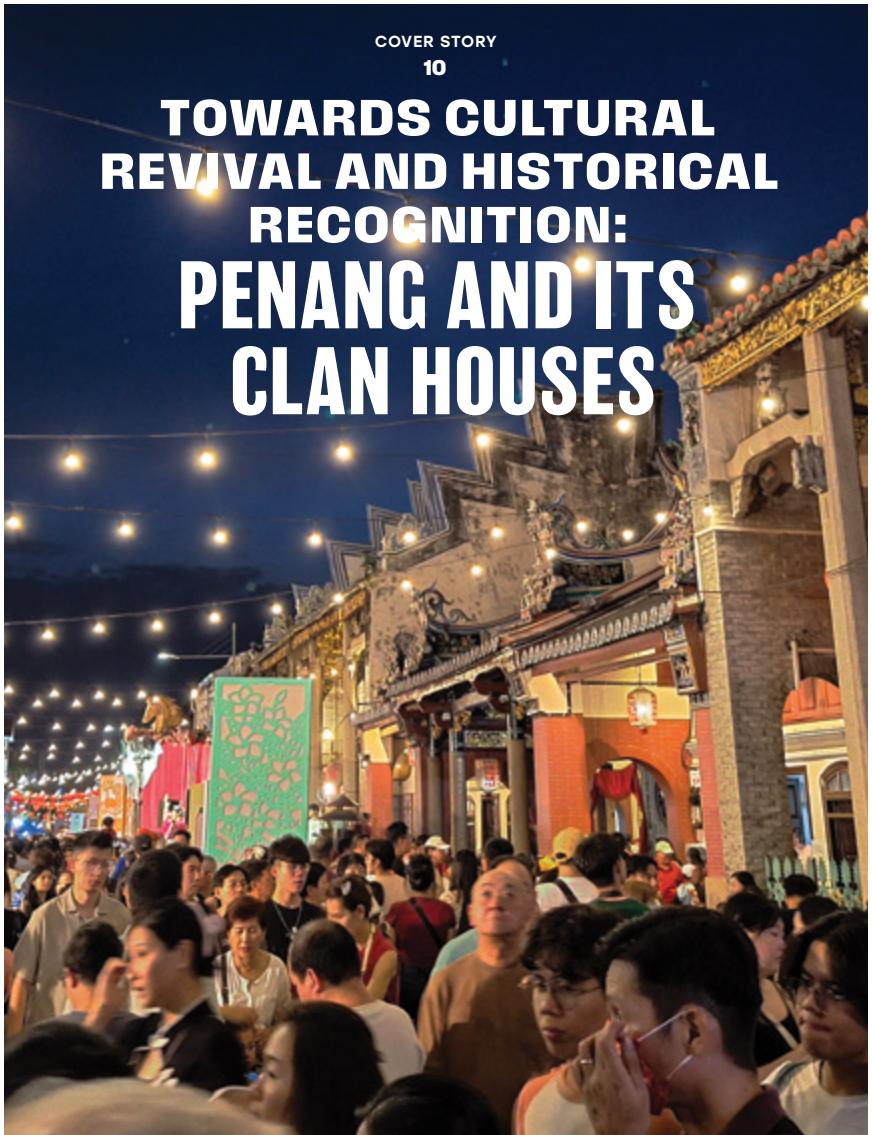


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“these associations ... are living, breathing archives; ...”

—WONG KIM FEI
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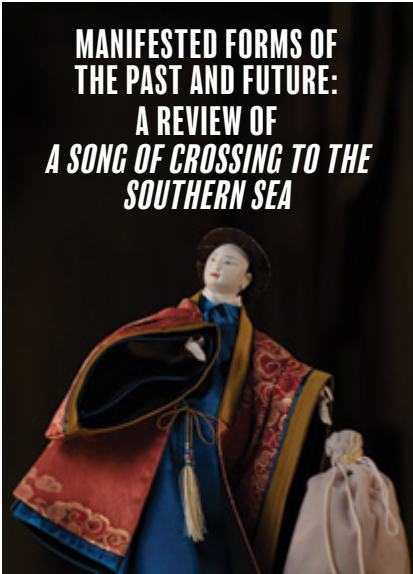
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MANIFESTED FORMS OF THE PAST AND FUTURE: A REVIEW OF A SONG OF CROSSING TO THE SOUTHERN SEA

MIGRANTS AND THE MOBILITY OF THEIR ECONOMIC CULTURE

BY OOI KEE BENG

THE CONNECTION BETWEEN culture and economics is a fascinating one. Staying alive is much easier to do as a group than alone. Interweaving functions, connecting roles and sharing the benefits of teamwork; all these are the building blocks of society. And of culture.

I chase and hunt, you skin and cook; I watch the door, you watch the young ones; I do the laundry, you sweep the floor. Sometimes we switch roles. Diversifying functions clearly makes for efficiency and bonding. By mastering different skills, our abilities become organically resilient and collaborative.

Culture derives from the languages, rituals and habits that we cultivate in order to function in this basic economy. These traits constitute our identity, stimulate our concepts about the world and congeal into our value system.

This economic-cultural ecosystem can be very immobile, as with agricultural villages or cities; quite itinerant, like those of fisherfolk; or highly mobile, as seen among the horsemen of the Eurasian Steppes.

But just how itinerant can *culture* be?

What if mobility involves a small group of people moving with haste into an alien ecosystem? How well can their economic-cultural system travel? Does it have resilience? How adaptive is it?

When you move to a new place, you can be either a tourist, foreigner, expatriate, student, immigrant or refugee... You belong somewhere along this spectrum, but might sometimes occupy more than one position. How you fare depends upon individual mental strength and social skills, on how wide the economic-cultural gap between home and away is, on whether there are enough of your fellows to recreate and generate bits of the old ecosystem to keep all of you comfortable.

Tourists stay in hotels, students on campus and expatriates in condominiums; refugees end up in camps while migrants move to places which are hopefully close to work. The least fortunate end up in sleazy parts of town.

Now, how mobile can *economics* be?

Upon finding yourself in an alien economic-cultural ecosystem, staying alive is most practically done by adopting occupations that satisfy basic human needs, rather than those that are culturally defined by the local inhabitants of your new home. It would be hard for you to find work that requires local economic-cultural knowledge, which often includes mastering some local language. Even highly educated migrants or refugees have great difficulty entering high-end professions that require a delicate understanding of terminologies and subtle cultural communication.

Thus, you might become a floor-sweeper or busboy in a foreign-run restaurant, or work in a laundromat and clean windows. Red-light districts always beckon to some. If you have some capital on hand, perhaps you can start a hole-in-the-wall takeaway restaurant. In many cases, holding multiple jobs and maintaining multiple social functions keep options open.

This is the lot of the immigrant, in most cases, anyway.

Today, in a relatively globalised context, this basic condition that a migrant suffers may not be obvious or evident. In the early days of globalisation, when few could travel far and host populations had little understanding of foreign things, how did they survive?

Intercontinental interactions at the advent of modern times did not happen under happy conditions.

Piracy and thievery, not to mention colonisation and invasion, were common. The development of Western capitalism and global trade took place on the backs of falling kingdoms and failing economies. Human mobility in the form of refugee streams and migrant flows was driven by cultural and economic implosion, warfare and famine, and accompanied by chaos and confusion.

Malaysia's history offers us much to study about the human sufferings of modernity. "Chinatowns" and "Little Indias" often appeared in colonial settlements. Today, these are valued as heritage sites. But they were often initially built out of desperation and destitution, and many things about them are better left unsaid.

Regardless, they chart a journey of resilience and character-building. The Malaysian Chinese clan associations are a prime example of how an economic culture can reconstruct itself elsewhere, its bare bones and strained bonds supporting community members while they hastily adjust to new lives. Migrant adaptation can take generations, but the results are not always reputable. Criminality and prostitution can become the basis for a new "culture". In general, though, with the security and support that migrant communities mustered through clan houses, "secret societies" and the replanting of economic-cultural bonds, habits and communication, a sufficiently strong sense of pride and identity could be retained and opportunities created for the attainment of a better life.

Chinatowns, clan associations, secret societies and school systems chart a tradition of continuity among Chinese migrants over the last two centuries. These institutions played key roles in adapting to a novel economic culture, even to the point of adopting new notions of nationhood.



“... TO INFORM WITHOUT OVERWHELMING”



**LETTER BY
ANIL PADMANABHAN**

QUITE BY ACCIDENT—perhaps serendipitously—past issues had been left in our room at the Ren i Tang Heritage Inn as reading material. I picked one up idly, and before I knew it, I was completely absorbed.

The piece that truly drew me in was “Third Places, Tropical Rules: How the People of Penang Gather”. Its exploration of how everyday spaces—whether a hillside rest stop or public field—evolved into shared civic commons was both evocative and profound. The idea of such places as a “vertical commons”, where solitude and community intersect, has stayed with me since.

In an age of fleeting attention, *Penang Monthly* stands out for its ability to inform without overwhelming, and to provoke thought without being strident.

It feels deeply rooted in place, yet expansive in its relevance. Something that is increasingly rare. I left with a few issues and a lasting impression.

I am curious about the process that you adopt to frame such a thoughtful publication every month. It should serve as a case study in newsrooms; I for one will recommend it to fellow editors/journalists.

Thank you for putting together something so consistently thoughtful and engaging.

MINUTE BUT MIGHTY

THE RELATIVELY UNFAMILIAR Penang San Kiang Association deserves an introduction. San Kiang (三江, lit., “three rivers”) initially included communities with roots in China’s Zhejiang, Jiangsu and Jiangxi provinces, although the majority of its members today do not actually have roots there! There are only six San Kiang Associations in Southeast Asia: five in Malaysia and one in Singapore. The Penang Association was not limited to its founding purpose of providing contacts and mutual assistance to early migrants. Its social functions also changed with time. These included raising funds for disaster relief in China as well as engaging in local political, economic, cultural and educational concerns to support the next generation and cultural transmission.

GETTING TO KNOW THE PENANG SAN KIANG ASSOCIATION

BY
CHAI
QIN
WEN





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6



7

CAPTIONS

(Cover page) The Penang San Kiang Association and San Kiang Building at Lorong Macalister.

1. School plaque inscribed by Kung Cheong Thai for SJK(C) Hoon Bong, Kedah.

2. My late grandparents' wedding at the early Penang San Kiang Association on Gat Lebuah Gereja.

3. The Nanyang Volunteers Memorial monument, inscribed with Kung Cheong Thai's calligraphy.

4. My late grand-aunt's wedding, ca. 1950s.

5. Ren Yunong's calligraphy artwork is prominently displayed at the Association.

6. Malaysia's sole San Kiang Cemetery, located at Batu Uban.

7. Residential neighbourhood named in honour of Principal David Chen Chong Ern of Chung Ling High School.

8. The memorial text for the Nanyang Volunteers Memorial at Ayer Itam, co-written by Guan Zhenmin and Zhou Mansha.

THE EXPANSIVE “THREE RIVERS”

Unlike Hokkien, Cantonese or Foochow migrants, for example, who have historically formed distinct settlement patterns in Malaysia, the “San Kiang” peoples—a category that has become geographically expansive—have not adopted a similar pattern. No state has a significantly large number of San Kiang settlers, nor do they live in San Kiang-majority villages. Indeed, the number of Zhejiang, Jiangsu and Jiangxi migrants to Southeast Asia was relatively small.

In 1897, the first San Kiang Association in Southeast Asia was established in George Town; branches were later founded in Singapore, Ipoh, Selangor, Kuching and Kota Kinabalu. The Penang branch is the only one in Peninsular Malaysia’s northern region. It was meant to provide contacts and mutual assistance to Zhejiang, Jiangsu and Jiangxi migrants, in a period when Chinese migrants typically organised themselves into *bang* (帮), that is, by taking a “group-based” approach to recruiting members.

Normally, clan associations are exclusive only to people from the same region, but this Association was an exception. Given its lack of manpower and financial resources, the Association has demonstrated a high degree of flexibility in recruitment. Rather than focusing on a “Small San Kiang” (小三江), limited to migrants from three provinces, it envisioned a “Greater San Kiang” (大三江) bounded by the Yangtze, Yellow and Heilongjiang Rivers. According to its Commemorative Handbook, published to celebrate the Association’s 100th anniversary, it was effectively open to all migrants *except* those with roots in China’s far south: Fujian, Guangdong, Guangxi and Hainan Provinces.

OCCUPATIONAL NICHES AND IMPACTS BEYOND PENANG

The San Kiang peoples arrived later than other dialect groups, meaning that their Association was not formally established until the late-19th century. By then, the Hakkas were dominant in the mining sector, the Teochews in land-clearing for plantations, the Hokkiens in commerce, the Cantonese in manufacturing and the Hainanese in food services.

Among the San Kiang peoples, occupational niches varied depending on one’s precise area of origin. However, the timing of their arrival coincided with a period of rapid growth in modern Chinese schooling. Consequently, armed with higher levels of education, they filled gaps in this field. With their refined craftsmanship, they also grew dominant in skilled trades. These were all emerging industries which had not yet been dominated by other dialect groups.

Generally, people from Zhejiang opened bookstores and taught; those from

Hunan, Sichuan and Hebei were educators; those from Jiangxi were involved in medicinal herbs; and Ningbo and Wenzhou peoples engaged in woodwork and furniture. Penang’s early San Kiang community opened bookstores, music shops and laundries, engaged in woodwork and provided entertainment. But it was in education where they made their largest mark. Among Malaysia’s major Chinese dialect groups, the Hokkiens were the most prominent in contributing funds and labour to establish schools. However, the teaching staff at many of these institutions were San Kiang peoples.

In Penang, this remarkable relationship is encapsulated by Chung Ling High School. In 1917–57, it had nine principals: Goh Ah Long, Wang Cun Tong, Wang Ji Ou, Gu Yin Ming, Tang Tong Hou, Huang Zhao Qing, David Chen Chong Ern, Lin Hui Xiang and Wang Yong Nian. All had San Kiang roots, except for Goh and Lin, who were Fujianese. The majority of teachers were also native to San Kiang, nurturing countless students, excelling in calligraphy as well as composing music and writing lyrics. One key individual, Lee Soo Sheng, a pioneering first-generation Chinese orchestral musician, composed the Association’s anthem and was honored with the prestigious “Musical Contribution Award” at the 2021 Malaysian Chinese Cultural Awards.^[1] Teachers also served as council members in the Association, including Guan Zhenmin, Kung Cheong Tai, Ren Yunong and Zhou Mansha. San Kiang educators also travelled to Kedah to teach. Consequently, we can still see plaques and school anthems written by them in local schools.

Also prominent were the Shaw Brothers, who were indeed key benefactors of the Association. Their company’s donation of land to the Association stabilised its finances. These Shanghai brothers established cinemas and amusement parks in Malaya and Singapore in the 1930s—which then proliferated throughout Southeast Asia—thus providing recreational outlets for the public and creating employment opportunities in the process. In Penang, they owned two major entertainment venues: Great World Park and New World Park. Indeed, the company’s manager in Penang, Zhou Dikang, was the Association’s seventh president.

THE WORK OF CULTURAL HERITAGE

Numerous calligraphic plaques crafted by the San Kiang peoples are preserved in the Association’s collection, but their work is found elsewhere too. One notable example is the calligraphy on the Penang Nanyang Volunteers Monument in Air Itam, which memorialises the Penang Chinese transportation volunteers, some of whom were killed during the Second Sino–Japanese



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War. This plaque was the handiwork of Kung Cheong Tai, while the monument’s inscription was composed by Guan Zhenmin and Zhou Mansha. The Association also possesses its own cemetery at Batu Uban: the only one belonging to the San Kiang peoples in Malaysia. Although not large, it is well-preserved. During the Qingming and Zhongyuan Festivals, board members visit to pay their respects and offer prayers.

In the blink of an eye, the Association has recorded over a century of history. It continues to operate steadily from its current location at Lorong Macalister and remains dedicated to serving its community. It hopes that more people can learn about its work, and calls upon eligible young people to join its ranks.

***Note:** This article is excerpted and adapted from the author’s 2025 master’s dissertation.^[2]

ENDNOTES

1. Sin Chew. (2018, October 31). 为14校歌谱曲赋予学校灵魂 吕书成87岁仍坚持创作 [Composing for 14 school anthems endows schools with souls: Lee Soo Sheng, 87, still insists on composing].
2. Chai, QW. (2025). 檳城三江会馆与三江社群研究 [Study of Penang San Kiang Association and the San Kiang Community]. MA dissertation, Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman.



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**TOWARDS CULTURAL
REVIVAL AND**

**HISTORICAL
RECOGNITION:**

**PENANG
AND ITS**

CLAN

**BY
PAN
YI
CHIEH**

PENANG IS HOME to more than 200 historic clan houses and district associations, which have shaped its cultural landscape for over two centuries. To a casual observer, these institutions may seem like static remnants of the past; however, many still actively support local communities while doubling as popular tourist sites. Beyond their ageing façades is a history of anchoring the Chinese community locally, overcoming major challenges and managing constant evolution. *Penang Monthly* explores their journey of adaptation in a changing world.

HOUSES





LEAVING HOME AND REBUILDING IDENTITIES

Our sense of identity is truly shaken when we leave home for distant lands and encounter others greatly different from ourselves. At such times, self-knowledge and exciting adaptations emerge.^[1] During the 18th and 19th centuries, many Chinese people left their homes to seek fortunes in places like Penang. While a majority of them hailed from southern Chinese provinces like Fujian and Guangdong, a smaller number migrated from more northerly ones such as Zhejiang, Jiangsu and Jiangxi (see “Minute but Mighty: Getting to Know the Penang San Kiang Association” in this issue). Mid-19th-century George Town was home to a vibrant mix of Chinese communities, including but not limited to the Hokkien, Cantonese, Teochew, Hakka and Hainanese.^[2] These dialect group communities settled alongside each another, forming distinct neighbouring districts for safety and for mutual care. Associations not only catered to those with a common origin or lineage, but also those in the same trade.

From this persistent purpose arose a variety of clan houses, dialect associations (*huiguan*, or *wooi kwan/wui koon* in Cantonese) and trade guilds or associations (often called *hong* in Cantonese). Although varying in size and scale, depending on community resources, all demonstrated significant love, dedication and passion in supporting members. Social resources were relatively scarce then, so these institutions played an indispensable role in ensuring the survival of early Chinese immigrant communities.

For new arrivals, such institutional support provided crucial everyday resources. These ranged from spiritual essentials, such as spaces for ancestral worship to practical

necessities, for example job opportunities and gathering places for people sharing similar backgrounds. Such support was vital when systems of trust relied heavily on interpersonal networks premised upon shared hometowns or dialects. As they expanded, these associations provided cohesive services such as reliable financial aid, educational scholarships and venues for marriage ceremonies. Matters related to death were also accounted for, such as funeral spaces and burial services (see “Traces of the Pear Garden in Penang: The Forgotten Pat Woh Tong Common Graves” in this issue).

MODES OF ORGANISATION

In pre-war Penang, identity was generally defined by highly intricate boundaries, including specific villages, districts and provinces. Consequently, a single individual could simultaneously belong to multiple organisations, based on shared surnames, dialect groups and professions.

These overlapping identities created an effective social safety net that ensured deep and multilayered protection for Penang’s Chinese communities, and a strong sense of belonging for individuals.

Clan houses strictly represent individuals with either a shared surname or a more specific lineage, often linked with distinctive hall names (*tang hao*). These names usually originated from areas where a prominent lineage once thrived or commemorate titles bestowed by the Chinese emperor for an ancestor’s noble deeds. For instance, the surname Tan is traditionally associated with the Eng Chuan (颍川) hall name.^[3] Interestingly, some clan organisations may represent multiple surnames, because certain groups have smaller populations or share historical connections. For instance, Saw Khaw Lean Ghean Thum Boo Chong Shu (大山脚苏许连谭巫宗祠) in Bukit Mertajam (established 1958) harmoniously houses six distinct lineages under one roof, featuring a shared altar dedicated to individual ancestors.^[4]

In contrast, district associations foreground geographical origins, defined by an immigrant’s home region in China and their shared native language. For example, a person originating from Shunde (Soon Tuck) District in Guangdong would have been eligible to join the Soon Tuck Wui Koon (Shunde Association, established 1838).^[5] But the association was, in turn, part of Penang’s umbrella Kwangtung & Tengchow Association (established 1795), serving as the major support pillar for immigrants from these areas—including Shunde.^[6] Thus, a newcomer could meet neighbours from their own hometown alongside a diverse community of Cantonese, Hainanese, Hakka and Teochew folk, while the provision of essential services (including a proper and dignified burial space) enabled individual peace of mind.

Trade associations also served as essential hubs for finding employment within specific vocations. While often aligned closely with certain dialect groups—



largely because skills and craftsmanship were once deeply intertwined with regional traditions—they are generally more inclusive than lineage- or geography-based organisations. A prime example is the Ta Kam Hong (Penang’s goldsmiths’ guild), whose early establishment was largely rooted among the Toishan (Taishan) community from Guangdong (see “Ta Kam Hong: More Than Just a Guild for Goldsmiths” in this issue).^[7] Beyond serving as a vital business network, it also promotes education and supports local social welfare.

With time, these institutions came to play vital roles in local cultural development. Several founded schools and actively encouraged descendants to pursue academic excellence by giving out scholarships. Over generations, these organisations have proudly upheld their cultural roles and foundational ethos by providing welcoming spaces where communities still gather to celebrate deities’ birthdays, honour ancestors and observe essential traditional occasions (for example, the Winter Solstice and Qingming, or Tomb-sweeping Day).

PAST AND FUTURE

The remarkable boom of these institutions, particularly prior to the mid-20th century, demonstrates the vitality of Penang’s Chinese communities. In fact, many were the first of their kind in Malaysia, such as the Seh Tek Tong Cheah Kongsi. This kongsi has the country’s most historic Cheah (Xie)

clan house, and remains dedicated to the ancestral lineage from Fujian’s Sek Tong Village.

It was not uncommon for new associations to emerge even after independence, with some improving their communal strength by integrating resources. Generally, these institutions entered a poignant transitional period after the 1960s, contextualised by the emergence of a new national identity, combined with the availability of more robust public resources. To be sure, many now face a shortage of new members; they offer fewer practical benefits for younger generations, whose daily needs are now met by modern society. Most significantly, these younger people no longer automatically connect with distant ancestral cultural traditions. Consequently, many organisations, especially clan houses and district associations, began establishing dedicated youth and women’s sections, providing a potential glimmer of continuity (see “Future-proofing an Ancestral District Association” in this issue). Indeed, institutional sustainability requires immense dedication and passion so that organisations can continue serving as vital cultural hubs.

They are also important to preserving local historical memory. Their architecture and interior decorations, coupled with extensive collections of artefacts such as plaques, tell valuable stories (see “Eyeing Traditional Chinese Architecture and

Heritage Building Conservation in George Town” in this issue). Many researchers and passionate individuals have explored how district associations have contributed to Penang’s art history. For example, the Hui Aun Association Penang’s plaque was written by the famous calligrapher, Tsue Ta Tee (see *Penang Monthly* July 2025). This was done between the 1950s and 1960s during his brief stay in Penang, when the association became a vibrant site for literati and artists alike to gather and hold exhibitions.^[8] Ultimately, their artistic and cultural value should not stay cherished only in George Town. All associations hailing from across Penang represent an equally invaluable part of a shared collective history and heritage, not only of the state, but the whole region.

FORMING CULTURAL HUBS IN A MULTICULTURAL SOCIETY

An institution’s confidence in and willingness to share stories with visitors is of paramount importance to its transformation. Engagement is an essential pathway to broadening public knowledge, without which the profound meaning behind these institutions risks being forgotten. Over the past two decades, numerous organisations and passionate individuals have worked tirelessly alongside clan houses, district associations and trade guilds to explore and preserve this heritage (see “A Glimpse into Penang’s Hakka Community” in this issue).





Undoubtedly, the 2008 joint listing of Melaka and George Town as a UNESCO World Heritage Site provides powerful inspiration. The annual George Town Heritage Celebrations, managed by George Town World Heritage Incorporated (GTWHI), features distinct themes to guide visitors as they immerse themselves in the city's diverse cultural tapestry. This supportive environment has encouraged many Chinese associations to open their doors, share histories and actively participate within the wider multicultural scene, thus allowing their vital tangible and intangible values to be explored.

THE AMAZING PENANG MIAOHUI

The Penang Miaohui event (since 1999) is an excellent demonstration of how dedicated teams can work with local associations to promote cultural significance. Organised by the Penang Chinese Clan Council, and planned and coordinated by the Penang Cultural Inheritors Society (also known as the "Inheritors"), Miaohui has been held annually during the Lunar New Year period. With an overarching focus on cultural preservation and heritage, the organising team invests tremendous effort into coordinating with participating groups. Supported by the Penang state government and local communities, years of dedicated effort have brought together numerous Chinese clan houses, district associations, temples and trade guilds to share their rich histories.

The festival has become both the liveliest event of Penang's Lunar New Year calendar and a crucial gateway for introducing traditional culture to visitors. In 2026, the festival area expanded to 12 historic streets in George Town, featuring 23 local clan associations and temples, 90 external



counterparts, over 120 local hawkers and 50 cultural exhibition booths offering interactive experiences like calligraphy and other traditional arts.

This long-term educational mission has evolved beautifully over the years. Kwoh Shoo Chen, a dedicated core member of the Inheritors' organising team for decades, has expressed heartfelt gratitude to the participating institutions, volunteers and partners, noting that organising Penang Miaohui would have been impossible without their unwavering support. She highlighted the vital role of the volunteer programme, first introduced in 2017, in helping associations explain their intricate histories to visitors. By 2019, the team even recruited primary school students as junior commentators, stationing these young guides at various locations to proudly pass on knowledge. In 2026, volunteer numbers reached a post-pandemic high of 500–600 people, aged as young as 14 to individuals in their 80s. Many dedicated participants and supporting clan houses travelled from

CAPTIONS

(Cover spread) Even at night, many visitors remain enthusiastic in joining activities at the Penang Miaohui.

1. Penang Tay Koon Oh Kongsi, an historic Chinese clan association located along Lebuh Penang.
2. The library of the Penang Chinese Town Hall has played an important role in preserving the anniversary publications of Chinese associations in Penang.
3. During the 2026 Penang Miaohui, the Moe She Temple welcomed visitors with an exhibition on tea culture.
4. A key feature of the Miaohui is the involvement of young commentators, who bring cultural stories to life for visitors.

5. Chinese associations have long prioritised education for the younger generation, as shown in these Moe Clan academic achievement honours.

6. Persatuan Hainan Pulau Pinang, an important community organisation with a longstanding role in supporting Penang's Hainanese community.
7. A trade association, the Penang and Province Wellesley Café Association is located on Muntri Street.

Seberang Perai, Kuala Lumpur and Kedah, among other locations, to take part.

With gentle, heartfelt warmth, Kwoh reflected: "We could not be more grateful for the immense support from all associations and volunteers. Their participation embodies the true spirit of Miaohui, ensuring that the diversity of traditional culture is preserved, inherited and passed on to the future."

For many institutions facing recruitment challenges, Miaohui has also become an important platform for reconnecting with their roots and attracting new members. Remarkably, one institution even recruited a spectacular 30 new members during the event! In recent years, there has been a conscious effort to expand and redefine Miaohui beyond Chinese culture alone. The 2026 festival marked a historic milestone by welcoming a multitude of other cultural organisations, holding an open house on the streets near the Lebuh Aceh Mosque and featuring vibrant showcases of Indian, Eurasian, Japanese and various heritage cultures. At its core, the festival aims to convey Miaohui's identity as a fundamentally cultural celebration, by extending an open invitation to embrace and unite Penang's increasingly diverse communities.

Chong Jian Mei, now in her early-30s, has served as Miaohui's event master planner for several years. Like many of her peers, she balances a demanding full-time job against volunteering an immense amount of time to Miaohui's rigorous, yearlong planning schedule. Since joining in 2021, she has found deep meaning in both the event and the dedicated individuals who bring it to life. As a Christian, her involvement was initially met with hesitation by

her family, who assumed that Miaohui was a strictly religious festival. However, through deeper engagement, she came to discover its testament to cultural preservation and diversity. Beyond Miaohui, the team also organises the Meng Eng Soo Open Day on 7 July, to honour ancestral spirits, and the annual Cultural Cultivation Programme, which focuses on youth expression.

Spanning two centuries of history, the journey to revitalising these institutions has never been easy; long-term sustainability remains a challenge. However, through the combined and passionate effort of the communities involved, this priceless heritage can be enjoyed and sustained for generations to come.

ENDNOTES

1. For an in-depth look into the emerges of distinct identities, and even nations, see: Anderson, B. (1983). *Imagined Communities*, Verso.
2. Chen Z. (2020), 马来西亚檳城华侨建筑 [Overseas Chinese Architecture in Penang, Malaysia]. China Architecture & Building Press.
3. Kwoh S.C. (ed.) (2013) 「」 檳州宗祠家庙简史 上集 [Chinese Clans in Penang: A Concise History (Volume 1)]. Penang Chinese Clan Council.
4. Ibid.
5. Editorial Committee of Penang Shunde Association. (1992). 檳城順德會館慶祝成立150周年紀念特刊 (1838-1988) [Souvenir Magazine of Penang Shunde Association Celebrating its 150th Anniversary (1838-1988)].

6. See the Kwangtung & Tengchow Association's website at <https://www.kwangteng-pg.org/>.

7. Perpetual Memorial Park. (2025). 在行业里看历史 在牌匾中听故事 一个勃勃生机的华人时代 [Seeing History Through Industries, Hearing Stories Through Plaques: A Vibrant Chinese Era]. 原乡柔情 檳城紀 [Our Native Land | Penang Chronicles].

8. Tan G.S. & Lee S.C. (2021). The Chinese Calligrapher to the South. *ERUDITE*, 2(2), 47–80.



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WOMEN ALLOWED:

YEOH KONGSI

TAKES A LEAP



BY RACHEL YEOH

MY AUNT'S URGENT tone broke the funeral gloom.

"Have you signed up to be a member of the Yeoh Kongsi? They are now admitting women." I gave her a puzzled look while she busied herself on her mobile phone. "I have sent you the registration form via WhatsApp. Did you receive it? Do you know this is the first time a clan house is allowing women to be members? We Yeoh ladies, we must join!" she berated.

I nodded in compliance. As if noticing my non-committal expression, she looked at me sternly and said, "Fill it up and send it to Seng Hooi, your cousin. He is the Honorary Secretary of Yeoh Kongsi. This is not just the Yeoh Kongsi where *any* Yeoh can join, this is specifically for the Yeohs from the same village—from Har Yang." I gave her a more convincing reply and she relented.

I shared this piece of news with my colleagues who had worked with Penang clan houses, and their excitement matched my aunt's intensity. They threw around

words like "this is never done", "revolutionary" and "not really a custom". I knew I needed to secure an interview with a Yeoh Kongsi trustee.

A LONG TIME COMING

The idea of recruiting women as clanspeople was pushed out approximately 15 years ago by a generation of older trustees. Unfortunately, many were not in favour of it. It was brought up again two years ago but was rejected, again. However, during the February 2025 board meeting, now with young blood and eager hearts, many gave their approval—a conditional approval, as the final approval had to come from the patron saint.^[1]

"Immediately after we gave our approval at the boardroom, located at the ground level of Yeoh Kongsi, we went upstairs to do the *bwa bwei* (throwing of divination blocks)," Seng Hooi relayed. "We asked for permission three times—and we got three yeses! Of course, nobody could object. There were some older members

who were not too keen, but after that 'divine clearance', everyone had peace of mind."

Another trustee, Oon San, explained that the question about women being part of the Kongsi arose after a query for women to put their tablets in the ancestral hall, also known as the "Hall of Four Knows", after they pass on. "Only the Har Yang Yeoh clansmen and their spouses could. This became the topic of debate. If wives of clansmen who were not born into the Yeoh family could have their tablets in the ancestral hall, why can't single or widowed Yeoh women do the same? The reply was, because Yeoh women weren't clanspeople."

Their solution was pragmatic: allow Yeoh women to be clanspeople—with restrictions.

Husbands and/or children of clanswomen cannot have their tablets in the ancestral hall because they carry a different surname. They also cannot be trustees.

"The Kongsi is also open to Har Yang Yeoh of different faiths, like Christians,

because the Kongsi constitution does not say you have to be of a certain religion to be a clansperson, you just have to be a Yeoh who descended from the Har Yang ancestral village. Also, there is no need to venerate the ancestors or pray to the patron saint to be a member—that is only required for trustees and those seeking financial aid for their tertiary education,” Seng Hooi explained.

This was not the first time trustees of the Kongsi pushed their traditional boundaries. It seems that the Kongsi had set a precedence in another matter before.

A WRITTEN CONSTITUTION

Yeoh Kongsi was formed to attend to the needs of its clansmen. In the late 19th century, the Yeoh clan owned five tin mining companies and employed 700 coolies.^[2] The Kongsi also looked into joint property-buying ventures and rental as a source of funding for sustaining and managing the clan. In 1900, a stele was erected on the Kongsi’s grounds that listed the names of the trustees at the time and also implied that the Kongsi should have written rules and regulations to govern the disposal of collective properties and oversee revenues and expenditures.^[3]

However, on 25 August 1909, Yeoh Paik Tatt, son of a former headman, sued the leadership of his Kongsi, citing misuse of funds and incompetent leadership.^[4] Based on court reports, Paik Tatt sought to replace its obsolete management with modern, efficient business practices. At that point, the Kongsi owned properties that were let out to members at a cheaper price than to outsiders.^[5] The trustees viewed the Kongsi as a charity for its members but



2

Paik Tatt saw it first and foremost as a profit-seeking institution.

The decade-long lawsuit uncovered more hidden transactions which led to forced resignations of all the trustees.^[6] The colonial court defined the Kongsi as a trust for members within the Har Yang Yeoh. The verdict banned preferential

pricing or business concessions for clan members, ruling that transactions must maximise the Kongsi’s financial interests which will then allow the Kongsi to continue providing charity for its destitute members.^[7]

Winning the lawsuit also led to Paik Tatt becoming the Kongsi’s president. Once at the helm, he drew up a new set of rules and regulations—colloquially referred to as the “constitution”.^[8] Because of this very public trial, other major clan associations across the Straits Settlements realised that they needed to comply with the British legal environment—in this case, codifying unwritten village rules, having a formal constitution and registering under the colonial Companies Ordinances or Societies Acts—to protect themselves from lawsuits.^[9]

ONWARD FROM 190 YEARS

During the recent Yeoh Kongsi 190th anniversary celebration, Chief Minister Chow Kon Yeow, in his opening speech, urged the younger generation to take an interest in the affairs of clan associations and carry their good traditions and values. “Clan associations will continue to thrive when the younger generation take active roles alongside the elders; their involvement will ensure continuity, energy and fresh perspective for the future.”

Admitting women is a trailblazing move that proves traditions can bend to accommodate practical needs, and survive. However, the bigger battle for today’s clan associations and trade guilds lies in capturing the interest of the younger generation. This, I believe, will require a radical leap by them to uphold their cultural legacies.



CAPTIONS

1. Ancestral tablets in the “Hall of Four Knows”.
2. The stele that was erected in 1900 on the Yeoh Kongsi grounds.
3. The beautifully painted three-beams five-purlins system in the main ancestral hall.



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

ENDNOTES

1. While the Yeoh Kongsi patron deity is widely known by the Anglicised Hokkien name “Sye Tow Kong”, heritage researcher Lim Gaik Siang discovered that the true characters are 使头公.
2. Songprasert, P. (1986). *The development of Chinese capital in Southern Siam, 1868–1932* [Doctoral dissertation, Monash University]
3. The 1900 epigraph does suggest that written rules and regulations should have existed, parties on either side of the lawsuit could not produce a copy.
4. Ling, Z. (2026). *Re-conceptualizing Southeast Asia Chinese Clan Association through The Seh Yeoh Kongsi Case, 1909–1917* [Unpublished manuscript]. Department of History, University of Connecticut.
5. Seh Yeoh Kongsi case. (1913, March 7). *The Straits Echo* (Mail Edition). <https://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/digitised/article/straitsecho19130307-1.2.157>
6. The trustees may have resigned voluntarily out of humiliation. This resignation was, however, not ordered by the court.
7. Ling (2026).
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid.

EYEING TRADITIONAL
CHINESE
ARCHITECTURE AND

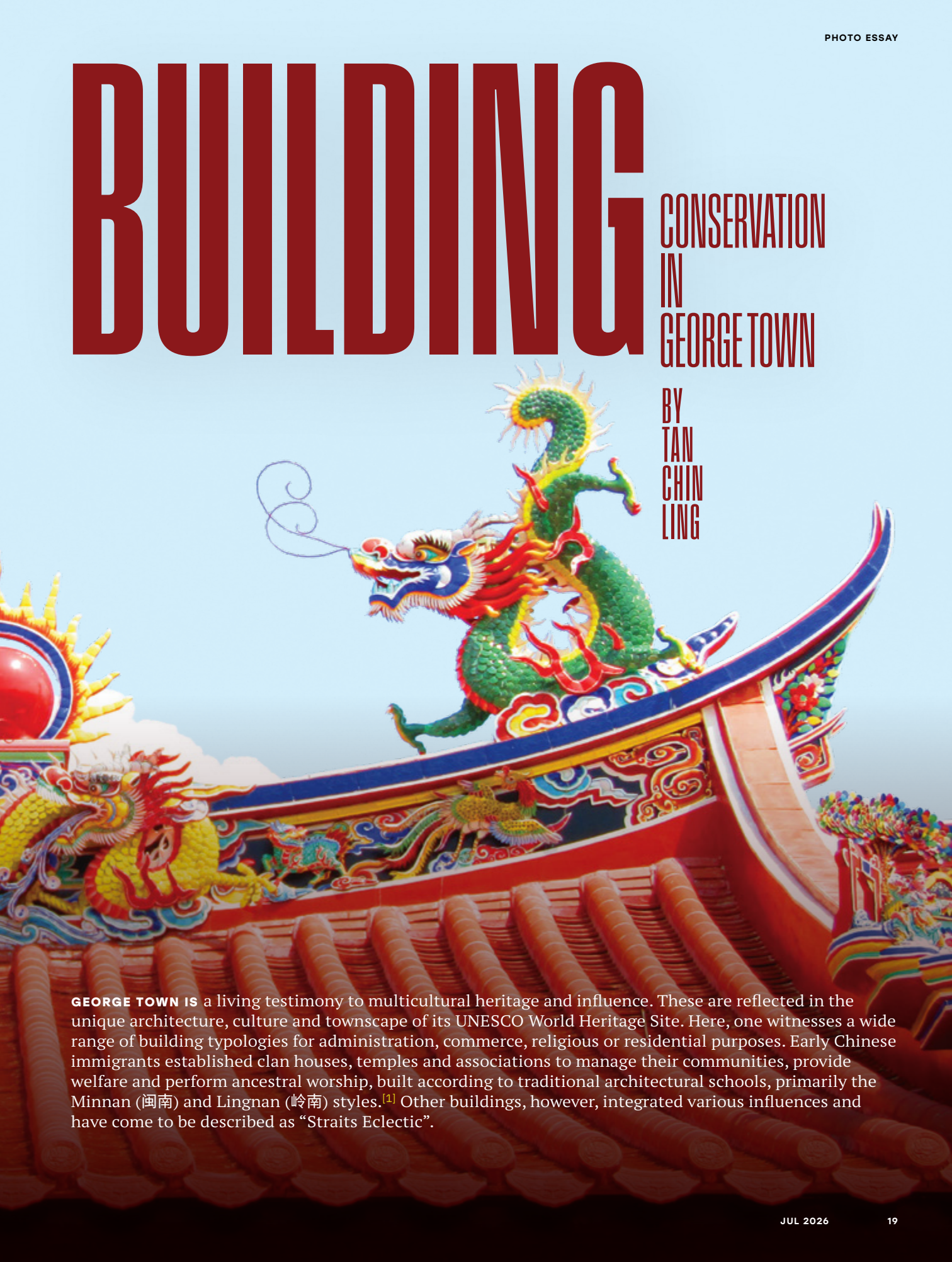
HERITAGE



BUILDING

CONSERVATION IN GEORGE TOWN

BY
TAN
CHIN
LING



GEORGE TOWN IS a living testimony to multicultural heritage and influence. These are reflected in the unique architecture, culture and townscape of its UNESCO World Heritage Site. Here, one witnesses a wide range of building typologies for administration, commerce, religious or residential purposes. Early Chinese immigrants established clan houses, temples and associations to manage their communities, provide welfare and perform ancestral worship, built according to traditional architectural schools, primarily the Minnan (闽南) and Lingnan (岭南) styles.^[1] Other buildings, however, integrated various influences and have come to be described as “Straits Eclectic”.



1



2



3



4



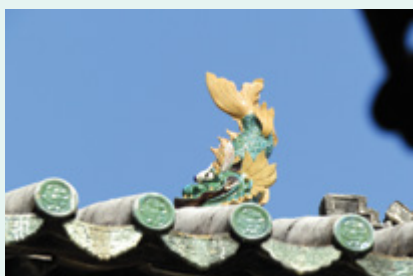
5a



5b



5c



5d



5e



5f

CAPTIONS

(Cover spread) Traditional Minnan architecture features a sharply upturned and forked roof ridge resembling a swallow's tail (燕尾脊). This ridge is decorated with jian nian (剪黏, cut-and-paste porcelain shard work) artwork and paintings.

1. Decorative elements such as pai tou (牌头), an iconic element of a Minnan temple roof, decorated with jian nian artwork.
2. Decorative stucco gui chui (规垂) on a Minnan gable wall.
3. Restoration of jian nian artwork on a Minnan-style roof.



6

How is such built heritage protected? The 2016 Special Area Plan safeguards heritage buildings in both George Town and Melaka. Category I buildings are of exceptional interest, while Category II buildings are of special interest. There are 82 Category I buildings and sites, 48 of which are authentic Chinese clan houses, association buildings and temples. Meanwhile, the Conservation Management Plan guides the authorities, professionals, community members, owners and members of the public in conserving and managing these buildings. Other relevant legislation are the National Heritage Act 2005 and the State of Penang Heritage Enactment 2011 (Enactment 14).

4. Ceramic lion and *bogu*(博古纹) stucco, commonly found on Lingnan-style roofs.

5. The Ng See Kah Miew (Ng Clan House, 5a) and Toi Shan Ninyang Wui Kwon (Nin Yong Temple, 5b) are in the Lingnan style. Lingnan architecture is famous for its *Shiwan* ceramic decorated roof ridge (5c and 5d), *huisu* (灰塑) (5c) and “three carvings” (stone, wood and brick). The granite carved beams of the front façade (虾公梁, lit. “prawn” beams) are topped by a carved stone lion (看梁狮子) (5f). The pillar heads are decorated with carved brick decorative elements (砖雕) (5e). The front façade is built with grey clay bricks.

6. Bird’s-eye view of the George Town World Heritage Site. Photo courtesy of XQ Tu.

7. Tan Kongsí’s main roof truss structure. Three cross-beams (三通) and five queen-posts (五瓜筒) are supported by a base of three brackets (一斗三升) and five curved lintels (五弯枋).

8. Goddess of Mercy Temple (Kong Hock Keong), built in the Minnan style.

9. A row of Category I association buildings, clan house and temples on King Street.

10. An experienced artisan restores a mural.



7



8



9



10

PHOTO ESSAY

11. Temporary roof to protect a heritage building during conservation works.

12. Timber species verification safeguards the authenticity of a heritage building. According to the Guidelines on Heritage Building Conservation, replacement of rotted timber components and elements must use wood of the same species and strength rating as the original. Note that the Malaysian Timber Industry Board has classified timber species into seven strength groups.

13. Leong San Tong Khoo Kongsí (burned down in 1901, rebuilt 1906) is a National Heritage, State Heritage and Category I heritage building (13a). For comparison, see the Khoo clan house at Sin Aun Village (新坡村) in China's Fujian Province (13b).

14. Schmidt hammer rebound test to study the compressive strength of a new plaster mock-up, before actual re-plastering works are carried out on-site. This test is crucial to minimise the risk of plaster quality issues.

15. Mortar samples collected for x-ray fluorescence analysis of its composition and condition (15a). The samples are prepared at a certified laboratory (15b).

16. 3-D scanning, drones and laser meters enhance accuracy while saving time and labour in heritage building documentation.

17. Another decorative stucco *gui chui*.



11



12



13a



14



13b

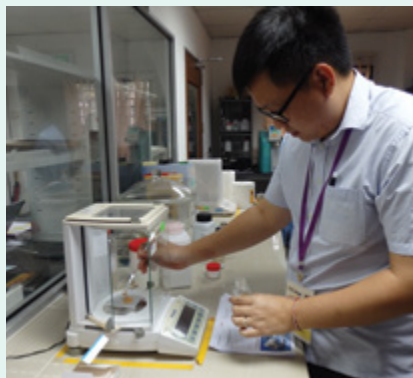
Gazetted heritage sites and buildings have to be conserved according to the Guidelines on Heritage Building Conservation and the Special Area Plan. The World Heritage Convention 1972 defines conservation as guardianship, providing for maintenance, preservation or protection from destruction or inappropriate change. Current Malaysian conservation guidelines are informed by the Venice Charter and Burra Charter, where safeguarding authenticity and cultural significance are key principles. “Change as much as necessary, but as little as possible,” states the Burra Charter.

All proposed heritage conservation projects in George Town’s World Heritage Site should safeguard the attributes of its Outstanding Universal Values.

A good project involves comprehensive and appropriate research, project planning, conservation techniques, building materials and other elements. Its success depends upon the effectiveness of decisions made in consideration of robust data and information, obtained through research, scientific analysis and data collection. Proper documentation is key to ensuring that cultural significance is conserved, besides serving as a future reference. As per the Guidelines on Heritage Building Conservation, it includes an initial study report, a dilapidation study report, the Historical Architectural Building Survey (covering pre-conservation, ongoing and post-conservation works) and a Final Conservation Report, among others.



15a



15b



16



16



17

ENDNOTE

1. Examples of the Minnan style include the Hock Teik Cheng Sin Temple (Poh Hock Seah), Goddess of Mercy Temple and the Hokkien “Big Five” clan houses. Meanwhile, most Cantonese and Hakka clan houses and association buildings are built in the Lingnan style, for example the Ng Clan House, Nin Yong Temple, Loo Pun Hong (The Carpenters’ Guild) and Moey She Temple.



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1

TA KAM HONG

MUCH MORE THAN JUST A GUILD FOR GOLDSMITHS

BY CAROLYN KHOR

ALL THAT GLITTERS is not gold, yet Penang has long drawn generations of goldsmiths, carpenters and craftsmen to its shores. The Chinese migrant communities have tended to form associations and guilds as pillars of their economic and social ecosystem. Among the early ones was Ta Kam Hong, the Penang goldsmiths' guild, founded in 1832. Although described today as either a historic guild or an ancestral temple, its role was one that extended far. It did not only deal with jewellery craftsmanship, as its name suggests. Indeed, Ta Kam Hong structured trade, welfare, religion and culture for an entire community. In short, it organised migrants in early-19th-century Penang and eased them into the wider community by bridging the world they had left behind with the haven they were forging.

DOUBLING AS A COMMUNITY INSTITUTION

Many early Chinese migrants did not arrive as isolated individuals entering an open labour market. Instead, they entered pre-existing social networks organised around dialect groups and districts of origin. Generally, newcomers were then linked to people from the same county or kinship network. However, some of these institutions also centred around occupation, including specialised trades.

Indeed, entry into certain professions depended heavily on both dialect affiliation and interpersonal networks, where guilds simultaneously created opportunities for some and controlled access for others. For instance, Cantonese-speaking migrants became strongly associated with artisanal trades such as goldsmithing, carpentry and construction. Thus, guilds such as Ta Kam Hong emerged when Southern Chinese migrants entered a rapidly expanding colonial port economy with little formal support. They functioned as both filter and placement system for new arrivals, concentrating trade knowledge within tightly controlled master-and-apprentice structures.

Ta Kam Hong occupied an important position in this ecosystem because goldsmithing was a skilled trade requiring years of apprenticeship and close trans-

mission of techniques. Early goldsmiths from Taishan, Guangdong, brought technical skills and systems of organisation drawn from guild traditions in southern China to Penang. As the guild's chairman, Foong Hon Beng, noted: "Apprenticeship arrangements connected young workers to master craftsmen, while the association itself provided an environment where business networks, social relationships and cultural practices are preserved through the generations."

Even the guild's theological anchor, centred around its patron deity, is rooted in craftsmanship. Ta Kam Hong houses the only Wu Jing temple in the world; according to lore, Wu Jing was a master craftsman famed for producing intricate gold and silver ornaments for the imperial court. One legend tells of how he fashioned an ornate coronet to conceal a noblewoman's facial blemish for the selection process of an empress. Although this deception eventually led to his execution, the story immortalises Wu Jing as an extraordinary craftsman, devoted to his trade. In the temple stands a statue of Wu Jing, depicted in official attire. During his "birthday" celebrations, a solid gold headpiece is ceremoniously placed upon the statue, which is also surrounded by antique silver ornaments, including a unique pair of decorative fans.

TRADITION AS THE SPINE OF THE PRESENT-DAY GUILD

According to Ta Kam Hong's records, it was first established by goldsmiths in rented premises on Bishop Street, before a permanent temple and guild building was established on Muntri Street in 1904. By the late-19th and early-20th centuries, Penang had become an important regional centre for goldsmithing and jewellery trading, with Chinese craftsmen being the dominant force within the industry.

Goldsmiths were not simply craftsmen who produced ornaments; they were also part of a wider network of smelters, merchants, traders and financiers. Since

gold jewellery was a precious and highly sought-after commodity, consistent demand kept the trade alive across generations. In Chinese culture, gold is not only a symbol of status and wealth; it is also an integral part of weddings and festivals, such as the birth of a newborn child.

In the postwar period, the practical functions once performed by guilds gradually gave way to careers untethered from traditional apprenticeship pathways. Younger generations became less dependent on dialect-based trade networks, leading to a decline in guild memberships. Ta Kam Hong's records boasted around 600 craftsmen in the 1960s, but active membership is only around 200 individuals today. According to Foong: "The trade has changed considerably. Traditional hand-crafted techniques still exist, but many have now transitioned to mechanised production, imported designs and modern retail business models."

Yet Ta Kam Hong did not disappear. Instead, it repositioned itself as both a representative body within the jewellery industry and custodian of cultural heritage. George Town's inscription as a UNESCO World Heritage Site has further cemented its place within Penang's history. Today, the Muntri Street building is as much a conservation landmark as it is a guild institution.

MORE THAN A PAGE IN HISTORY

Ta Kam Hong's members today include practising craftsmen as well as retailers and traders, reflecting a transition from a community-based guild into a more commercially connected trade association. "The goldsmith craft and reverence for Wu Jing remain part of our tradition, but the association's role has evolved with the industry and changing times," Foong said.

However, some physical upgrades to the building are needed. "We will be upgrading its flooring, roofing and interior decoration," he continued. The renovation works are expected to be completed by 2027.

Last December, Ta Kam Hong launched a "buy gold, win a car" fundraising campaign to support restoration efforts for the temple and guild complex. During its 193rd anniversary celebrations, Foong said that restoration and maintenance (estimated at RM5mil) were needed to ensure that the site remains structurally sound and able to continue serving the wider community.

However, to view Ta Kam Hong purely as a physical heritage attraction or an occupational club would be to overlook its imprint on broader migrant networks and community life. Its social impact still reverberates today through annual celebrations held in conjunction with Wu Jing's birthday, and other commemorative events that continue to strengthen intergenerational "kinship" among members. Through business networks and global collaborations, the guild continues to carry tradition into the 21st century.

Ta Kam Hong's significance—and that of similar historic guilds in the vicinity—lies in the way it preserves the spirit and cultural memory of early southern Chinese migrants to colonial Penang. Its carved signboards and temple halls remain part of a living heritage that traces the lives of craftsmen who toiled in an unfamiliar land. Within its walls are also stories of migration, resilience, survival and community.



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

CAPTIONS

1. An elaborate altar featuring Wu Jing as its patron deity.
2. Ta Kam Hong's restoration works began in February 2025.



FUTURE- PROOFING AN ANCESTRAL DISTRICT ASSOCIATION

BY WONG KIM FEI

FOR THE LONGEST time, I viewed Penang's Chinese ancestral district associations, or *huiguan*, with a heavy dose of scepticism. To me, and perhaps many of my generation, these centuries-old institutions seemed like archaic remnants of a bygone era. I dismissed them as exclusive social playgrounds for older generations, where wealthy elders played increasingly detached roles in a local vanity fair: chasing community prestige, trading grand titles and hosting extravagant dinners. I assumed that their historical purpose as mutual aid networks had long expired, and was therefore content to remain an outsider. How, then, did I go from sceptic to active custodian of the Hoy Peng Wui Koon (Hoy Peng district association)?

MAPPING SELFHOOD IN A GLOBALISED WORLD

Identity has a strange, quiet way of catching up with you. Before 2019, if anyone had asked me about my ancestral roots, my answer would have been generic. "I am a Cantonese Malaysian from Penang." Beyond that, the map of my lineage would have been a complete blank. I had no idea which village, town or specific district my ancestors left behind when they braved migration across the South China Sea.

The turning point arrived abruptly in 2019. Having just turned 42, I found myself gripped by deep, existential questions. Who am I? Where do I truly come from? This philosophical urge to map my origins compelled me to act. I reached out to my cousin in Singapore, and asked: "Does our maternal aunt still have any living relatives back in Guangdong? Does she happen to have an old address?"

The response was a photo of a faded, yellowed piece of paper with handwritten Chinese characters sent via WhatsApp. It was an address from a time before post-codes and satellite navigation. Armed with nothing but this fragile clue, I turned to China's online maps. I spent hours zooming into the rural landscapes of Guangdong, tracking names that had changed across generations. Miraculously, the digital pins aligned. I located the village and, through that digital bridge, managed to

connect with my Chinese cousin whom I never knew existed. This breakthrough culminated in 2023, when I finally embarked on a deeply emotional pilgrimage to my ancestral homeland in Hoy Peng. Walking upon the soil of my grandfather's village and embracing long-lost kin transformed my understanding of self.

THE JOURNEY TO JALAN CINTRA

Eager to share this journey, I documented my ancestral quest on a Facebook group dedicated to the global Hoy Peng diaspora. I did not expect this simple act of digital storytelling to catch the eye of a vigilant elder back home. Goh Voon Hong, a dedicated vice-president of our local Hoy Peng Wui Koon, read my posts. Recognising a rare spark of ancestral pride in a younger Penangite, he reached out with an invitation to join our "ancestral home" on Jalan Cintra in George Town.

Initially, my old prejudices resurfaced, and I gave polite excuses, expecting him to drop the matter. But Goh possessed a gentle, unyielding perseverance. Over months of persistent and warm encouragement, he showed me that the association was not driven by vanity, but instead about preventing our specific history from fading into oblivion. Moved by his dedication, I relented. In 2025, I officially crossed the threshold and joined the "family".



Our association holds a profoundly unique position in regional history. Officially recognised by the Registry of Societies, the Hoy Peng Wui Koon is the *one and only* dedicated Hoy Peng district association in Southeast Asia. Historically, Hoy Peng was part of the Seiyap (Four Districts) region in southwestern Guangdong, alongside Toisan, Sunwui and Yanpeng (later reorganised as Ngyap, with the inclusion of Hoksan). Early Hoy Peng immigrants to Penang were relatively few compared with their fellows from neighbouring districts, and so they joined the Toisan Association, rallying under a broader Seiyap identity. The founding of our own independent district association in 1949 was a monumental statement of identity for the local Hoy Peng community.

A SILENT MOTHER TONGUE AND NESTED ALLIANCES

Stepping inside as a new member revealed a sobering reality. Like many smaller, localised dialect-based associations across Malaysia, Hoy Peng Wui Koon faces a severe demographic crisis. The vibrant mutual-aid hub of the 19th and 20th centuries has quieted down, and younger generations are conspicuously absent.

Yet its institutional heart keeps beating. Our committee members meet regularly and meticulously, operating as a fully legal entity. This institutional structure mirrors a wider historical network within Penang's Chinese community. The island is dense with traditional groups operating within a nested hierarchy of geographical identity, still practising Qing-era customs. Smaller associations representing specific counties or districts are historically tied to larger overarching prefectural associations, based on old administrative boundaries. Hoy Peng's historical administrative home was Siew Heng Foo (Siew Heng Prefecture). Thus, the Hoy Peng Wui Koon is directly affiliated with the larger and more prestigious Penang Siew Heng Association (Persatuan Siew Heng Foo) on Jalan Transfer. Consequently, many of our committee and general members simultaneously serve as leaders and members at Jalan Transfer, maintaining a delicate, living network of historical alliances that has survived empire and modernisation.

There is an endearing irony, however, in how we communicate. During regular committee meetings, annual general meetings and anniversary banquets, the dominant language of connection is standard Cantonese. But our ancestral mother tongue, the Hoy Peng dialect (a distinct branch of the Yuet Chinese family, famed for its unique phonology), has largely fallen silent. Cantonese has become the proxy tongue for a heritage we can no longer articulate in its original form. Neither veterans nor the few younger members can speak it fluently. In

fact, despite having travelled back to my grandfather's village three times now, I still find myself completely bewildered when my mainland relatives speak to me.

INJECTING NEW VITALITY FOR FUTURE SURVIVAL

For most ancestral district associations in Penang, the annual calendar is driven by a predictable and sacred rhythm of traditional rituals: hosting lively Chinese New Year open houses, conducting ancestral prayers during Qingming to honour our pioneers and gathering for the grand annual anniversary banquet. However, Hoy Peng Wui Koon recognises that preservation cannot rely on nostalgia alone. To survive, we must inject a new vitality into the institution.

We have actively begun recruiting and empowering a new generation of descendants—young professionals in their 20s and early-30s—to form an energetic Youth Wing. Instead of confining them to traditional rituals, we are encouraging them to conceptualise, plan and participate in major contemporary cultural festivals across Penang, most notably the Penang Miaohui: the Penang Chinese New Year Cultural Heritage Celebration. Through active participation, we dynamically link Hoy Peng's Diaolou (UNESCO-recognised fortified watchtowers often described as castles) with our home city of George Town (itself hosting a UNESCO-recognised site). By showcasing these historic parallels, our Youth Wing proudly emphasises Hoy Peng's distinction as home to the only UNESCO World Cultural Heritage site in Guangdong Province. By positioning ourselves within George Town's broader cultural tapestry, we aim to attract undetected or disconnected Hoy Peng descendants scattered across Penang and northern Malaysia into our warm, intimate circle.

The survival of a small, homeward-looking association in the 21st century is also an exercise in creative financial and social sustainability. How do we keep the lights on? The answer lies in a beautiful, cross-border web of solidarity. Our annual anniversary gala survives through the support of fellow Cantonese and Seiyap associ-



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ations across Penang, which we reciprocate. These anniversaries double as global homecomings, where delegations of Cantonese clansmen from Sabah, Hong Kong, Macau, Singapore and even Guangdong travel vast distances to attend, bringing with them generous financial contributions. Further, the Penang state government, as well as local federal and state lawmakers, provides vital annual financial grants, recognising that micro-associations like ours are custodians of Penang's cultural soul. Our committee and members also organise cultural and ancestral delegations every one to two years, bringing members back to Hoy Peng for heritage exploration and personal root-seeking.

Ultimately, my journey from cynical outsider to active member of the Hoy Peng Wui Koon has taught me that these associations are far from obsolete. They are living, breathing archives; the anchors that keep us from drifting away in the currents of a hyper-globalised world. For a small community like ours, the Jalan Cintra property is more than just a building. It is the physical manifestation of a shared lineage, a sanctuary where a photo of a yellowed address shapes a living, vibrant future.

CAPTIONS

1. Penang Hoy Peng Wui Koon participating in the Butterworth Chinese New Year Celebration, which is attended by many Hoy Peng and Toisan descendants.
2. My cousins from China and I. We share the same grandfather, who passed away in Penang in 1973 before I was born. I only discovered I had cousins in China in my 40s.
3. A committee meeting where we regularly discuss ideas to rejuvenate our organisation.



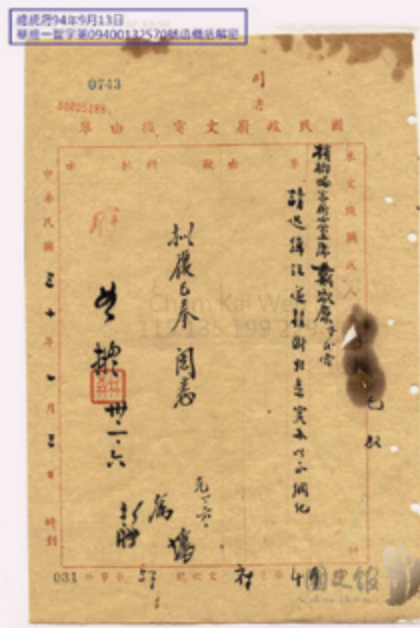
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2

A GLIMPSE INTO

PENANG'S HAKKA COMMUNITY



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1



2

BY
CHAM
KAI
WEN



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THE HAKKAS (客家), also known in Hokkien as the Khek-lang, are one branch of the Han Chinese people. The term refers to a group that migrated down to southern China quite late in history,^[1] and settled mainly in the provinces of Guangdong and Fujian, with a smaller number in Guangxi. This article offers a glimpse of this community in George Town, through the lens of the Penang Hakka Association.

THE EARLY TRACES

Given the lack of historical records, it is difficult to know exactly when the Hakkas first arrived in George Town. A tombstone belonging to Li Ah Liu (李阿六) from Jiaying Prefecture, dated 1799, stands at the Mount Erskine Cemetery,^[2] generally believed to be one of the earliest Hakka tombstones in Penang.

As for Hakka associations in George Town, the earliest was likely the Kar Yin Fee Kon (檳榔嶼嘉应会馆). In 1801, Sir George Leith, lieutenant-governor of the Prince of Wales Island, gifted a piece of land on King Street to the association. The neighbouring Tsen Lung Fui Kon (檳城增龙会馆) was apparently already established at that time; its name is marked to

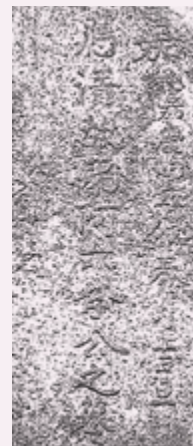
the north of the land grant to Kar Yin Fee Kon.^[3]

After the 19th century, as the Hakka population continued to grow, many more associations were established, including the Fook Chew Association, Pertubuhan Yung Ting Utara Semenanjung and the Persatuan Taipu Pulau Pinang. Other organisations closely linked to the Hakka community also emerged, such as the Thai Pak Koong (Ng Suk) Temple. Many remain active today.

THE ESTABLISHMENT OF THE PENANG HAKKA ASSOCIATION

In 1939, the Nanyang Khek Community Guild was founded in Singapore, with a branch established in Penang soon after.^[4] The Japanese occupation followed, and few records from that period survived to this day. Existing documents do show that then-Chairman Dai Shuyuan (戴淑原) wrote to the Kuomintang government, reflecting the community's close concern with the wartime situation in China.

In the postwar period, the Penang association resumed operations, but as times changed, so too did its identity and activities. After the Communist Party of



嘉應四年仲春月吉旦
清故弟阿六李公之墓
州

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China came to power in 1949, contact between Malaya and China became much more difficult. Furthermore, when Malaya gained independence in 1957, local Chinese communities began paying more attention to their new country. These changes were reflected in local activities, many of which were well documented in the *Sin Chew Jit Poh*. On 23 September 1953, the Penang Hakka Association was reported to have actively donated funds for the establishment of Nanyang University: the first Chinese university in Southeast Asia. On 11 March 1956, the newspaper reported that the Association's board had agreed to assist the government in recruiting ethnic Chinese policemen. Compared with the prewar period, the Association was clearly becoming more concerned with local developments.

THE ASSOCIATION'S EFFORTS AT CULTURAL PRESERVATION

Although the Hakkas are not a large community in George Town or Penang at large, they still left behind a clear historical presence. Recent efforts to preserve and promote Hakka history and culture demonstrate how the community changed with the times.

In 2006, the Association established Malaysia's first Hakka Heritage Museum. It hopes for the museum to be a starting point for collecting and preserving the community's cultural heritage nationwide. In 2012, the Tan Sri Wong Pow Nee Memorial Hall—named for Penang's first chief minister, himself a Hakka and whose appointment was therefore a point of communal pride—was established at the museum. The museum now serves as an important venue for welcoming local and overseas visitors alike.

The Association also formed a choir in 2017 with the aim of preserving the Hakka language and promoting singing and cultural activities. It welcomes not only Hakka

members, but also those of different dialect groups with a shared interest in singing. The choir has even performed at the Penang Miaohui celebration. According to youth chief Stanley Yew, the Association has started providing basic Hakka language classes and even published a self-learning handbook in 2020.

More than a century has passed. Yet the Penang Hakka Association and other such organisations remain active today.

CAPTIONS

1. Dai Shuyuan's letter to the Kuomintang government. Source: Academia Historica, Taiwan, archival record nos. 001-014162-00007-019 and 001-014162-00007-020.

2. Title deed belonging to Kar Yin Fee Kon, 2 November 1801. Source: The Minutes of Penang Kar Yin Fee Kon Association Meeting Editorial Committee (2026).

3. Li Ah Liu's tombstone. Source: Franke & Chen (1982, p. 685).

4. Malaysia's first Hakka Heritage Museum. Source: Penang Hakka Association's website.

5. The Penang Hakka Association choir rehearsing for a performance at Penang Miaohui 2026. Source: The Penang Hakka Association's Facebook account.

6. Thai Pak Koong (Ng Suk) Temple, King Street. Source: The Temple's official Facebook account.

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TRACES OF THE PEAR GARDEN IN PENANG: THE FORGOTTEN PAT WO H TONG COMMON GRAVES

BY
PEK
WEE
CHUEN



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SINCE THE 1990S, demand for Chinese street opera has declined sharply from its heyday as both popular entertainment and part of everyday life. Still, whenever a deity's birthday or the Hungry Ghost Festival is celebrated in Penang, temporary opera stages are erected, with troupes—whether Cantonese, Hokkien or Teochew variants—invited to perform for several consecutive days. But what did their early roots look like?

In 2024, I discovered two Qing-era common graves serving opera troupe practitioners at the Penang Kwangtung and Tengchow's First Cemetery at Mount Erskine. Taken together, these offer clues into the lived worlds of these people, and the institutions to which they belonged.

OF NATIVE VILLAGES AND THE CHRYSANTHEMUM DEPARTMENT

The First Cemetery preserves 117 graves dating from the 19th century onwards, perhaps making it the Chinese cemetery with the highest density of common graves in Malaysia. At least 13 are related to specific occupational groups, covering the performing arts, services, retail, manufacturing and manual labour, among others. The guild organisations of barbers, Cantonese restaurant and cuisine practitioners, Hainanese kitchen workers, laundry workers, grocers, carpenters, cement workers and stonemasons also occupy space there.

The emergence of common graves should not be taken for granted. Early southbound migrants were often solo sojourners, many without family members or descendants locally. After death, their funerary arrangements were often handled by clan associations, guilds or native-place organisations. Chinese society generally believed that the dead required incense offerings, lest they became lonely wandering spirits. This belief in the immortality of the soul and the importance of honouring the dead led some organisations to gather unattended remains and rebury them in a common grave, where ritual offerings were made annually during the spring and autumn equinoxes.

The first "Common Grave of Pat Woh Tong of the Great Qing" (皇清八和堂總墳, coordinates 5.44283N, 100.3025E)—the earliest of its kind—was established in 1888 by Pat Woh Tong, a guild of Cantonese opera practitioners. This common grave, long-neglected and hidden behind overgrown grass, is made of finely carved white granite. Although modest in scale, its material, quality of carving, and calligraphy are exceptionally refined, demonstrating the importance that its founders attached to this burial and ritual space. The head of the tomb is decorated with a motif of the rising sun and drifting clouds, while two side pillars frame the main stele. These pillars are inscribed with the following couplet:

Lofty sentiments across the four seas are
like those of one's native village.
四海高情如梓里

A united spirit of righteousness moves the
world of the pear garden.
一團義氣感梨園

In contrasting “the four seas” with “one’s native village”, the grave discursively transforms fellow practitioners adrift in a foreign land into a community as close as kinfolk from the same hometown. Their “united spirit of righteousness” further highlights the bonds of fellowship and solidarity within the guild.

Coincidentally, about 190 metres uphill stands the second, identically named common grave (5.44341N, 100.30084E), similar in form but in poorer condition. It was erected in 1901 by the Lei Yuen Hong (Pear Garden Guild, 梨園行): an alternative name for the Pat Woh Tong, one which references the courtly entertainment institution of the Tang dynasty. Note that the “Lei Yuen Tong” (Pear Garden Hall, 梨園堂) was also used in some contexts. The slight difference lies in naming reflects a nuance. “Tong” suggests a hall, association or organised body, whereas “Hong” more commonly refers to the trade, profession or occupational line. In practice, however, the two terms were often used interchangeably in historical contexts.

Its tomb head has fallen off and the side pillars have slightly separated from the main stele. The couplet on the pillars, which makes historical allusions to the world of Chinese opera, turns the common grave into a site of ritual offering, remembrance and the transmission of occupational spirit. It reads:

Through a hundred generations,
strings and songs are passed down by the
Chrysanthemum Department [a traditional term for the Chinese opera world].

百代弦歌傳菊部

For a thousand autumns, offerings
and sacrifices honour the Pear Garden.

千秋嘗祀仰梨園



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WHAT WAS THE PAT WOHO TONG?

Notably, there is no longer a Pat Woh Tong guild organisation in Penang, and clear historical records of its existence have yet to be found. Nevertheless, the common grave provides evidence that this occupational organisation already existed in Penang before 1888. According to tradition, the Xuanzong Emperor of the Tang instructed performers in singing, dancing and music in the Pear Garden, which became a general term for opera troupes and the theatrical world. Thus, opera performers were known as “disciples of the Pear Garden”.

The term “Pat Woh” itself (eight harmonies) originates from the eight divisions formed within opera troupes, divided according to duties and roles. These were the Siu Wo Tong (male-role actors), Hing Wo Tong (painted-face roles), Fuk Wo Tong (female-role actors), San Wo Tong (male and female clown roles), Wing Wo Tong (actors specialising in martial roles), Dak Wo Tong (supporting actors responsible for martial-action performances), San Wo Tong (administrative personnel responsible for arranging performances, signing contracts and collecting deposits), and Pou Wo Tong (musicians). Its name suggests the harmonious coexistence of these divisions, reflecting opera practitioners’ expectations in self-organisation.

Although the Penang Pat Woh Tong’s precise founding date remains unknown, we may infer some aspects of its history through the development of other Pat Woh associations. As early as the Wanli Emperor’s reign during the Ming Dynasty, Cantonese opera practitioners had already established the King Faa Wui Gun in Foshan. During the Taiping Rebellion in 1854, these performers responded in support of the uprising, and their association was subsequently banned by the Qing government. In 1857, the Pat Woh Wui Gun was founded in Singapore, and there is reason to believe that its founding was connected to the suppression of Cantonese opera organisations in Guangzhou. Being located in another Chinese-majority port city within the Straits Settlements, Penang’s organisation likely shared a similar background. Indeed, Penang not only hosted active commercial and migrant networks, but also mature performing arts organisations, occupational mutual-aid systems and ritual traditions.

During the Guangxu Emperor’s reign, the Pat Woh Wui Gun was revived in Guangzhou when the local prohibition on Cantonese opera was lifted. By 1889, the construction of its association building in Guangzhou was completed, one year after the first Pat Woh Tong common grave was founded in Penang. By contrast, the Pat Woh Wui Gun was only established in Hong Kong in 1953, while the Persatuan Pat Woh Malaysia was founded in Kuala Lumpur in 1968.

AN OPEN-AIR ARCHIVAL LESSON

Existing Chinese-language newspapers mention close relationships among the Pat Woh associations of Singapore, Hong Kong and Guangzhou. Now, traces of the Pat Woh Tong in 19th-century Penang are becoming more visible, gauging from these rediscovered common graves. They may allow us to rediscover a lost chapter of this Cantonese opera guild organisation.

These common graves remind us that a cemetery is not merely a place for burying the dead, but also an open-air historical archive. The performers of the Pear Garden, who once moved between opera stages, temple festivals and the streets of the city, may have long faded with time. Yet through these common graves, they have left behind traces of their presence, waiting for later generations to identify, write about and remember them once again.

CAPTIONS

1. The 1888 Grave of Pat Woh Tong of the Great Qing.
2. The 1901 Grave of Pat Woh Tong of the Great Qing.

3. The emblem of the Persatuan Pat Woh Malaysia, showing its eight divisions. Source: Persatuan Pat Woh Malaysia’s Facebook account.

4. Street opera during the Hungry Ghost Festival in George Town.



DREAMING
IN

BRO



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DURING MY VISIT to the Broome Historical Museum to learn about its pearling industry, my attention was drawn towards an historic street sign on display. Immediately, I felt like I was in Penang, judging from the multilingual listings of the street name—Carnarvon—in Malay, Arabic, English, Japanese and an Indian script. But Broome is a remote town on the far northwest coast of Western Australia, sitting between the blue turquoise waters of the Indian Ocean and the red dirt of the Kimberley region. It functions as an important regional hub with a fly-in, fly-out workforce servicing the mining, oil and gas industries. Traditional tourism and the pearling sector round off the major attractions of this still-remote outpost, whose transnational history of pearling prompted my journey. Along the way, other links to Penang's part of the world came into view.



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OME

OF PEARLS,
MIGRATION
AND
BEING
"MALAY"

BY
ANNE
TAN



3

THE LURE OF PEARL SHELLS

Over a century ago, Broome was home to one of the world's largest pearling fleets, responsible for more than a quarter of the global supply of high-quality mother-of-pearl shell. Its iridescent lustre has had a universal appeal across history. Pearlery in the late-19th and early-20th centuries harvested mother-of-pearl shell, which was used to create pearl shell buttons (used before plastic buttons were invented), buckles and ornamental items.

I was engrossed in the array of documents and artifacts available at the museum. Photographs on display depict cohorts of workers, together with their pearling masters. Many of these masters were the sons of English gentry who, after serving in the Royal Navy, were given schooners with which to seek their fortunes. In sharp contrast, the workers laboured in



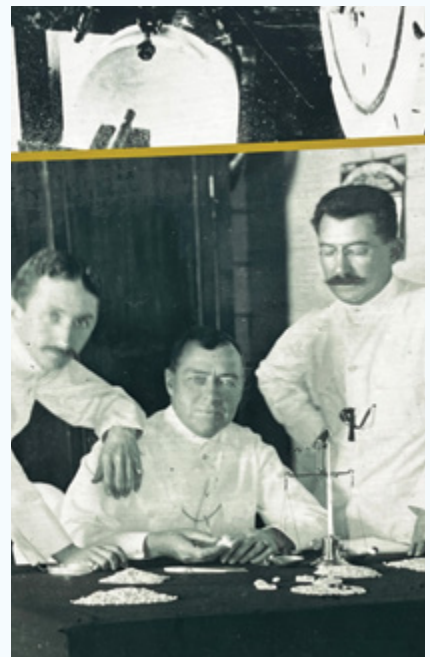
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deep diving suits, a task which required skill and courage. The job was too poorly paid for Europeans to consider, while Indigenous labourers were protected by law against being forced to dive. Thus, Asian workers, who were prepared to leave their impoverished fishing villages and accept the wages offered aboard pearling luggers, formed a crucial labour force.

I had always associated Broome's regional pearling industry with Japanese divers, who of course played a key role. But the historic street sign, and my subsequent research, gave me a much wider knowledge and appreciation of Broome's multicultural pearling history. Beginning in the late-19th century, the Indonesian Archipelago became a prime recruiting ground for labour in Western Australia's fledgling pearl shell industry. Multicultural crews, numbering in their thousands, came

to its diving grounds. Many came directly through Dutch offices, such as the one at Koepang (Kupang, in East Nusa Tenggara). Although ethnically and culturally diverse, they were often simply, but mistakenly, referred to by Europeans as "Malays".

As a map of the areas of origin/recruitment of Asian labour for the Broome pearling industry reveals, "Malay" was a general term which encompassed peoples from places such as Singapore, Malaya, Java, Timor and Sulawesi (see Image 7). It illuminates the diversity of the divers as well as tender and deck crews: men from the Dutch East Indies ("Koepangers"), the Philippines ("Manillamen"), China and Japan, among others. By 1873, this diverse workforce was employed quite extensively in pearling, and therefore tied to the industrial wealth of Broome. Pearlery visited Singapore to recruit indentured labourers, who were



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brought to work for a fixed period before returning to their homelands.

In this way, the contribution of the “Malays” to Western Australia’s development was significant, comprising the greater part of Asian labour recruits during the late-19th century. They worked during both the swimming/diving and apparatus/diving eras. Harsh conditions prevailed, with many succumbing to disease or incapacitation. Their trade was characterised by brutal and dangerous modes of production. The inadequate provision of food and clothing made for less-than-ideal working conditions. These workers deserve to have their role in Western Australia’s labour history recovered and acknowledged.

IMAGES OF BROOME TODAY

Moving out to the streets, it was not long before I found many instances of Broome’s rich multicultural diversity. Street signs point the way to other links with Southeast Asia. These include the historic Carnarvon Street sign, showing its wear and tear, in the Museum, whose present-day equivalent

continues to publicly announce the street’s identity in its numerous languages.

Carnarvon Street and Lebuhr Carnarvon were both named after Henry Howard Molyneux Herbert, the fourth Earl of Carnarvon (1831–90), a prominent statesman who served as the secretary of state for the colonies. Many locations were named in his honour during the late-19th century, since he was a key figure in the management of the British Empire.

The multiracial characteristics of Broome remain very much in evidence, whose large Japanese and Chinese cemeteries bear witness to those who came to this remote region in search of employment. A street installation featuring a giant abacus is prominently displayed on Carnarvon Street. In this way, visitors to Broome are assured of a rich history informed by diverse cultural contact and the magical lustre of pearls and mother-of-pearl shell.

CAPTIONS

(Cover page) Broome’s street signs are in multiple languages, reflecting its multicultural history as a pearling town. The main directional sign on Carnarvon Street in Chinatown is a wonderful way of showing how this history continues.

1. The historic multilingual Carnarvon Street sign.

2. Pearl shells were once harvested to make buttons and other items, and form a constant aesthetic presence on the streets of Broome today.

3. The multiracial workforce of Broome’s pearling industry.

4. An imposing street art installation depicting an abacus, which speaks to the importance of Chinese culture in Broome’s history.

5. A large pearl shell on display, with round bits punched out to make pearl shell buttons.

6. A display of pearling masters in crisp white garb, secluded well away from flies and mosquitoes, weighing their pearls. According to the guide, these masters sent their laundry to Singapore to be cleaned and freshened!

7. An interesting map details the areas of origin/recruitment of Asian labour in the Broome pearling industry. Reproduced from Anderson (1978).

8. In the heart of Chinatown.

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RETHINKING INDUSTRIAL HERITAGE: CHARCOAL AS BLACK GOLD IN KUALA SEPETANG

BY WILLIAM THAM

BOATS NEGOTIATE MANGROVE-LINED waterways towards the Sepetang's river-mouth, the smell of charcoal from domed kilns permeating the air. Aboard are mangrove logs, too dense to float, harvested from the Matang Mangrove Forest Reserve and bound for the factories at the town's edge. This relationship between industry and conservation is crucial to considerations of space, ecology and industrial heritage in Kuala Sepetang's extensive Reserve. Stretching northwards to Kuala Gula, near the state border with Penang, it is not just a passive natural resource, but also a driver of the settlement's key "sunset industry": charcoal production.

As Doris Quek and Lim Ker Chwing, architect-lecturers from UCSI University and founders of Colllab 社计手, explained, their "Reimagining Charcoal" project sought to bring together architects, material experts and students to explore the site's industrial heritage.^[1] Approximately 80% of Kuala Sepetang's charcoal output—classified as "Grade A"—is exported to markets abroad, such as Japan. However, changing cooking practices, which phased out charcoal-fired stoves for gas or induction cookers, have shrunk the domestic market, forcing producers to repurpose charcoal for toothbrush-making, ornaments and "vinegar" (distilled from the vapour rising from the kilns, used as an insect repellent and deodorant). But their interventions do more than preserve the industry. Instead, these involve a "reconsideration of the scale and direction of production, by exploring ways to move from export-driven models towards more localised [ones] for long-term ecological and social stability," as they jointly explained.

WHAT DOES INDUSTRIAL HERITAGE LOOK LIKE?

The first step is understanding and documenting industrial practices, a task which Colllab specialises in. The team's experience with living museum projects, which placed interpretive installations into still-active fishing and boatbuilding plants in Pulau Pangkor,^[2] were invaluable for interpreting the significance and nuances of the charcoal industry. Such interventions are particularly urgent since sunset industries can—and do—sometimes suddenly disappear, because of the lack of generational continuity and a reliance on niche markets. Doris recalled how the boat-makers that Colllab worked with in Pangkor simply stopped operating following a drop in demand after the Covid-19

pandemic, thus revealing the fragility of similar industries.

Compounding matters is the difficulty in documenting ephemeral practices. The builders of the domed kilns at charcoal plants rely not on blueprints, but a *feel* for how these domes should be built, working by hand with rudimentary tools and without formal technical training. Trial-and-error, muscle memory and vernacular practices are not amenable to standardisation or documentation. Such knowledge could easily vanish if the kilns stop operating, with broader losses for Kuala Sepetang in general. After all, "industrial materials carry histories of place, ecological relationships and social knowledge," Doris and Ker Chwing reflected.

Colllab's team members sought to unobtrusively contextualise everyday work at the kilns, by engaging in a creative archival process which mobilised sketches, videos and photography to digitally capture the site. This work was not necessarily about monumentalising particular practices or spaces, but also shedding light on the broader ecology, which the industry was actively transforming and sustaining. Rather than thinking of charcoal production as being merely extractive, Doris and Ker Chwing noted how it has fostered "active systems of management and trade" within the estuary.

As one of the world's largest mangrove conservation projects, the estuary's forests have protected not just the coast and its inhabitants, but also provided the necessary conditions for sustaining charcoal production.^[3] Subject to scientific forest management since 1902, periodic thinning seeks to improve yield, forest health and keep waterways open. The Reserve is divided into different "coupes" (compartments) thinned in 30-year cycles, from which locals can obtain raw material for firewood, charcoal production and construction. Such top-down approaches to conservation, seen as bulwarks against the apparent inevitable disappearance of natural resources, were central to the ethos of (post)colonial governance. This logic of reciprocity is so ingrained that kiln operators like Chuah Kee Yong of My Charcoal Factory could declare that producers were the eyes and ears of Perak's Forestry Department.^[4]

In short, Doris and Ker Chwing observed that the industry is "embedded within cyclical harvesting practices that help regulate the forest's growth and renewal, thus sustaining the ecosystem, associated trades, and the communities that depend on it". It becomes impossible to isolate a natural ecosystem in Kuala Sepetang, which has been actively shaped by human and non-human interests for over a century. Consequently, it is crucial



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to pay detailed attention to broader ecosystemic balance, especially since researchers have found that while mangroves are “sustainably rejuvenating in terms of silviculture”, this was “not necessarily [the case] in a context of ecological functionality”.^[5]

COLLABORATING WITHIN ECOLOGICAL LIMITS

The ethos of sustainability infuses the “Reimagining Charcoal” project, providing a framework within which community groups such as Re-look Port Weld, industry actors, local government and forestry officials can be brought together. Such engagements could not be one-off, and so the team returned constantly to Kuala Sepetang to deepen their engagement with the locals. Collaboration yielded not grand industrial visions, but humbler tracings between land and sea, kiln and reserve. In this way, they

came to support Re-look Port Weld’s parallel attempt to revive *Ni Siap* (mangrove dye) production (see *Penang Monthly* July 2025).

Such work reflects Colllab’s ethos, which involves what Doris and Ker Chwing describe as “long-term engagement rather than extractive or short-term intervention”. It allows industrial heritage to “function as a living system, one that continues to develop, generate knowledge, foster participation and open up future possibilities”. Accordingly, a key concern is how the legacy of the charcoal industry can be continued in line with ecological limits, while meeting the business needs and desires of the local community.

I once heard charcoal being described as “black gold”, which reveals its latent potential for generating more hopeful narratives about carbon, rather than the gloomier one involving fossil fuels, entrenched politico-economic interests and runaway climate change. Charcoal, as imagined by this project’s stakeholders, becomes crucial for maintaining local practices of vernacular sustainability, while resisting the

temptation towards upscaling and mass production. Perhaps charcoal could be made the centrepiece of local festivals to promote tourism and community-building (for example, as firewood for communal barbecues), or by repurposing leftovers from the kilns into building material. Ultimately, such practices must centre people—including meeting employment needs for youths and established workers—while factoring in crucial ecological interactions.

***Note:** All photographs courtesy of Colllab.

CAPTIONS

1. The Colllab team, University of East London and UCSI University faculty as well as student volunteers with mangrove logs bound for the kilns.
2. Doris Quek and the Colllab team presenting their project in Petaling Jaya.
3. Exploring the possible uses of charcoal for ornamentation and construction.
4. Bringing the exhibition back to Kuala Sepetang.

ENDNOTES

1. This project was jointly organised by Colllab and researchers from UCSI University and the University of East London, funded by the British Council.
2. Their work on *ikan bilis* production (<https://www.reellifearchival.com/home>) and boat-building (<https://www.reellifearchival.com/home-2>) are also accessible online.
3. Chen Danyang et al. (2024). “Historical ecological monitoring and appraisal [...] unveils consequences of regime shifts in 120 years of mangrove management.” *Journal for Nature Conservation*, 79, 126528. This is not to say that the Reserve is an unqualified ecological success story (p. 2). See also Ammar Abdul Aziz et al. (2015). “Investigating the decline of ecosystem services [...],” *Estuarine, Coastal and Shelf Science*, 164, 353–66.
4. See a profile of Chuah at: *Malay Mail*. (2024, October 1). “Kuala Sepetang’s charcoal makers ignite passion to preserve a century-old legacy.”
5. Chen et al. (2024, p. 2).



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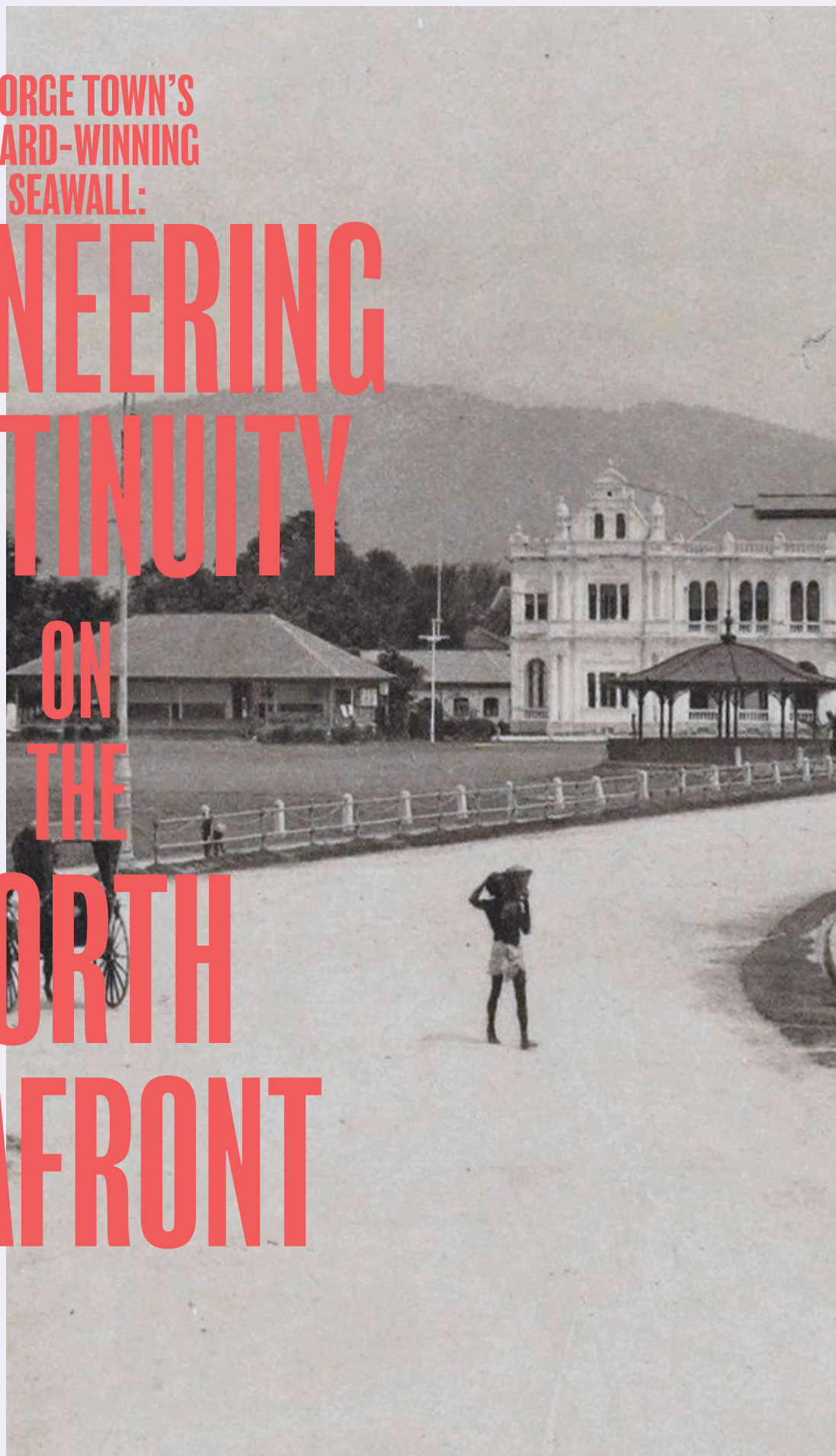


GEORGE TOWN'S
AWARD-WINNING
SEAWALL:

ENGINEERING CONTINUITY

ON
THE

NORTH SEAFRONT



BY
MATT BENSON
AND
AUFA
ABD RAHMAN

WHAT DOES AN award-winning heritage project look like in a city confronting climate change? In George Town, the answer is surprisingly ordinary: joggers at dusk, fishing lines cast from granite steps and families catching the sea breeze along a waterfront rebuilt to survive the century ahead. Here at the North Seafront, recent engineering works by public and private stakeholders have considered both climate action and community needs to engineer continuity, in line with coastal heritage.





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HERITAGE AT THE WATER'S EDGE

Standing on the granite edge of the North Seafront, the view stretches across the Strait of Malacca towards Gunung Jerai, where the Bujang Valley civilisation predates the city by more than a thousand years. Long before Captain Francis Light founded a British settlement in 1786, these waters were already a global crossroads. This continuity becomes clearer when you understand what went into rebuilding the seawall.

For more than two centuries, the Esplanade's seawall protected George Town from the tidal forces of the Strait. Built of granite and laterite, it framed Fort Cornwallis, City Hall, Town Hall and the Padang: the civic heart of the city. Just as importantly, it gave locals somewhere to gather, catch the breeze and escape the dense inner city. Remarkably, as the decades turned to centuries, its core social function remained unchanged.

By the early 2000s, however, both the seawall and the spirit of the waterfront were deteriorating. A 2017 structural assessment found cavities, erosion, collapse zones, failed drainage and decades' worth of ad hoc cement patching that obscured the seawall's heritage character. Climate projections intensified the urgency of taking action: the tidal surges that had always threatened the shoreline were becoming more frequent and severe.

ENGINEERING AN HEIRLOOM

The decision to rebuild, rather than restore, was taken as conservation-led reinstatement rather than demolition. The new structure follows the original alignment, preserving the historic curvature of the coastline while replacing failing infrastructure with a granite-faced, mass gravity wall engineered for projected sea-level rise and stronger tidal conditions. Structural resilience became a form of heritage protection.

Reconstruction has also transformed how people use the waterfront. Offset seawards by five metres, the new wall has widened the promenade, now accommodating evening walkers who *makan angin* ("eat the breeze", or in other words, enjoy themselves) alongside the recreational fishers who have cast lines from this shoreline for generations. It has catalysed a more vibrant nighttime atmosphere, with the emergence of pop-up vendors and increased activity around Medan Renong and the promenade.

Near the Cenotaph War Memorial, terraced steps were designed to tolerate periodic tidal submersion, allowing visitors to make direct contact with the sea and a restored section of the original 19th-century seawall, now framed for interpretation. Rather than resisting coastal cycles, the design adapts to them.

Attention to detail reinforced the project's historical continuity. Memory tiles inscribed with archival accounts were embedded in the pavement, Penaga Laut trees were replanted along the promenade and local artisans contributed traditional masonry and metalwork.

The project itself became a collaborative exercise in conservation. Think City, working with the City Council of Penang Island (MBPP), Chief Minister Inc., George Town Conservation and Development Corporation and the Aga Khan Trust for Culture, coordinated the project, from structural assessment through completion. Collaboration among consultants and experts—including historians, marine engineers and archaeologists—strengthened both planning

and implementation by ensuring that reconstruction responded sensitively to overlapping heritage, environmental and engineering challenges. Specialist craftsmen trained workers on-site in traditional stone masonry techniques that are growing increasingly rare within the heritage sector, thus ensuring the reconstruction built local skills and physical infrastructure alike.

Community engagement also shaped tangible outcomes throughout. Recreational fishing needs were incorporated into the design, veterans' associations influenced the Cenotaph's redesign and seafront hawkers were consulted during construction. The result was more than a rebuilt seawall. Indeed, it restored a civic routine central to George Town's everyday life.

SUSTAINABILITY BEYOND THE WALL

Today, the North Seafront remains one of George Town's most important public spaces, where joggers, fishers, families and tourists gather along the waterfront each evening. Post-construction surveys captured a *perbezaan ketara* (lit. marked difference) in visitor experiences and numbers compared with a decade ago, with visitation up by nearly 60%.

The seawall forms part of a broader North Seafront transformation guided by the George Town Strategic Master Plan. The programme has also reinstated the Fort Cornwallis moat, filled in around 1921 following a malaria outbreak, whose removal contributed to the Padang's recurring flooding for almost a century (see *Penang Monthly* April 2021). It also restored the Koh Seang Tatt Fountain Garden and upgraded Lebuhraya Light, one of George Town's oldest roads, as a pedestrian corridor reconnecting key civic landmarks.

Together, these projects demonstrate that heritage conservation and climate adaptation are not competing priorities, but complementary ones. The restored moat now functions simultaneously as stormwater infrastructure, an urban cooling system and biodiversity habitat. Reinstating it was not simply preservation, but the correction of an environmental mistake made a century earlier.

This integrated approach earned the North Seafront transformation the award for New Design in Heritage Contexts and Special Recognition for Sustainable Development at the 2025 UNESCO Asia-Pacific Awards for Cultural Heritage Conservation. Prior to this, it received the Malaysian Landscape Architecture Awards Project of the Year, the Malaysian Construction Industry Excellence Awards Best Infrastructure and the Malaysian Institute of Planners Gold Award for Heritage and Conservation. Such recognition matters not because George Town gains yet another plaque or title, but because it acknowledges something increasingly important for historic cities worldwide: that resilience cannot be separated from public life, heritage and community identity.

George Town's seawall protects more than the shoreline, it also preserves the city's relationship with the sea and the civic life that has always gathered beside it. On this waterfront, continuity and adaptation are not opposing forces, but inseparable aspects of the city's resilience.

CAPTIONS

(Cover spread) The Esplanade in 1907. Image by Charles J. Kleingrothe.

1. The award-winning revitalised seawall and linear garden at the Esplanade, George Town World Heritage Site. Image by Sherwynd Kessler Studio.

2. A multi-level terrace designed to bridge the urban landscape and sea, allowing visitors to experience the waterfront from varying heights.

3. The North Seafront's concentration of highly significant heritage assets and civic landmarks that characterise George Town's historic waterfront.

4. The expanded waterfront promenade provides a scenic recreational area for both local communities and visitors. Image by Sherwynd Kessler Studio.



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DZULKIFLI



ABDUL RAZAK

ON BIG PHARMA, COMPROMISED POLITICS AND FAILING ACADEMIA

BY RACHEL YEOH

DZULKIFLI ABDUL RAZAK is the fifth recipient of the Dr. Wu Lien-Teh Society Award for Leadership in Public Health. He served as the Vice-chancellor of Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) from 2000 to 2011 and was also the 14th President of the International Association of Universities (IAU) from 2012 to 2016. Today, he is the Rector of the International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM).

Globally recognised for his expertise, he was appointed by the World Health Organisation (WHO) to serve on the WHO Scientific Advisory Committee on Tobacco Product Regulation and the WHO Expert Advisory Panel on Drug Policies and Management. He is the first Asian, and seventh internationally, to receive the prestigious 2017 Gilbert Medal from Universitas 21—a network of renowned research-intensive universities dedicated to fostering global citizenship and institutional innovation. He was also honoured with the 2017 Asia HRD Contribution to Society Award in recognition of his significant contributions to human capital development in the academic world.

Penang Monthly spoke with Dzulkifli just before his award presentation about his views on drug and vape handling, and also academia as a whole.

Rachel Yeoh (RY): First and foremost, thank you Tan Sri for sitting down for a chat with me. To begin, could you tell me a little bit about your background and how you got into pharmacy.

Dzulkifli Abdul Razak (DAR): My father is a Penangite and my mother is from KL. So I am half-*lah*. We were brought up in Tanjong^[1] and my father is a survivor of the atomic bomb—a *hibakusha*.

I entered USM in 1971 to study pharmacy. We did not know what *pharmacy* was back then. And for that people called us farmers: P, H, A, M, E, R, S. Others thought it was “palmistry”—we read their palms and see whether they need to watch your luck. (laughs)

So we jumped into this thing, not knowing what it was all about. Suddenly, I found out that it was the worst, most corrupted industry in the world. Somebody gave me the book *Roche vs. Adam*: Adam was the manager of the vitamin section, and he wanted to make it more accessible to others. The company didn’t allow it. And finally, he was killed. I said to myself, “My God, this industry is a terrible industry.”

I began to look for alternatives. At that time, Anwar Fazal was the director at the International Organisation of Consumers Unions (IOCU), and he introduced me to S. M. Mohamed Idris, and I began to develop this whole idea of what I call “social pharmacy”. There was no such thing as “social pharmacy”—I was trying to address this whole social issue of what pharmacy does to ordinary people.

RY: How does social pharmacy change things?

DAR : Let’s say, an old man wants to buy a particular drug, and I push it to him at a 30% profit margin. He says, “I don’t have any money.” Now what do I do? I have to reject him, ask him to find an alternative.

We later learnt about essential drugs... generic drugs—all not part of the curriculum. We talked about regulatory functions and so forth, and we ended up doing a project, where people donated drugs to us, and then we dispensed these free of charge to people who could not afford them—free pharmacy.

But there was also a problem: if you provide free drugs, people do not want it. People think that it is a hopeless drug.

I was in Brunei with WHO. Brunei gives you the best proprietary drugs, right? But what we did every day at the end of the afternoon was, we had to go back to the waste paper basket and take all the drugs that were dispensed because they would be thrown away.

RY: Why?

DAR: People think free drugs are useless. They will go out and buy the same drugs at a high cost because “expensive drugs are good drugs”.

So the industry is made in such a way that branded, proprietary, expensive drugs are the most effective drugs. This is the mindset change that we need to talk about.

A friend of mine started a free clinic in Kelantan, but it is now closed because free medicine is “not good”. In pharmacy, I go for conferences, all paid for, first class and all... and all I need to do when I come back is to dispense your prescription. These are the kinds of corruption in the industry that academia does not care about. We are all sponsored by these people. We are happy when there is a crisis, because we can sell more drugs.

We developed a drug information system, where the information sourced could be found by people who needed it. In the early 1980s, there was a *Loh See Fun* poisoning that happened in Ipoh. About 100 people died and the doctors did not know what caused it. However, through this information system that we developed, we decided to test if it

was boric acid, and *voila*, it was the problem! The manufacturer used access boric acid. Suddenly, we became nationally famous by providing a solution to the problem.

RY: Were you already part of the Poisons Board at the time?

DAR: I was, but the Poisons Board was more interested in medicine. This was more of a voluntary thing. It was only when we solved this particular issue that people started looking to us. We were a group of people with my students talking about pesticide poisoning and stuff—there was no official name.

For me, poisoning is dire because people die from it. So we worked hard on this, and they gave us the status of the National Poison Centre.

There was another episode where 25g of cyanide was dumped in Pangkor, and nobody knew what to do about it. They called us immediately. If that cyanide leaked, it was estimated that 7,000 people would die—immediately. That was another incident that put us on the pedestal. Our work became recognised by WHO.

After the National Poison Centre [was established] in 1995, I was asked to be the Vice-chancellor of USM. That was the year 2000. At that time, my idea of university also changed. I think the university needs to be a social enterprise, rather than what it is now, very academic, very detached from society... so we bid for that. There was a programme called APEX (Accelerated Program for Excellence).

I asked myself, “I am a Vice-chancellor in the year 2000 in the 21st century. How does university differ from the 20th century?” Everybody was talking about Y2K, except for universities. It was around that time that I was invited to a



conference in Luxembourg called the University of Tomorrow. I met a consultant and futurist at the forum, named Sohail Inayatullah. I invited him to USM, and together, we were able to shape the future of USM in the year 2000 to the year 2025. There were six scenarios that we picked from many, and one of them was on sustainability. The word sustainability wasn't popular then. Many asked me, “What is this sustainability?” But because the methodology is so rigorous, we were able to tell them exactly what it was. We were given the status of APEX University, with RM800mil in funding in 2008.

We are shaping the university now as education for sustainable development, which includes the community. So the trust is now in the community, and no longer the industry per se, and I think that is a shift from what the future of university would look like. That gave me a lot of leverage to bring in new ideas. USM became “University in a Garden”—I wanted it to be a metaphor: a garden has many types of plants, but underneath them are roots. Until you nurture the roots, you won't get the plants. We do not want to just talk about what can be seen, the university rankings and so on. At the end of the day, most of the universities become irrelevant because the roots—the values—are not nurtured.

USM was picked as one of the seven pioneering universities on sustainable development, which was recognised by the United Nations.

I remember telling the minister, “Why can't we take sustainability as a kind of a platform to build education?” He replied, “This one has no political mileage, so we are not going to bother.”

RY: Talking about political mileage, could you tell me about tobacco getting delisted from Malaysia's poisons listing?

DAR: The model in the US is all about drugs—they have no tobacco problem. However, we have a tobacco problem. So we say tobacco is one subject that we do as far as poisoning is concerned. To be clear, we are not looking at the current consumers using tobacco, we are looking at schools.

We started a club, the “Nafas Baru” club (or the “Fresh Breath” club), to encourage students, through peer influence, to reject tobacco. We can't begin this at age 30





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because it will be too late, it is too difficult to change such habits. Currently, there is nothing to build that resistance. Then, there is the question of vape now. But the government is not doing anything about it, if at all.

RY: What can be done then?

DAR: The solution is staring at our face, but nobody wants to [implement it]. When vape was introduced, it was a substitute for tobacco. But it has become a gateway *in*, fuelled by highly addictive, chemically flavoured products. When we knew about this, we said we needed to ban it—that was in the year 2023. All the big medical health fraternities said the same. This is the part I'm very sore about, which I will not forgive the people involved. The Minister of Health at that time, Dr. Zaliha Mustafa, overturned it. They had a meeting on 31 March. She vetoed it. She said, "I use my mandate to veto this, because they want to implement this on 1 April—because the Minister of Finance will start taxing vapes on 1 April." They want to make money out of this.

RY: At the expense of the younger generation.

DAR: They say, "Look, vape is safe", but it is not. You can buy vapes anywhere. It's not regulated. The money collected from taxing vapes will not be enough to rehabilitate one addict. Even WHO spoke to us and said, "Look, Malaysia will be the first country that will produce a new breed of addicts—vape addicts".

RY: You dealt with drug policies globally in WHO. Is there one thing that Malaysia—other than vape and tobacco—is currently ignoring?

DAR: I think Malaysia, from my point of view (and maybe I'm biased), we are very much industry-dependent. So, for example, with a drug, if it is registered overseas, then we quickly register it, whether we need to or not. It becomes an economic imperative rather than a health imperative.

I am asked "Why don't you join the industry? You can make money." But I cannot bring myself to. I can make RM40,000 a month at that time. But then my KPI would be, how many people do I kill a year? I cannot live with myself. Sorry to give you the bad story, but this is a struggle.

RY: Would you agree that we now focus more on cognitive development and technical expertise over empathy and social responsibility?

DAR: Yes. So, how do you involve the heart *and* the mind? [Dr. Wu Lien Teh] was very community-centric. And his priority was basically the majority rather than the minority. But he was not one of our Nobel Laureates. Nobel Laureates talk about their own project, which is very confined to a lab—we look at that as "a mark of success". I'm glad [Wu Lien Teh Society] is doing this, and recognising people like Noor Hisham.

RY: So we are off the rails in balancing the heart and mind.

DAR: We're off. Take the current Minister of Higher Education, he's a political scientist. When he was appointed, I wrote a critical commentary. Unlike his predecessor, whom we successfully engaged on key university initiatives, this appointment felt driven by political ties rather than educational expertise. A top-down approach based on political proximity rather than merit inevitably stalls progress.

We need to have institutes like Penang Institute and associations like the Consumers Association of Penang to demand for what is right. In fact, this year, I was told every university is now given RM1mil to play the ranking game to be at the top 100—which is nonsensical to me. I was brought in by one private university to talk about ranking, knowing that I was against it. He said, "Look, Zul, we have got a problem." I asked, "What's the problem?" "Ranking. Now we are number 350 and this year we pay RM3mil to get the number. Next year (2018), if we want to retain this number. We have to pay RM2.5mil." That alone will disqualify you from being a university. Then I asked, "Do your students know that you are paying for this number?" "They don't. But as a private entity, we need to have this number or the public will think we are no good."

RY: Similar to drug access.

DAR: Exactly. So, how to turn this around? Other countries are not as gullible as us. How many Nobel Laureates has Singapore produced? How many Nobel Laureates have the Japanese produced? In Tokyo alone, there are tens of them; yet Tokyo's rankings are far below the National University of Singapore. What are we measuring? So these are issues that the academics are not bothered with, just like me when I went to pharmacy.

RY: These are thought-provoking questions. I think that is all the time we have for now. Thanks for chatting with me.

DAR: Thanks for everything.

CAPTIONS

(Cover page) Engaging Türkiye institutions in Ankara, February 2023.

1. Memorandum of understanding and roundtable discussions at the Senate in Moscow, October 2023.

2. At Tongyeong RCE *Sejahtera* Center in Korea, September 2023.

ENDNOTE

1. George Town's original name was Tanjong (or Tanjung Penaga): <https://www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2024/07/24/george-town-or-tanjung-penaga-a-history-of-penangs-capital-and-a-call-to-restore-the-name/144381>



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

THE QUIET DISCIPLINE BEHIND THE MUSIC: MEETING PIANIST VINCENT ONG

**BY
DEBORAH
KAY YEN LIN**



“DEDICATION” IS OFTEN used generously, almost casually, in the world of classical music. For Vincent Ong, dedication seems self-evident in the precision of his playing, the consistency of his performances and the discipline required to sustain a demanding touring schedule. But what does it look like in light of this Malaysian musician’s return to the complicated reality of home?

As someone who first worked alongside Vincent during his Taipei recital debut at the National Concert Hall in 2025, supporting both concert operations and marketing, dedication also reveals itself in subtler ways, for example, in his ability to constantly recalibrate—whether artistically, mentally or emotionally—across vastly different cultural and professional landscapes. I grew to realise that dedication is not a single act but a lifestyle. It is gauged from his relentless pursuit of nuance, patience in refining his work and willingness to engage in honest reflection, even when no one else is watching. In his Homecoming Tour from 20–28 March 2026, which included recital performances, mentorship masterclasses and audience dialogues in Kuala Lumpur and Penang, Vincent demonstrated that music is also about leaving a legacy, marking presence and building connection. Dedication is not just quantified through metrics, hours practised, repertoire mastered and performances completed, but qualitatively demonstrated by finding one’s artistic identity and intentionality.

THE WORK BEHIND THE WORK

Penang-born Vincent is recognised for his distinctive musical voice, combining poetic imagination with structural clarity and artistic depth. A laureate of the 2025 International Fryderyk Chopin Piano Competition in Warsaw and winner of the 2024 International Robert Schumann Competition, he is one of his generation’s leading young pianists. He first studied with Ng Chong Lim, and then Eldar Nebolsin, before recent performances took him to major venues across Asia and Europe.

As our friendship deepened, I had a front-row seat to the less-visible parts of Vincent’s life as a musician. Much of his time was spent in practice rooms, paying meticulous attention to every nuance, phrasing, tone and shift in sound. Every pause, deliberate repetition and exploratory sound is part of a process that few outside a musician’s inner circle witness. Conversations between takes often ranged from the technical to reflections on the balance between work and friendship. In these quiet interludes, I began to understand how discipline is also characterised by curiosity.

I remember how we were quietly working while “sipping tea” one evening in Berlin, when Vincent suddenly spat. This moment foregrounded the duality

of a musician's life, switching between relentless discipline and the small, human moments that keep one grounded. Both are necessary, since the deepest artistry is born in the careful, ongoing negotiation of identity, emotion and intention through presence.

Managing a career like Vincent's requires layers of responsibility. Many musicians, particularly those who tour extensively, risk losing a sense of self amid schedules, expectations and the pressure of achieving perfection. Without careful guidance, even a single misstep could distract artists from the music itself. This is where a dedicated management team becomes indispensable. It does more than organise calendars, but also acts as a buffer, sounding board and strategic partner.

Vincent is currently presented by Liu Kotow International Management and Promotion, which provides a professional scaffolding that allows music to flourish, while leaving space for personal growth, experimentation and conversations that build trust and friendship.

BEYOND PRACTICE ROOMS, BETWEEN WORLDS

When Rondo Production wrote to Liu Kotow about having Vincent return to Malaysia for a tour, we paused to consider its implications, especially since Vincent has long been abroad, working within structured and established classical music circuits. Further, the Tour's mission extended beyond artistry, in encouraging young musicians and students to discover their own passion for music.

Fortunately, Vincent's former mentor would be present. Chong Lim is one of Malaysia's most respected pianists, composers and educators, whose influence has shaped generations of young musicians. Vincent flew from Penang to Kuala Lumpur just to partake in the depth of mentorship offered. Chong Lim remained a steady presence throughout Vincent's journey, flying to Warsaw to watch the final round of the Chopin competition. When Vincent returned to Malaysia, Chong Lim offered encouragement before concerts, support during intermissions and words of praise afterwards, thus transcending the teacher-student dynamic.

The Tour spanned Kuala Lumpur and Penang, with more than 2,200 audience members in attendance at recitals, masterclasses and public dialogues. Supported at the federal level by the Ministry of Human Resources and Talent Corporation Malaysia, and at the state level by the Penang state government and its executive councillor for tourism and creative economy, this initiative ensured that young musicians engaged directly with an internationally recognised Malaysian artist. It created opportunities



for inspiration, mentorship and meaningful artistic exchange, extending the Tour's impact far beyond the concert hall.

In Malaysia, Vincent expressed his dedication by communicating music through masterclasses, interactions with students and performances alike. I remember the Penang masterclass vividly, which became an open dialogue between artist and audience. Students performed, exchanged ideas and received detailed feedback on technique, interpretation and musical expression. From the moment we entered the room, the focus and openness of the students was striking. Music happened not just on the stage, but in small, intimate moments, such as when questions were asked, answers shared and eyes met. Being in Penang relaxed us, by providing a state where attention, sensitivity and willingness to engage bloomed.

STAYING THE COURSE

Ever since we started working together, we often had to film greeting videos or short promotional clips, a task I always approached with apprehension. Vincent can be incredibly particular about every little detail. I remember one video that took over three hours to film online because he kept noticing little things he thought could be improved, such as how he held his hands, the way he enunciated words and even the curtains in the background.

This exacting attention parallels the dedication he brings to music. During rehearsals, I watched him dissect a single phrase for what felt like hours, experimenting with phrasing, tone and dynamics, until the music felt alive. Even in casual moments—whether sipping tea, walking through a city or riding the U-Bahn—he

turns every experience into a lens for reflection on music and life. It is in these small, deliberate choices that his artistry reveals itself.

Returning to the point about presence, it is evident on-stage in the way he inhabits each composition fully, commanding attention not through spectacle, but authenticity. Off-stage, it shows in how he engages with students, colleagues and friends with generosity, curiosity and patience, although he may be very quiet, being always a listener. He has a remarkable ability to be entirely in the moment, whether facing a large audience or mentoring a single child struggling with a phrase. This level of commitment has not hardened him; instead, it has deepened his humanity. He laughs at his own quirks, shares insights freely and never allows the demands of his craft to overshadow the connections he makes with others. Discipline paired with warmth is a rare balance, defining him as both a musician and a person.

Vincent's story is a reminder that dedication is not only measured by what we produce, but also how we show up in every moment. In returning for the Homecoming Tour, Vincent demonstrated that music is also about legacy, presence and connection. Watching him navigate worlds with rigour, humility and authenticity offers a glimpse into the heart of a musician who has stayed the course, and continues to illuminate the path for those who follow.

***Note:** We are deeply grateful to Rondo Production, the federal and state governments and all sponsors and partners for supporting initiatives like the Homecoming Tour and the masterclasses.



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CAPTIONS

(Cover spread) Vincent Ong performing at the National Concert Hall in Taipei, Taiwan, in December 2025. Source: Tat Keng, TEY.

1. Deborah (left), Vincent (middle) and Ng Chong Lim (right) backstage at UCSI University after his concert on 24 March. Source: Deborah Kay.

2. The Rondo Production team at UCSI University. Source: Rondo Production.

3. Shannen Liu-Kotow (left) and Grzegorz Kotow (right) from Liu Kotow International Management and Promotion. Since its founding in 2009, Liu Kotow has bridged artists and presenters by managing careers across live performances, recordings, publishing and brand development. Source: Shannen Liu-Kotow.

4. A moment over tea with Vincent in Teeraum Sanvian, Berlin. Source: Deborah Kay.

5. A masterclasses organised by Rondo Production. Source: Rondo Production.



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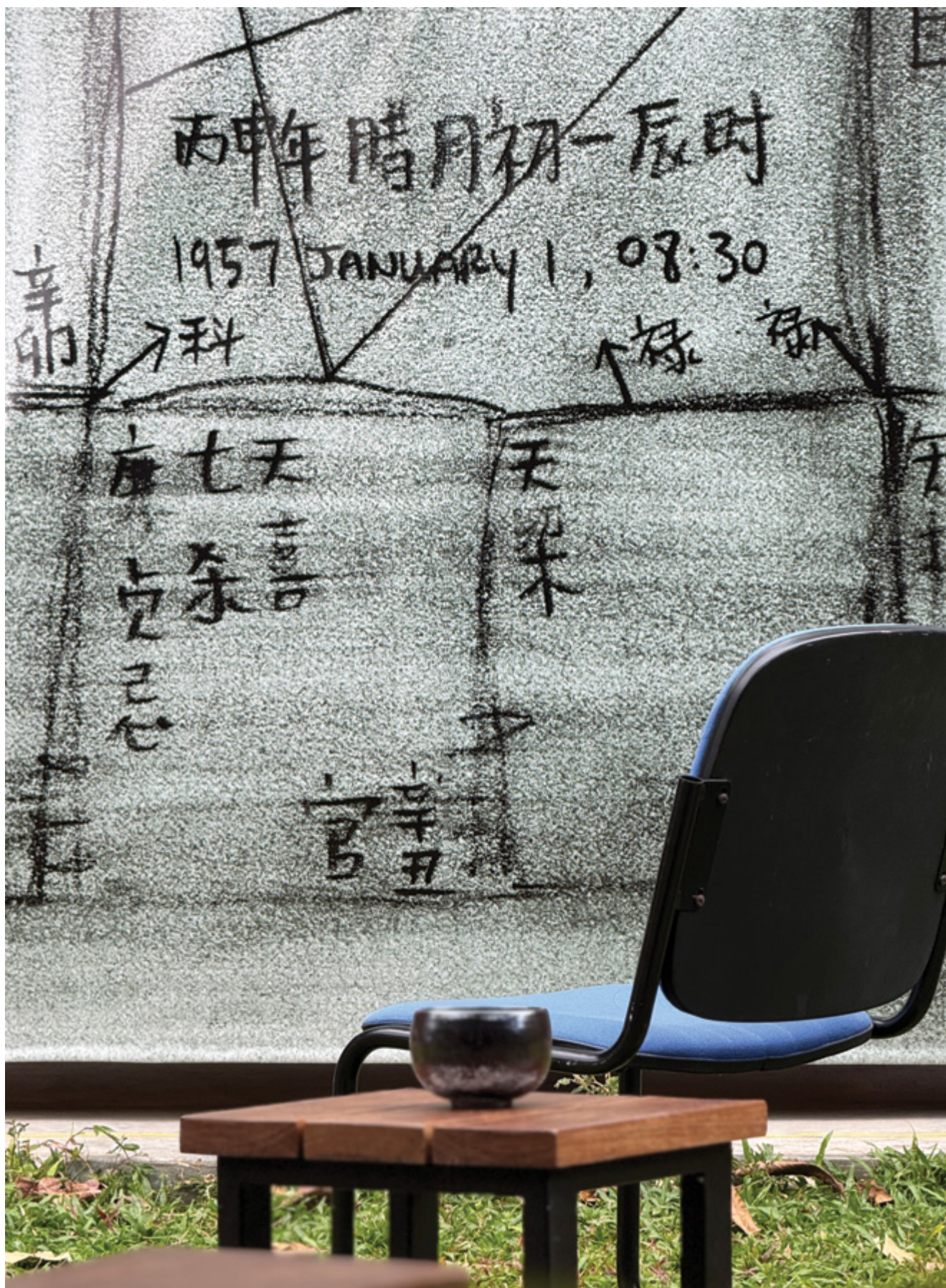


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DEBORAH KAY YEN LIN

is an arts administrator and marketing professional currently based in Taiwan. She formerly worked at its National Theatre and Concert Hall, and currently holds roles at Bach Inspiration, Melody Music Consultant (Penang), VIRAMA Ensemble and WIND IMAGE.



GEORGE TOWN'S FATE, PREDICTED IN JOHN CLANG'S *DREAMING ISLANDS* PROJECT

BY LIM WAN PHING

DID YOU KNOW that George Town became a city on 1 January 1957 at 8.30am? It made the front page of the following day's *The Straits Times*, under the headline "Penang's Big Day—What a Day!"

The time and date for this event—this birth—were the details used for a reading in Singaporean artist and geomancer John Clang's recent fortune-telling art project. "George Town as a person, or main character, is represented by the *zi wei* (紫微, King Star)," John began. "Its friend is the *tan lang* (贪狼, Greedy Wolf). This means that George Town is a fun city that enjoys interacting with others. Its weakness, however, is that it is too easily affected by others' opinions."

John's reading was part of the show *Dreaming Islands: A Geomancy of Time*, held at COEX from 8 to 12 January 2026. Curated by John's long-time friend, art historian Michelle Lim, the show involved several components: a city-chart of George Town with live interpretation ("A Portrait of George Town"); a display of nine chairs arranged in auspicious positions ("Nine Chairs"); and personal readings for anyone who submitted a question ("Reading by an Artist"), hand-written on a canvas cloth ("Table of Inquiry"). The result was a highly interactive and participatory art show, which integrated art and geomancy with ideas of space and history.

TAKING PORTRAITS WITHOUT A CAMERA

Professionally, John is a photographer, artist and filmmaker. He has worked with brands like Zara, Nike, Adidas, Verizon and IBM, but is also recognised as a grandmaster with 15 disciples. He studied Chinese metaphysics for over a decade and has been conducting "Reading by an Artist" as a live art performance since 2023. Privately, he gives readings at no charge to anyone who enquires about their future.

John merges divination with art by taking portraits of people *without* a camera. Instead, he "reads" them and maps their past, present and future. "I am the camera, I-Ching [易经, Book of Change] is the lens and the portrait is embedded into their hearts," John explained at the artist-curator talk at COEX. The resulting "portrait" is akin to a long-exposure photograph, where the "likeness" of a sitter gradually comes into focus, and they are given details and clarity about their life.

Having read humans, John is now expanding to reading spaces, such as cities. Prior to George Town, he



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charted the "portrait" of the Jim Thompson Art Centre in Bangkok, and before that, Singapore. His practice is informed by *zi wei dou shu* (紫微斗数, Purple Star Astrology), a form of fortune-telling based on one's time of birth to determine personality, career and life prospects. He also integrates knowledge from geomancy, Chinese medicine, and the ancient divination text, the I-Ching.

A BRIGHT FUTURE FOR TWO CITIES

"George Town's children are represented by the *tai yang wen chang ke* (太阳文昌科, Scholar Star)," went John's reading. "The sun at noon is bright and effective. This means intellects are sprouting from George Town, as it's a city that has historically produced intelligent people. The children of George Town are bright, impulsive and ready to spring into action."

As for Singapore, John predicted that the country will prosper between 2032 and 2036, likely because of projects that are currently underway. Women and the Global South are also predicted to dominate and excel globally in 2043, with Malaysia, Singapore and Indonesia rising high. He then advised the audience to get involved in anything "south".

Indeed, John's readings for Singapore and Penang seem to declare progress and prosperity for both

CAPTIONS

1. Detail of "Nine Chairs" (2026) as part of *Dreaming Islands* at COEX@Kilang Besi. Photo by Ho Kae Jing, courtesy of Art Linguistics.

2. Installation view of "A Portrait of George Town, Penang" and "Nine Chairs" (2026). Photo by Yu Ke Dong, courtesy of Art Linguistics.

in the coming decades. He prophesises that between 2021 and 2030, George Town will develop through its connections abroad. One important highlight is that many people will be coming back. And between 2031 and 2040, George Town will be extremely successful: the city will flourish, where businesses and individuals will shine.

A PROJECT ACROSS ISLANDS AND BORDERS

Michelle, for one, is taking these predictions to heart. A curator, researcher and art professor at Singapore's Nanyang Technological University, she has worked closely with John to bring the show to Penang after successful runs in Singapore, Bangkok and the 2025 Sharjah Biennial in the United Arab Emirates. Her current academic research focuses on Japan and the Global South, and she is looking to collaborate with more artists in Malaysia and Indonesia.

"During the early conceptualisation of this project, we asked ourselves, 'Where is our art scene right now? What does it mean to be part of Southeast Asia?' I'd like to see more curators in Singapore think about shared cultural history, and not just national history," Michelle said. It was also important for her to bring *Dreaming Islands* to Penang, and to expand John's repertoire to include the "Portrait", "Readings" and "Nine Chairs" performances together. "It's all one project but with different manifestations of energy," she said. "Penang was important because of our shared history as a trade settlement. And if we shared the same past, could we share the same future too?"

With *Dreaming Islands*, both John and Michelle emphasised the importance of the collective. "The community is at the core of what we tried to do," Michelle remarked. In contrast, "[f]or many artworks, the artist is the central figure. But our show could only work with participation from the audience [members] who sent us their personal questions, and the local community who loaned us the nine chairs and the stories that came with them."

Indeed, this ethos was central to her general curatorial practice. "When organising an exhibition, I always think about audience participation and how that can be meaningful in the long term, [where art is] not just consumed."

This project may seem conceptual, philosophical and experimental, but the outcome is physical and tangible. Divination merges with art to act as a symbol of hope and tool for navigating uncertainty. All readings and interpretations are to be translated into real action for personal empowerment. For George Town's people in particular, John encouraged them to be actively involved in their city's progress. Michelle agreed, but also saw the "island" as an individual in its own right. "*Dreaming Islands* stands for every dreaming individual. Are the people dreaming? If they are, then the island will progress."



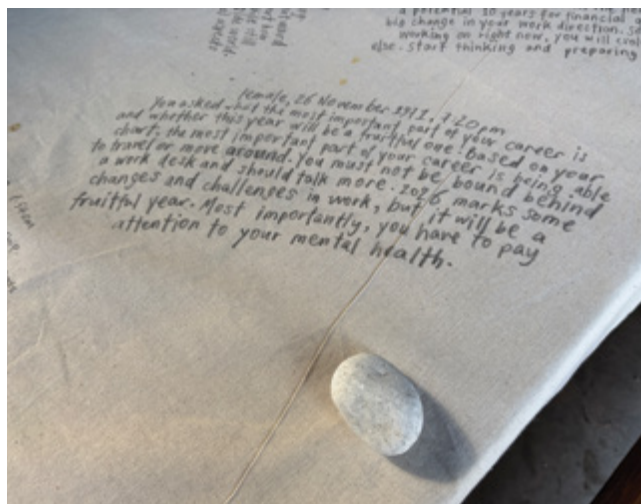
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"I am the camera, I-Ching [易經, Book of Change] is the lens, and the portrait is embedded into their hearts."



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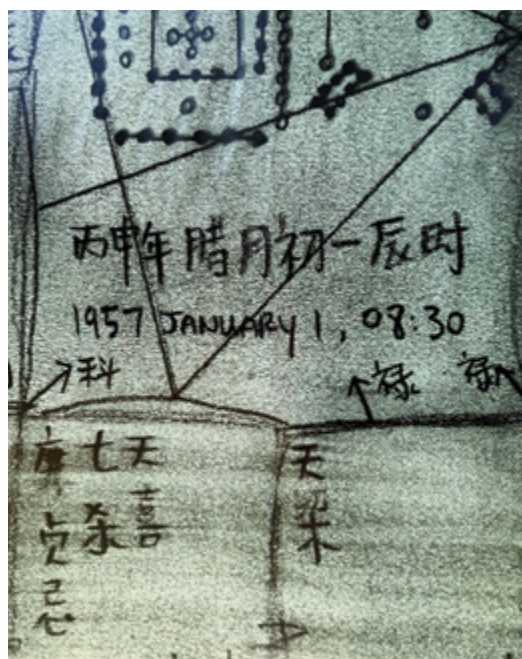
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3. Goh Cheng Hao recording John Clang's messages on "Table of Inquiry" (2026). Photo by Yu Ke Dong. Image courtesy of Art Linguistics.
4. Audiences interacting with "Nine Chairs" (2026). Photo by Yu Ke Dong. Image courtesy of Art Linguistics.
5. A close-up of the "Table of Inquiry".
6. Incense pieces being dried on "Nine Chairs" (2026). Photo by Michelle Lim. Image courtesy of Art Linguistics.
7. Installation view of "Table of Inquiry" (2026). Photo by Michelle Lim. Image courtesy of the artist.
8. "A Portrait of George Town, Penang" (2026). Photo by Andrew Ng. Image courtesy of the artist.
9. Details of "A Portrait of George Town, Penang" (2026). Photo by Andrew Ng. Image courtesy of the artist.



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.

MANIFESTED FORMS OF THE PAST AND FUTURE: A REVIEW OF *A SONG OF CROSSING TO THE SOUTHERN SEA*

BY YEE HENG YEH



WHAT I HAVE always found magical about Potehi, or glove puppetry, is the amount of life that a once-inanimate object can be imbued with. When a few subtle twitches are accompanied by spirited voice acting, a character the size of your hand can be suddenly, and credibly, brought into existence.

In some cases, the puppeteer and voice actor are not even the same person. Studying the programme book for *A Song of Crossing to the Southern Sea*, a recent Taiwanese–Malaysian collaboration, I was surprised to note that the two puppet protagonists were operated and voiced by different performers across scenes. I imagined a puppet behind the scenes, different hands slipping into its torso of cloth to give it solid shape, different throats modulating pitch and register, as if the character's voice itself was a glove that could be put on and taken off at will. What unites the character, then, is the body of the puppet itself: the form which holds the substance.

The glove puppet fits perfectly onto a hand—its form is made for that function. But how does the form of glove puppetry fit the substance of the show?



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COMPOSITION AND COLLABORATION

Song tells a straightforward story. In the late-Qing period, with war looming in the background, two young men from Zhangzhou venture on a journey across the sea in search of new fortunes in new lands. It treads the familiar path of narratives concerning ancestral migration from Malaysian history. There are the requisite trials and tribulations, eventual financial successes and tragedies inseparable from the choice to leave one's homeland.

This journey is also expressed by a range of musical instruments and languages throughout the play. When the characters arrive in Malaya, we hear the strains of the *seruling*, and their spoken Hokkien gradually morphs into the Penang version we know today. Elsewhere, the anachronistic use of the guitar and cello captures the unreality of a hallucination sequence.

What is interesting is *Song's* process of composition. The creators explained that in most cases, lyrics were drawn from existing songbooks and melodies borrowed from musical sets still circulating within tradi-

tional opera. It is a kind of patchwork process. In this way, the show establishes its intention of using the old to make the new.

Also new was the use of another art form, Liam Kua (lit. "chant-sing"), a blend of folk singing, dialogue and music, in this performance. Liam Kua becomes a storytelling device that operates on multiple levels. Performers serve as narrators who set the overarching mood and direction of a scene, but at points, they also chime in as characters themselves, crossing the boundary between story and narration. In this sense, they are similar to a chorus, both commenting on and participating in the story.

The most striking moment comes when they break the fourth wall to address and interact with the audience. They sing and joke, sharing Malay phrases they have picked up along the way: *berapa banyak, sangat cantik, terima kasih*. The production thus reveals its own conditions of creation. These Taiwanese performers, too, have had to cross that southern sea (in less perilous circumstances, admittedly) to learn the idiom of the peoples here. Through song, they re-enact this history.

This meta-theatrical flourish highlighted how Liam Kua, like Potehi, has roots in folk entertainment. Improvisation and interaction are part of the form's living contract with its audience. And so, the charm of the moment felt organic and profound.

GROUNDING AND EMBODIMENT

Other elements, such as the use of playback for certain sounds or generative artificial intelligence backdrops, did not cohere as effectively. With so much musical talent at the team's disposal, why use sound effects, rather than the tones and timbres of instruments, to construct soundscapes? And where traditional intricate, if static, backdrops once functioned as a shorthand for setting, here, the casual switching between uncannily animated sequences was slick but somewhat distracting. It felt ill-fitting. This was an element that did not sufficiently interrogate the conditions of its creation.



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CAPTIONS

(Cover page) Chow Boo Seng with a bag of soil from the motherland.

1. Official banner of *A Song of Crossing to the Southern Sea*.

2. Puppeteers and musicians of *A Song of Crossing to the Southern Sea*.

3. A fighting scene between the Teochews and Hokkiens in the play.

4. Slaves get beaten and chased on board the ship to Nanyang.

I think this feeling emerged because, at its heart, Potehi is an art form that is necessarily embodied—and I do not just mean the presence of the puppeteer's hand. The audience's presence, too, is vital. In a post-show question and answer session, the production team revealed that one change they made, after receiving audience feedback from their Taiwan staging, was to include more humorous beats.

This worked out wonderfully. A scene where the body of a ship's passenger is thrown overboard takes on slapstick dimensions. A character's increasingly anxious letters to his parents is depicted in frantic crescendo—by leaning into a spiral of panic, pathos emerges through absurdity. There is darkness to the comedy, which in turns grounds and humanises moments of great emotion. I was surprised by how well these elements balanced out.

In an early scene, the characters bring with them a bag of soil from their home-

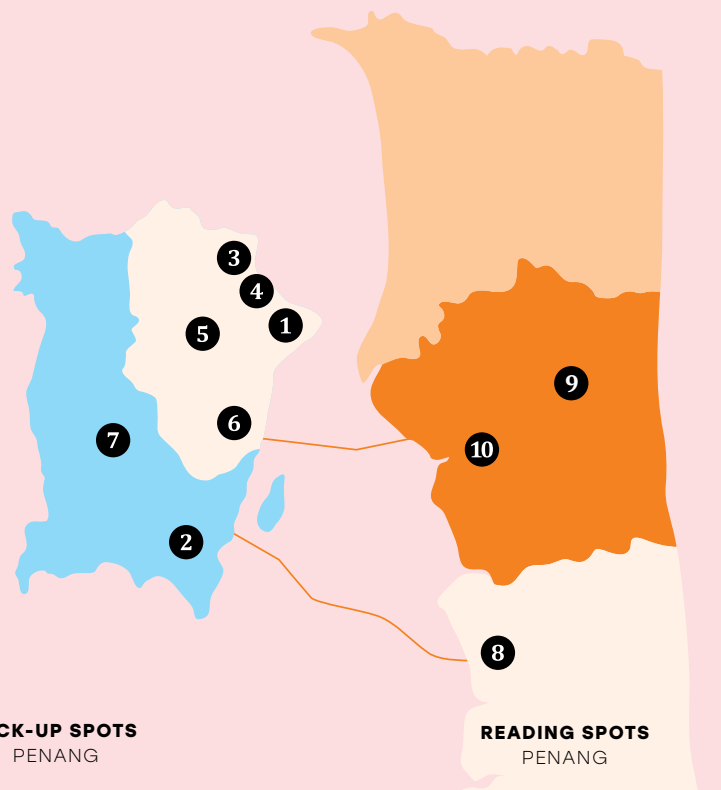
land—however far their journey might take them, the soil would serve to anchor their lives, and deaths, to the place they came from. This, too, is a kind of grounding. Like these characters, the artists practising this art form face uncharted territory. There are still more layers to uncover in the histories of these forms, in the possibilities of their futures and in how both may interplay with other genres and new forms. But there is a bold, eager generation at the helm. It is not hard to believe that they will come to find their footing.

***Note:** This production by Ombak Potehi (Penang) and Smile Folksong Group (Taiwan) was staged from 24–26 April in Auditorium A, KOMTAR.



YEE HENG YEH is a writer and Mandarin-to-English translator whose work has been featured in *The KITA!* Podcast, *adda*, *Strange Horizons*, *NutMag*, *Nashville Review* and *Guernica*. You can find him on Twitter at @HengYeh42.

HERE'S WHERE YOU CAN FIND PENANG MONTHLY



PICK-UP SPOTS KL/SELANGOR

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

PICK-UP SPOTS PENANG

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

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

READING SPOTS PENANG

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

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

MLD: million litres/day

WATER SUPPLY ROAD MAP TOWARDS 2050

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

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

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

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

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



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