

# PENANG MONTHLY

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## PENANG'S PULSATING PASAR MALAM

### COVER STORY

PENANG'S PASAR  
MALAM: THE RHYTHM  
OF COMMUNITY AND  
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FROM GERMANY  
TO PENANG:  
ADVENTURES OF THE  
"KOPITIAM CHAIR"



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- 4 Put the spotlight on ordinary Penangites who otherwise go unnoticed, but who nevertheless define the culture of the state in essential ways.
- 5 Highlight the importance of Penang as a generator of culture, education, industry and cosmopolitan values.
- 6 Emphasise present trends in the economics, industry, politics and arts which affect the immediate future of the state and country.
- 7 Offer reliable socioeconomic data for the benefit of decision makers in government and the private sector.

# PENANG'S PULSATING PASAR MALAM

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But as humans, are we not  
drawn to the flawed and the  
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feel undeniably real?”

— MUHAMMAD  
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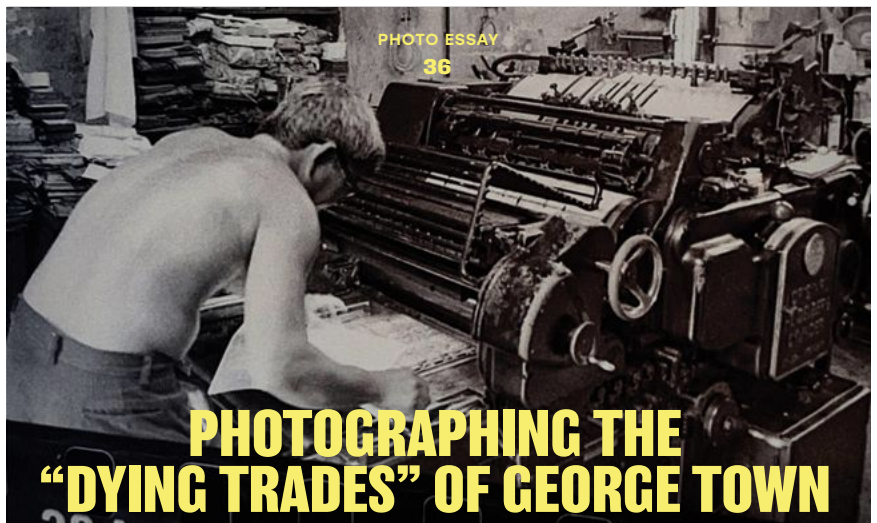


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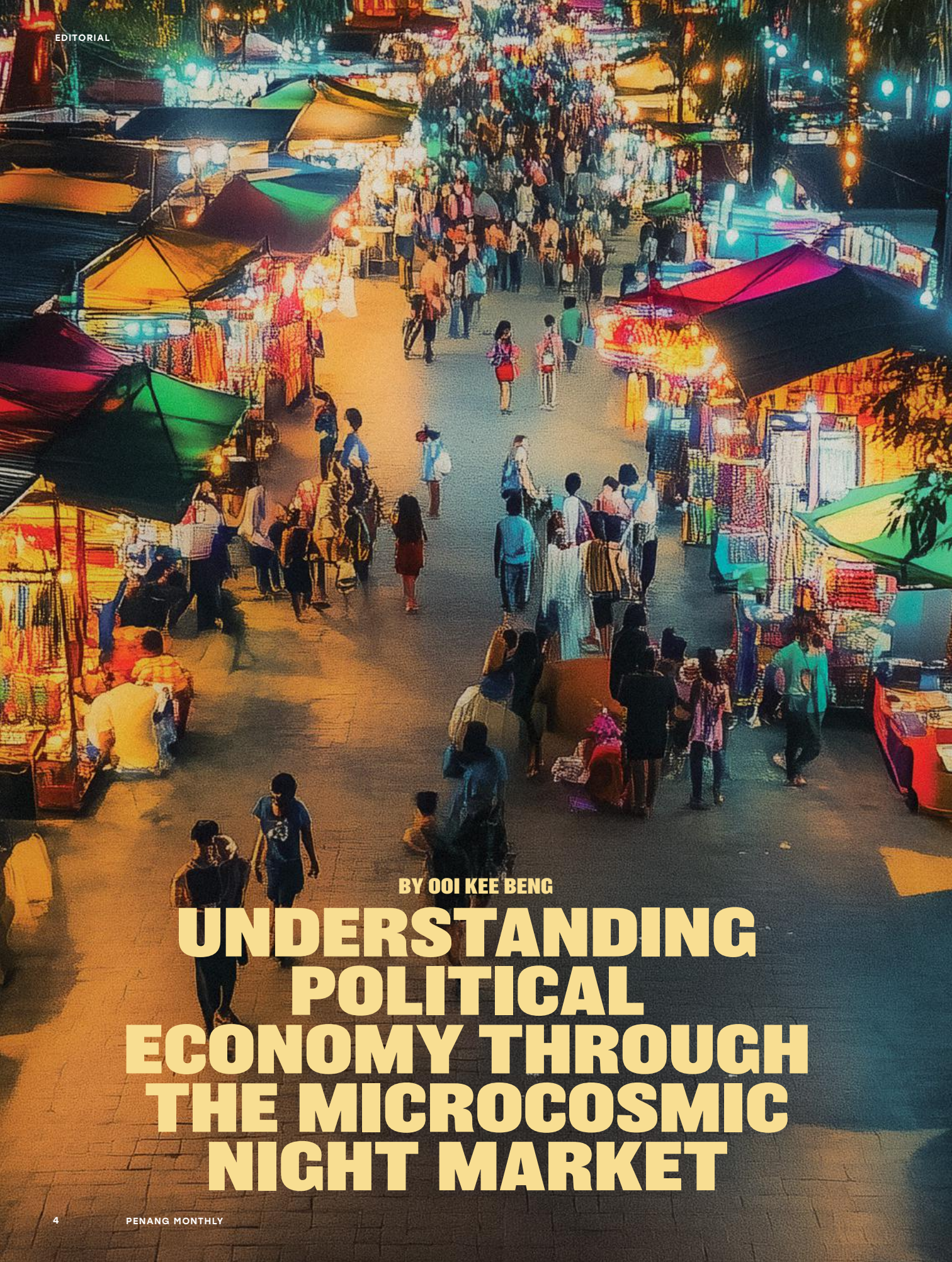
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### PHOTOGRAPHING THE “DYING TRADES” OF GEORGE TOWN



BY OOI KEE BENG

# UNDERSTANDING POLITICAL ECONOMY THROUGH THE MICROCOSMIC NIGHT MARKET

**THE POLITICAL ECONOMY** encompassing the night market is strangely illuminative of human society. Why do I say that?

Now, one can take the individual as the point of departure for analysing the bare constituents of society. Or one can start with the family, quickly scaling upwards to the clan, and so on.

The former approach leads to a Lockean individual giving up certain rights and freedoms, having realised that the resultant collective and polity bring more substantial gains than the retention of individual rights alone. The latter, on the other hand, is based on familial bonds, which require negotiations, agreements and intermarriages between different identities—whether based on surnames, clans or villages—for coexistence.

In either case, a political centre has to emerge. In general terms, how the nature of this centre is justified and extrapolated upon distinguishes the Western adoration for the Individual from the Confucian esteem for the Family. This difference is a much discussed and debated matter which remains unsolved and unresolved.

This month's focus on the night market (or "pasar malam" in Malay) inspires me to take an alternative point of departure for understanding human bonds—and bondage—across bloodlines, before the state emerged to absorb basic economic activities as the basis for its *raison d'être*.

#### RATIONALISING TIME AND SPACE

To simplify matters somewhat, let us liken the urban pasar malam in settings like Penang to a river-mouth Sunday market from a rural past, where barter trade was the order of the day. From one tributary come boats bearing succulent fruits from the high slopes of neighbouring hills. From another, sampans carry carcasses of pigs, deer and birds of all sizes. From further down the coast women arrive, carrying bundles of newly harvested crops. Fishing boats from the delta bring fresh catches of sea creatures, great and small.

Issues of space and time need to be immediately managed. When and where should they all congregate as sellers and buyers? What language should they speak? All this would gradually evolve into common agreement through regular practice and convenience. And it would be determined in various ways, be it through threats and coercion, or give-and-take and mutual self-interest.

More concretely, which group should take which spot on the beach, and how much space can they claim for the day? If this market is a one-off matter, then some aggressive elbowing might suffice, a first-come-first-served model could work or perhaps the bigger group with the most muscular men would decide.

However, if it is to be a regular event, the message has to be passed around to as many groups in the vicinity as possible: foot-fall is vital for a market to sustain the supply of and demand for a variety of goods. These hopeful and geographically diverse barter businesses would have to deal with all these matters, further complicated if their mother tongues are not commonly understandable. Thus, some order has to be maintained and routinised.

Herewith, Economics meets Politics, and Political Economy is born. Political power comes into being: first through the need to facilitate the transfer of goods, and by extension to stimulate production for future market days. The management of space and time—and perhaps language use in signage or the formulation of general rules—is soon necessary.

Protection is needed as well. You do not want pirates raiding these gatherings. Perhaps a fortress can be built around the market grounds, with recognisable armed forces watching out for disruptive behaviour. No disturbing of the peace, please: no theft, no violence.

Above all, a common currency is needed to ease trading. Call it protection money if you like, but for barter to become more efficient and predictable, taxes and fees have to be imposed. The mobility of this money—and its value—will subsequently have to be controlled as well. That is now the fuel for the political economy.

And thus, the State is born.

This apparatus outwardly seeks to oversee all of society and regulate economic behaviour for the "common good". It quickly evolves into an administration which is now not only responsible for deciding upon a common language but also monopolising violence. These are the prerequisites for trade and the imposition of formal laws. The state does not *only* manage time and space, however; it has to control *understandings* of time and space. An ideology is necessarily developed that gives collective meaning to the community, be this in religious or economic terms.

#### CONTROLLING THE CONTROLLING STATE

Now comes the imperative to control the controllers. Limiting the powerful, while the powerful control schools, messaging, transfers of wealth and taxation cannot be an easy task. Whatever the form of this powerful entity, whether the Leviathan or the Son of Heaven (or the *Kerajaan*, in the regional context), the challenge remains crucial today.

The western historical trajectory came up with democracy, a mechanism through which power can be, if not controlled, at least disrupted by some time-limiting process. But according to Aristotle and others, this system has inbuilt and inevitable weaknesses—namely populism, in most cases—that will destroy it in the end.

Meanwhile, the Confucian tradition constructs the notion of *Tianming* (the mandate of heaven), which claims that the job of the powerful is merely to bring prosperity and wellbeing to the people. But if the sovereign does not carry out this duty properly—a problem exacerbated by the lack of institutional checks and balances apart from the protests of righteous mandarins—then the consequences can be dire. Whether through popular uprising as proposed by the Confucian philosopher Mencius, or Heavenly intervention as per Zhou Dynasty discourse, regime change is justified if that duty has been neglected by the state.

In our times, when territory-fixated nation-states and national economic growth determine political discourses and international relations, a *consciousness* of key dynamics—i.e., how economics and politics interact; how power is constructed and exercised within a country or globally; and how unresolved human challenges now seriously affect the sustaining dynamics of nature itself—is needed to guide humanity towards a form of global governance which is not self-destructive and exclusive.

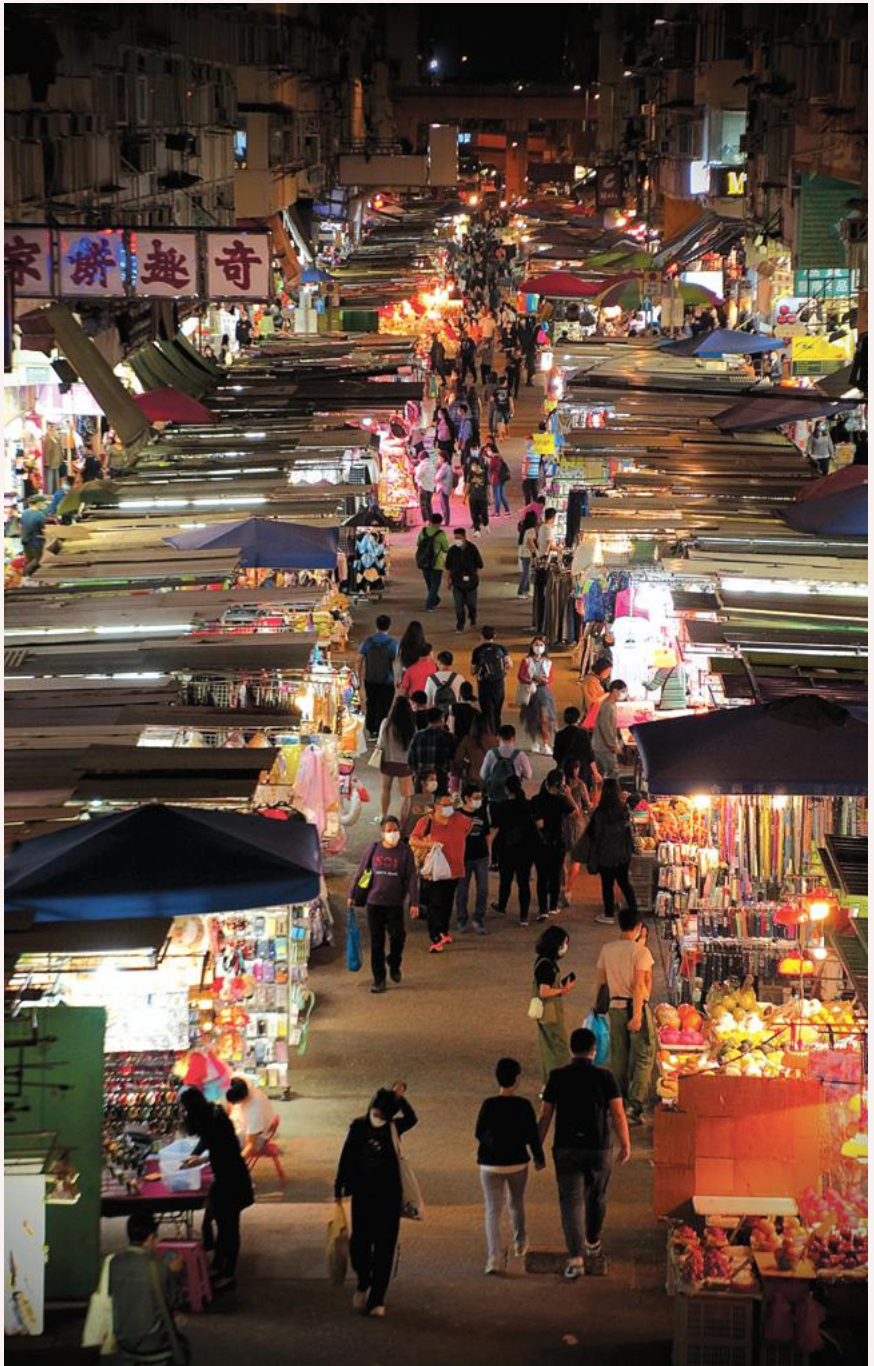
To my mind then, the times call for governments to shift away from national interests and essentially parochial policy thinking towards the sustainable management of a globalised world. Global governance is necessarily the key subject for political and philosophical discussion in our era, the underlying ethos for which has to be *universal humanism*. Otherwise, more forms of genocides and cultural suppression await.



# BETWEEN PROFITABILITY AND AFFORDABILITY: THE ECONOMICS OF NIGHT MARKETS

BY NADHIRAH ZAINUDDIN

**THE PASAR MALAM** is often associated with affordability. Yet its economic value transcends consumer prices. By bringing ready-to-eat food into residential areas, night markets reduce the time and effort required by individuals to obtain dinner, while providing traders with access to customers without the financial commitment of operating permanent retail premises. These benefits are closely connected: customers gain convenience and variety, while traders gain a comparatively accessible space for earning income. However, the continuity of this relationship depends on an increasingly difficult question. Can night market food remain affordable to customers while generating viable income for sellers?



## THE ECONOMIC VALUE OF CONVENIENCE

The importance of convenient food options has grown alongside changes in the organisation of household life. Urbanisation, longer commuting times, greater female participation in the workforce and the prevalence of dual-income households have increased the value of time that might otherwise be spent on domestic work, for example, purchasing ingredients and preparing meals. In Malaysia, the share of household expenditure allocated to buying food away from home increased from 11.2% to 15.3% from 2019 to 2022.<sup>[1]</sup>

Purchasing ready-to-eat food is no longer necessarily an occasional activity; for many working households, it has become part of managing employment, travel and family responsibilities.

This broader shift in how households obtain meals is being accommodated by night markets. As places for consumption, they provide a practical alternative to home cooking, restaurant dining and food delivery. Night markets are widely expected to provide accessible food, particularly for households seeking a less expensive alternative to formal dining. Indeed, lower-income and vulnerable

households rely disproportionately on night markets because of the accessibility of meals sold there.

The ability to make choices on limited budgets is also a key attraction. Customers can inspect what is being sold, compare prices across stalls and adjust decision-making according to individual budgets. A household does not have to agree on a single type of cuisine, while an individual can choose between having a full meal or several smaller items. This convenience is also experienced spatially. Unlike a permanent commercial centre which customers have to travel to, the night market temporarily brings commercial activity into or near residential neighbourhoods. Its value therefore includes price, time and travel savings.

#### AN ACCESSIBLE MARKETPLACE FOR SMALL VENDORS

The night market performs particularly important economic functions for stall operators. Hawking has historically provided a relatively low-capital route to self-employment, particularly for individuals with limited access to formal business opportunities.<sup>[2]</sup> A vendor can establish a steady flow of customers without assuming all the expenses associated with opening and maintaining a conventional shop or restaurant. This does not mean that entering the business is cost-free, however. Vendors still require equipment, transportation, ingredients, licences and sufficient working capital to prepare meals. Nevertheless, the temporary and small-scale nature of these operations allows individuals to begin their entrepreneurial journeys at more manageable levels.

According to an anonymous stallholder who entered the night market business in 2021 after the Movement Control Order restrictions were lifted, they initially pursued this path on a full-time basis. Until now, night market business supplements their income from regular factory employment. “The night market is more manageable because the licence is inexpensive. Opening a permanent premise or joining larger events would require more capital and a bigger vehicle, which I do not have at the moment,” the vendor explained. Regardless of whether night market businesses provide a primary or supplementary livelihood, recent national-level findings suggest that many vendors do rely heavily on income from such businesses, although these earnings may be low and unstable.<sup>[3]</sup> This makes the night market a decentralised employment space formed by numerous small and independently operated businesses.

Their significance is not always visible from the size of individual operations, which may only employ owners and their family members. Collectively, however, night markets provide repeat opportuni-

ties for income-generation across different locations and trading days. Their rotating nature also enables vendors to reach several customer bases without maintaining multiple premises. Yet mobility transfers certain costs and risks to stallholders themselves, incurred by transporting equipment, repeatedly setting up and dismantling stalls as well as facing uncertain demand at different locations.

#### THE LIMITS OF AFFORDABILITY

Affordability is central to the relationship between vendors and customers. However, affordable prices do not arise automatically. Before selling the first item of the evening, a stallholder may already have paid for ingredients, packaging, transportation and operational overhead. Those employing helpers must also account for labour. The stallholder must then estimate how much stock to prepare without knowing precisely how many customers will actually visit.

“The increase in the price of soybeans has been particularly significant. The same quantity that previously cost RM70 now costs RM150, while packaging materials and food containers have also become considerably more expensive,” the vendor continued. But passing on price increases to customers is not straightforward, because the high concentration of stalls within a limited space makes alternatives readily comparable. A customer who considers one product too expensive may choose another stall, purchase a different item or simply not buy anything altogether.

Thus, competition benefits customers by encouraging vendors to offer reasonable prices and maintain quality, but limits the extent to which vendors can respond to higher costs. Keeping prices unchanged may protect demand, but narrows the margins earned from each sale. Raising prices may preserve returns on individual items but result in fewer purchases. Faced with this dilemma, the stallholder may increase their product’s price from RM3 to RM3.50, rather than reduce portions or compromise on quality. Why? “Customers will notice if the quantity is reduced. Once they are familiar with the product and satisfied with its quality, they will usually continue buying even when the price increases slightly,” said the vendor.

This decision illustrates how accounting for costs at night markets cannot simply involve a fixed mark-up of production costs. Customers assess value based on many factors: price, quantity, quality and familiarity. A visible price increase may be accepted if the product continues to meet expectations, but a business which compromises on value is less easily sustained. Further, consumers also experience their own pressures, as evidenced by vendor earnings. “Previously, daily sales could reach RM800. Now, even reaching RM500 can be difficult. Cus-

tomers tend to spend more when payday arrives,” the vendor said. Customer spending thus appears to follow the salary cycle. A crowded night market does not necessarily indicate stronger sales: customers may continue to visit while buying fewer items, prioritising essential meals or comparing prices more closely. The number of visitors matters, but so too does the amount that each one is willing and able to spend.

#### A BALANCE WHICH CANNOT BE TAKEN FOR GRANTED

The everyday economics of Penang’s night markets extends beyond the selling price of food alone. For households, these markets reduce the time and effort required to obtain a meal, while providing variety and allowing members to exercise control over spending. For vendors, they offer access to customers and an entry point into small-scale commercial activity. Yet the benefits enjoyed by each side depend on the continued participation of the other. Customers need prices that remain within their budgets. Vendors need sufficient returns to justify the preparation, transportation, labour and uncertainty involved during each evening’s business.

Discussions about night market prices can easily position consumers and food vendors as antagonists. In practice, however, both are responding to their own economic limitations. This means that the prices on display emerge from a continuous negotiation between operating costs, competition and household purchasing power. Penang’s night markets may consist of small and temporary stalls, but their economic function is substantial. They support everyday food access, neighbourhood commerce and numerous individual livelihoods. Preserving these benefits requires recognising that affordability is not simply a characteristic of the night market, but also a balance that must remain workable on both sides of the stall.

#### ENDNOTES

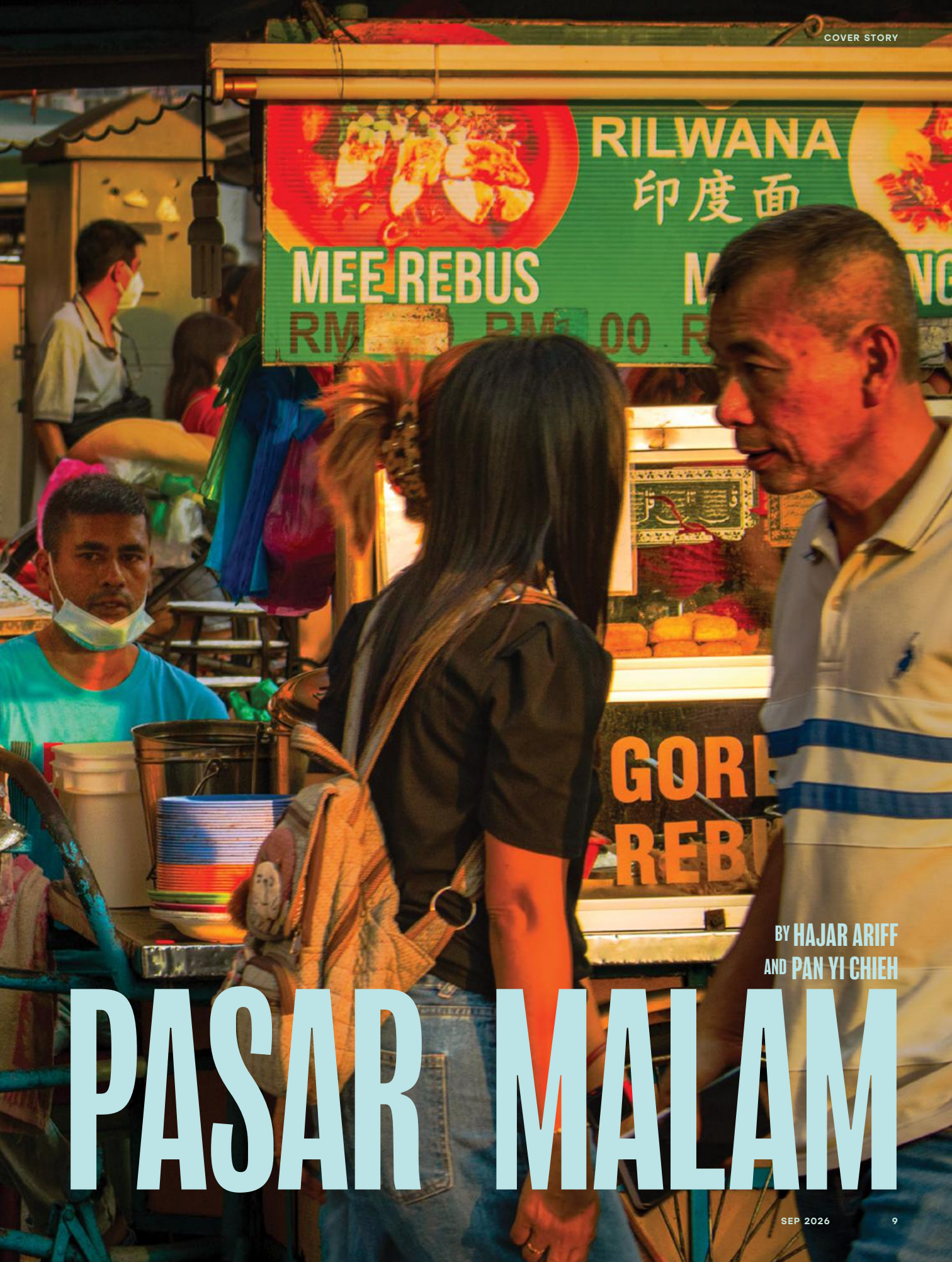
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# PENANG'S

THE RHYTHM OF  
COMMUNITY AND  
LOCAL BUSINESS



BY HAJAR ARIFF  
AND PAN YI CHIEH

# PASAR MALAM

**ASIA'S NIGHT MARKETS**, or “pasar malam”, as they are called in Malaysia, are a popular and established form of economic activity, well-integrated into daily life. The pasar malam comes alive in the evenings, offering a temporary place to grab dinner, buy snacks, enjoy light entertainment or simply browse the wares available. Beyond food—their essential element—the pasar malam serves key social, economic and cultural functions. It acts as a lifeline for vendors and small entrepreneurs, while providing spaces for visitors to gather with friends and family, satisfy daily needs and find amusement.

## CAPTIONS

Cover: Kimberly Street Night Market at golden hour.

1. A variety of food choices at Pasar Malam Taman Sungai Dua Utama.

2. Pasar Malam Farlim. A lively night market with a charming touch of greenery.

3. Pasar Malam Farlim. Fresh fruits and vegetables are an essential part of every night market.

4. Hajar Ariff with Zara and Abang Long, who sell soya and other refreshing drinks at Pasar Malam Taman Tasek Indah.



In exploring Penang's pasar malam, we begin by reflecting on our own experiences: what do night markets mean to each of us? For Hajar, growing up in Malaysia, the pasar malam was a space to spend time with her parents, walking together from stall to stall while choosing food and observing the lives of small-scale vendors who worked hard to set up, prepare ingredients and sometimes travel long distances to make a living. Through these visits, her parents also taught her a simple but lasting lesson: when life feels difficult, there are always others facing even greater hardships, making the pasar malam not only a place for family time, but also a space for learning empathy and gratitude. For Yi Chieh, growing up in Taipei in the 1990s meant more or less weekly visits to its nightly markets, located along busy streets and small connecting lanes. Although not a huge fan of

the food, she was fascinated by the colourful, overwhelming sights and festive atmosphere. She often stopped to watch people playing traditional arcade and carnival attractions, where pinball machines, darts and ring-toss games abound. While these games felt old-school, they were deeply tied to the night market's “vibes”, creating a vibrant, crowded and chaotic environment alongside the various food options. Ultimately, this atmosphere captivated her and, most importantly, also allowed for precious family time.

## A TYPOLOGY OF MARKETS

In Malaysia, pasar malam and other markets play a central role in daily life, as well as in local cultural and economic development. Penang's market landscape includes morning markets, seasonal and festive markets such as Ramadan bazaars, *pasar tani* (agricultural markets) and *pasar karat* (flea markets). There are 30 pasar malam located on Penang Island and over 60 are distributed across Seberang Perai (see “Selected pasar malam in Penang” in this issue). Each operate on a fixed day of the week, and are typically located close to residential areas, primarily serving local residents. They are essential spaces for people to buy dinner, snacks, fruits and vegetables, and a variety of fresh seafood and poultry.

These offerings naturally mirror the cultural traditions and culinary preferences of each neighbourhood. Interestingly, their layouts and spatial arrangements are also deeply connected to their outdoor environs, creating a distinct atmosphere which sets night markets apart from indoor alternatives like supermarkets. For example, the Farlim night market stretches along and wraps around an open field, shaded by the canopies of mature angasana trees (*Pterocarpus indicus*) which provide much-needed relief from late-evening sunlight. Meanwhile, the Macallum Street night market features a typical city centre street layout, framed by schools and shop lots. In Seberang Perai, the landscapes become even more varied and expansive, boasting larger-scale night markets. Some are situated near rivers, such as at Taman Sungai Dua Utama, while “Ban Busuk” in Kubang Semang is nestled between a scenic river and nearby expressway (see “The Accidental Influencer” in this issue).

Each market creates a unique relaxed atmosphere through the clever use of urban and semi-urban spaces, demonstrating strong connections to local development and urban change. Consequently, they offer immersive experiences deeply rooted in local culture, place-based values and their immediate environs, which can only be truly felt in person. Although only formalised in recent decades, and therefore not strictly “traditional” institutions, such





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markets still manifest specific intersections of time and space (see “Filling borrowed space” and “Spectacle, ‘snake oil’ and satay” in this issue).

#### EVERY VENDOR HAS A STORY

In Seberang Perai Selatan, the Taman Tasek Indah night market takes place every Monday, along a row of shophouses just off a main road. The market is easily visible to and accessible by locals, where a steady flow of visitors arrives from the surrounding neighbourhoods.

Among its vendors are Zara and Abang Long, a couple who have spent the past four to five years building their business. Their decision to become vendors was driven by a desire for an additional source of income, which gradually transformed their modest stall into a reflection of their family’s values. The business, named after Zara—“Zara Soya”—signifies a distinctly personal identity. It is more than a recognisable name on

a signboard; it also represents shared effort, mutual support and a belief that honest work, no matter how modest, deserves to be done well. Every cup of fresh soya milk and each bowl of Tau Fu Fa served reflects this commitment.

Over the years, the couple learned that being vendors requires a certain level of flexibility. They are not necessarily confined to one market; different locations offer varying customer profiles. A market serving a predominantly local residential community may have different spending habits and preferences from one located near industrial areas. Understanding who exactly comes to a particular pasar malam therefore influences decisions about whether to sell their products at this location.

Their business has always been a family endeavour, and their conversations often revolve around their children’s education, aspirations and the careful financial

decisions needed to support the household. Rather than pursuing rapid expansion, Zara Soya creates stability through consistent effort. Success, in their eyes, is measured not by the size of the business, but its ability to provide for the family while maintaining the quality that customers have come to expect. This philosophy has shaped the way they approach business. Abang Long recalls being deeply influenced by a close male friend, whose disciplined approach to budgeting and saving left a lasting impression on him. Watching someone carefully manage every ringgit reinforced the importance of financial prudence. Growth, they believe, should come gradually and sustainably, built on careful planning rather than unnecessary risk-taking.

Abang Long smiled when recalling their early days, where the hardest lesson was not perfecting recipes, but overcoming his own sense of *malu*: shame. Standing behind a stall and serving customers felt unfamiliar at first, and he worried about how others might perceive him. Over time, however, those doubts faded. Regular customers became familiar faces, brief transactions turned into friendly conversations and the stall gradually became a source of quiet pride. What once felt intimidating eventually fostered a genuine sense of belonging.



His newfound confidence is reflected in how he speaks about the business. Even the smallest pasar malam stall deserves thoughtful branding and a welcoming presentation. Customers form their first impressions long before they taste the product. “People buy with their eyes first,” he observed, before expressing his hope to one day operate from a professionally branded vehicle. This would be no mere symbol of status, but a reflection of the care and professionalism invested in the business. Stories like Zara Soya remind us that the success of a pasar malam cannot be measured solely by the number of stalls it hosts or the size of its crowds. The dedication, resilience, adaptability and deter-



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mination shared by countless vendors and their families across Penang, in response to dynamic economic conditions, also matter (see “Between profitability and affordability” in this issue).

#### A MATTER OF GOVERNANCE<sup>[2]</sup>

As personal as each journey may be, it is only one part of a larger picture. Behind every orderly row of stalls lies a carefully coordinated ecosystem of market organisers, licensing systems and local authorities, working together to ensure that the pasar malam continues thriving as both a commercial space and valued community institution. In Penang, the responsibility for managing these markets is divided between Majlis Bandaraya Pulau Pinang (MBPP, City Council of Penang Island), which oversees markets on the island, while Majlis Bandaraya Seberang Perai (MBSP, City Council of Seberang Perai) administers those on the mainland. Beyond issuing licences, both councils establish the regulatory framework governing where markets may operate, how stalls are organised and the standards vendors must meet to conduct business.

For aspiring vendors, joining a pasar malam involves more than simply finding an empty space. They must obtain the appropriate licence or permit, and reg-

ister through the organiser responsible for a particular market. These organisers are typically residents’ associations, the local Majlis Pengurusan Komuniti Kampung (MPKK, Village Community Management Council) or registered hawkers’ associations approved by local councils, which play central roles in allocating stalls, maintaining vendor records and ensuring that only licensed traders are operating. Their responsibilities extend well beyond administration: they are expected to design stall layouts in ways which allow for safe pedestrian movement, coordinate traffic management, provide sufficient waste bins, conduct post-market cleaning and appropriately segregate food-sellers from vendors of raw produce to minimise the risk of cross-contamination.

For food vendors such as Zara Soya, compliance includes completing accredited food-handling training, obtaining anti-typhoid vaccination and observing hygiene standards (pertaining to food preparation, protective clothing and waste management). Increasingly, both MBPP and MBSP are encouraging environmentally responsible practices, including reducing single-use plastics, promoting biodegradable alternatives and supporting recycling initiatives in market operations. While most markets generally remain clean—reflecting growing public awareness about littering—challenges persist. Single-use plastics remain widespread, leaving room for improvement (see “Responsibility for waste” in this issue). Finding basic facilities remains a concern. Consequently, nearby mosques and schools frequently provide vital support to market-goers by offering essential public amenities like washrooms and prayer spaces.

Spatial management is equally important. Both councils specify areas where trading is permitted, while prohibiting hawking in locations that may obstruct traffic, compromise pedestrian safety or interfere with public facilities such as schools, hospitals



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and emergency access. MBSP also distinguishes between static, mobile and temporary vendors, each with their own licensing requirements and operating conditions. Seasonal permits, meanwhile, allow traders to capitalise on festive demands by selling Lemang, cookies, hampers and seasonal fruits, for example, during designated periods at approved locations. Meanwhile on Penang Island, new pasar malam locations are generally not permitted within 1km of existing markets, unless special approval is granted, thus helping prevent oversaturation and ensuring the distribution of economic opportunities across communities.

While these regulations are rarely visible to the average visitor, they underpin the vibrant atmosphere that defines Penang’s night markets. These collaborative efforts not only regulate commerce, but also preserve a community institution that continues supporting livelihoods while reflecting the state’s unique social and cultural identity.

#### CULINARY EXPERIENCES, INCLUSIVENESS AND MEMORY

The pasar malam has functioned as a space where community norms are practised, reinforced and passed down (see “The human element” in this issue). However,



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5. Putu Bambu is a popular traditional rice cake dessert, freshly made at the pasar malam.

6. Pasar Malam Jalan Mahkamah, Bayan Lepas, where delicious local favourites such as Nasi Padang Singgalang add to the vibrant experience.

7. Pasar Malam Taman Sungai Dua Utama, located near the scenic Perai River, featuring the occasional chance of spotting a crocodile!

8. At Pasar Malam Kubang Semang, where the space beneath the flyover offers seating for some customers.

9. Pasar Malam Kubang Semang is set along a beautiful river, adding charm to the lively night market.

#### ENDNOTES

1. Statistics from MBSP (<https://www.mbsp.gov.my/index.php/ms/>, updated as of January 2025) and MBPP's 2023 annual publication (accessible at <https://www.mbpp.gov.my/ms/korporat/sumber/penerbitan-2>).

2. See: MBPP. (2024 amendment). *Garis Panduan Menganjur dan Mengawal Aktiviti Pasar Malam, Pasar Pagi, Pasar Minggu dan Pasar Tani*; and MBSP. (2025, July). *Garis Panduan Kaedah Penjajaan dan Permit Penjajaan Bermusim di Seberang Perai*.

3. For an overview of how varied licensing requirements for hawkers emerged as part of postwar governance structures, see: Chin KY. (2024). "Jostling for right of way." *Modern Asian Studies*, 58(6), 1664–84.

4. Nur Sofea Hasmira Azahar and Mohd Amirul Rafiq Abu Rahim. (2025). *Why Night Markets Matter? A Review of Literature*. KRI.

with lifestyle changes and the wider range of leisure and dining options available today, its function is also shifting. Recently, researchers too have become concerned, as the title of a recent literature review suggests. "Why Night Markets Matter?" points out that these markets form a distinct and essential part of Malaysia's hawking culture, offering important economic opportunities, showcasing entrepreneurial culture, preserving cultural heritage, encouraging social connections and representing a business model that constantly adapts to modern urban life.

So too are they spaces where memory work unfolds. In Penang, each pasar malam becomes a living archive of culinary heritage. Vendors bring distinct specialties of various origins, blending regional Malaysian dishes with street food influences from abroad (sushi and mala are sometimes available). Food offerings range from staples (e.g., Laksa, Char Koay Teow, satay) to rare traditional delicacies reliant on the deep experience of older cooks. These foods also offer a glimpse into Malay culinary heritage, where less commonly found dishes and desserts include Nasi Daging, Wajik (made from glutinous rice, palm sugar and coconut milk), Dodol, Kuih Dangai (mainly made from grated coconut, glutinous rice flour and sugar), Kuih Peneram (palm sugar ring snacks) and Nasi Kerabu, alongside Padang dishes such as Nasi Padang Singgalang. Indeed, these markets help preserve traditional cooking skills: vendor demographics range from young adults in their 20s to seniors in their 70s, while children often help run family stalls.

Unlike modern designer markets and shopping malls, or outdoor novelties such as pop-up markets (see "Not just commodities" in this issue) the open-air environment of the pasar malam offers genuine inclusiveness and educational value. We have observed how they serve as community hubs, where the differently abled (*orang*



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*kelainan upaya*) independently operate their own stalls, while local vendors consistently support one another and ensure that spaces remain accessible. Furthermore, community organisations occasionally set up booths to share public information, such as financial literacy guidance.

Against the dominance of air-conditioned cafes, indoor hawker centres and food delivery applications, pasar malam remain distinctly permeable spaces. Their relevance comes down to proximity and authentic atmosphere, intertwined with local environmental conditions. Seeing hardworking vendors sustaining their families through small rotating mobile setups captures the true spirit of the local night market.

If it has been a while since your last visit, now is the time to step out and reconnect.

**\*Note:** We would like to thank Mohamad Hakim Khairulazman for his initial insights into pasar malam, particularly those in Seberang Perai.



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**PAN YI CHIEH** is a research analyst at Penang Institute who was born in Taiwan but now lives in Penang. She is proud to be nurtured by the two beautiful islands she regards as home.



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# SELECTED PASAR MALAM IN PENANG

BY HAJAR ARIFF & PAN YI CHIEH

## OVERVIEW

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DISTRICTS

90+

TOTAL  
NIGHT MARKETS

60+

IN SEBERANG PERAI  
(AS OF JAN 2025)

30

ON THE ISLAND  
(AS OF 2023)

In this mapping exercise, we would like to guide you through the variety and beauty of selected pasar malam in Penang. Let's have fun!



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## BARAT DAYA JALAN MAHKAMAH NIGHT MARKET (BAYAN LEPAS)



### LENGTH

~420m

### STALLS

~200

A variety of local Malay cuisine and traditional desserts, international dishes (such as Japanese cuisine), drinks, fresh seafood, poultry, fresh produce, ikan bilis (dried anchovies), clothing and daily necessities. The food options lean heavily towards local Malay cuisine, such as Bihun soup and Nasi Padang Singgalang.



Source: Authors' own fieldwork (July 2026) & Google Maps



### INFORMATION

#### OPENING HOURS

Every Saturday,  
5:00 PM–10:00 PM

#### COMMODITIES

Food options, particularly  
Malay cuisine.

#### NEARBY FACILITIES

Coffee shops and  
restaurants, public clinic  
and residential area.

### LOCATION

#### SETTING

Located along Jalan  
Mahkamah, ending near  
the Klinik Kesihatan (KK)  
Bayan Lepas/Jalan Dato  
Ismail Hashim junction.

#### ENTRANCE NODE

Entrance located at the  
start of Jalan Mahkamah.

#### SPATIAL LAYOUT

Two-row linear  
arrangement with  
active streetscape and  
good accessibility.

### TRANSPORT

#### BY CAR

Parking available at  
parking bays along Jalan  
Dato Ismail Hashim.

#### BY GRAB/TAXI

Drop off near  
KK Bayan Lepas.

#### BY BUS

Take Rapid Penang buses  
302 or 308 and alight  
near KK Bayan Lepas.

## TIMUR LAUT FARLIM NIGHT MARKET

Local cuisine, international cuisine (e.g., Chinese, Japanese and other international dishes), drinks, clothing and daily necessities.

LENGTH

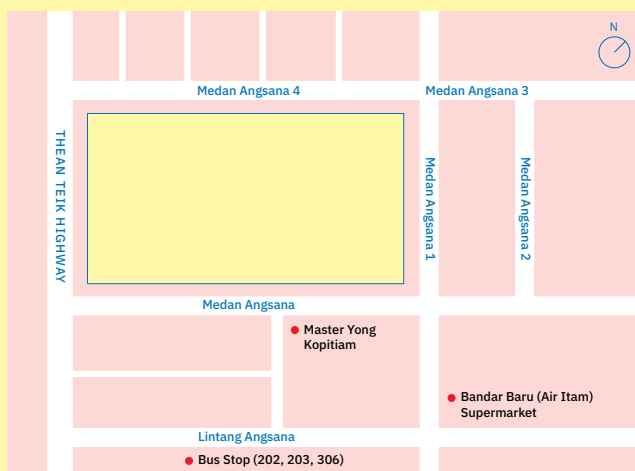
~500m

STALLS

~170



Source: Authors' own fieldwork (April 2026) & Google Maps



### INFORMATION

#### OPENING HOURS

Every Wednesday,  
6:00 PM–11:00 PM

#### COMMODITIES

Predominantly food and beverage stalls (mainly Chinese vendors).

#### NEARBY FACILITIES

Coffee shops and restaurants, variety of shops and basketball court.

### LOCATION

#### SETTING

The night market is located in the commercial neighbourhood of Medan Angsana.

#### ENTRANCE NODE

Accessible by any of the surrounding roads.

#### SPATIAL LAYOUT

Circular arrangement around an open field with large angšana trees providing natural shade.

### TRANSPORT

#### BY CAR

Roadside parking available.

#### BY GRAB/TAXI

Drop off near Master Yong Kopitiam (one of the shops closest to the pasar malam).

#### BY BUS

Take Rapid Penang buses 202, 203 or 306, and alight at Lintang Angsana bus stop.

## SEBERANG PERAI UTARA TAMAN SUNGAI DUA UTAMA NIGHT MARKET

A variety of Malaysian regional food, a selection of international cuisine, drinks, fresh produce, seafood, poultry, clothing and daily necessities.

LENGTH

~252m

STALLS

~120

### INFORMATION

#### OPENING HOURS

Every Thursday,  
5:00 PM–11:00 PM

#### RIVERSIDE ATMOSPHERE

Serene Perai River setting provides a relaxed experience for visitors.

#### NEARBY FACILITIES

Residential area and toilets.

### LOCATION

#### SETTING

Fronting Jalan Sungai Dua Utama 1, with the Perai River nearby.

#### ENTRANCE NODE

Accessible via two entrances along Jalan Sungai Dua Utama 1.

#### SPATIAL LAYOUT

Spacious layout with four distinct rows of stalls and wide walkways.

### TRANSPORT

#### BY CAR

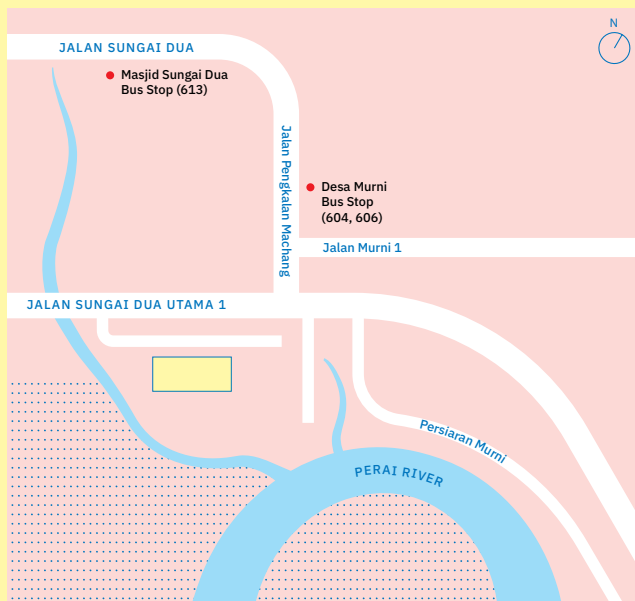
Roadside parking available.

#### BY GRAB/TAXI

Drop off near Jalan Sungai Dua Utama 1.

#### BY BUS

Take Rapid Penang buses 604 or 606 and alight at Desa Murni, or 613 to Masjid Sungai Dua.



Source: Authors' own fieldwork (May 2026) & Google Maps

# SEBERANG PERAI TENGAH

## KUBANG SEMANG NIGHT MARKET (“BAN BUSUK”)

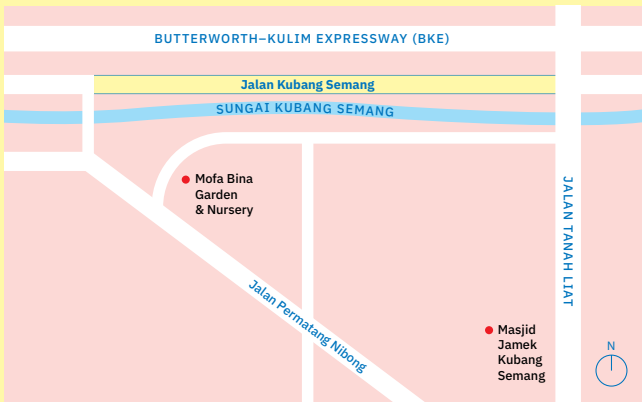
A variety of Malaysian local food and desserts (e.g., Murtabak, Laksa, Bihun, Putu Bambu), drinks, fresh produce, seafood, poultry, clothing and daily necessities.

### LENGTH

~267m

### STALLS

~130



Source: Authors' own fieldwork (May 2026) & Google Maps

### INFORMATION

#### OPENING HOURS

Every Friday,  
5:00 PM–10:00 PM

#### COMMODITIES

Residual space beneath the flyover is repurposed for shaded seating.

#### NEARBY FACILITIES

Mosques, coffee shops, restaurants and petrol pump.

### LOCATION

#### SETTING

The market sits between Sungai Kubang Semang and the Butterworth-Kulim Expressway.

#### ENTRANCE NODE

Two pedestrian bridges serve as the market's main entrances.

#### SPATIAL LAYOUT

Two rows of stalls with a central pedestrian walkway.

### TRANSPORT

#### BY CAR/MOTORBIKE

Parking available along the roadside and nearby open area.

#### BY GRAB/TAXI

Drop off near Mofa Bina Garden & Nursery or Masjid Jamek Kubang Semang.

# SEBERANG PERAI SELATAN

## TAMAN TANGLING NIGHT MARKET

A selection of fresh produce, seafood, poultry, Chinese-style food, local Malaysian food, clothing and daily necessities.

### LENGTH

~500m

### STALLS

~120

### INFORMATION

#### OPENING HOURS

Every Friday  
5:00 PM–10:00 PM

#### COMMODITIES

Diverse mix of Chinese and Malay vendors, with a dedicated row of Chinese ready-to-eat food stalls.

#### NEARBY FACILITIES

Residential area, variety of shops and coffee shops as well as restaurants.

### LOCATION

#### SETTING

Located in a commercial centre of Taman Tangling.

#### ENTRANCE NODE

One end of the market is closed to vehicles during operating hours, creating a safe, pedestrian-friendly environment.

#### SPATIAL LAYOUT

Runs along a shop lot corridor bordering a residential neighbourhood.

### TRANSPORT

#### BY CAR

Parking available on the roadside or around the residential/commercial area.

#### BY GRAB/TAXI

Drop off near Soon Seng Heang (M) Sdn Bhd or LS Mart Pasaraya Simpang Ampat.



Source: Authors' own fieldwork (July 2026) & Google Maps

# THE ACCIDENTAL INFLUENCER: PAK WIY'S MISSION TO DOCUMENT SEBERANG PERAI'S PASAR MALAM

BY HUSNA SHAFIRAH

**AMID THE BUSTLING** lanes of Pasar Malam Kepala Batas, where the aromas of satay, durian and freshly cooked food mingle, a man weaved through the crowd, clutching his smartphone. After making his routine lap of the night market, he turned on his TikTok livestream, ready to answer the questions pouring in from hundreds of viewers.

“Pak Wiy, can you check if the *akak bihun sup* (female noodle soup-seller) is here today? Just near the corner.”

“Martabak Abang Sado is open today, right?”

“How much is *ikan temenung* (Indo-pacific mackerel) per kilo today?”

Abdul Qawiy, 39, better known as “Pak Wiy” (Uncle Wiy), has become an accidental influencer. For most visitors, a trip to the pasar malam begins with a decision on where to park. For Pak Wiy’s followers, it begins by asking him what is available in real time. Every day, he visits different pasar malam in Seberang Perai, streaming

their hustle and bustle—documenting not just food, but also familiar faces, returning traders and seasonal specials—to encourage more people to visit and support local sellers. *Penang Monthly* follows his unusual journey to document various facets of Seberang Perai’s pasar malam.

## TAKING UP A MANTLE

Ironically, Pak Wiy never intended to become a content creator. His evenings at different pasar malam began with his side work as a Prudential BSN insurance consultant (aside from his day job as a risk management officer). Setting up a promotional booth at local night markets introduced him to a steady stream of potential clients, but he soon realised that limiting himself to just one location weekly meant missing opportunities to connect with others.

Pak Wiy had then been following the late Mukhzanee Muhammad, also known as Chef Zarul, a Permatang Pauh content creator with more than 88,000 followers on

TikTok. For many residents of Seberang Perai Tengah, Chef Zarul had become a trusted source of information on neighbourhood eateries, small businesses and, most notably, the Bukit Mertajam Wet Market. Unlike the conventional “viral” food reviewers popular among younger audiences, his videos served as a community noticeboard. He updated viewers on seasonal produce, promotions and even directories of wet market traders, making it easier for customers to connect directly with local sellers.

Chef Zarul’s passing in June 2025 left a void among the local online community. Inspired by his dedication to promoting local traders, Pak Wiy decided to continue documenting local vendors and sharing night market updates from Seberang Perai’s markets through TikTok Live sessions and content creation. Over time, his commitment earned him recognition among the community, with some followers affectionately referring to him as “Chef Zarul’s





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Nephew”. Almost a year into this task, Pak Wiy’s account has steadily grown to almost 5,000 TikTok followers.

#### MAPPING SEBERANG PERAI’S PASAR MALAM SCENE

After months of walking through various pasar malam, Pak Wiy has come to appreciate each market and their “personalities”. Although often overshadowed by Penang Island’s better-known attractions and street food, many pasar malam in Seberang Perai still have their own appeal, judging from their unique locations, distinctive features and generational histories.

Pasar Malam “Ban Busuk” (lit., stinky bund), once named the longest night market in Seberang Perai and held weekly each Friday, is one of them. Located at Jalan Kubang Semang Penanti, near the old *pekan* (town) of Penanti and the Butterworth–Kulim Expressway exit, it uniquely borders its namesake river, which feeds a padi field irrigation canal. While the exact origin of

its affectionate yet unusual nickname is unclear, the locals believe that this name attracted curious visitors from all over Penang and Kedah. According to Pak Wiy, Ban Busuk has earned a good reputation among locals as a “*tempat cari makan*” in the dual sense of the term: it is a food-hunting spot for visitors and a place for vendors to earn a living. Its sheer length and ever-changing selection of stalls means that even regulars continue discovering new things. For this reason, he always recommends Ban Busuk to visitors looking for variety, particularly given its balance between traditional and contemporary selections.

Another pasar malam he recommends is more low-key compared with more famous ones, yet it remains one of his favourite hidden gems. Located along Jalan Abdul Saad, near Sekolah Kebangsaan Juru (one of Seberang Perai’s earliest Malay vernacular schools, established during the British colonial era), this market retains an atmosphere that has stood the test of time.

Almost all the stalls are erected in front of local villagers’ homes: a rare sight even for Pak Wiy. After all, most pasar malam are set up in areas which would not intrude upon or pose disturbances to local communities, meaning that they end up in empty parking lots, on common roads and in front of shop lots. Here, buying a piece of Dangai or Apom Lenggang often means standing just a few metres away from someone’s front porch. This arrangement has endured because most villagers are generational pasar malam traders, and residents have long been accustomed to sharing the street with the weekly market. “In this day and age, who would’ve wanted a pasar malam to block the entryway to their house?” he added, laughing.

For most vendors, setting up canopies before sunset and dismantling them at the end of the night is part of their weekly routine. Yet the weather often dictates how evenings unfold. Strong winds during the Northeast Monsoon can send cano-



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#### CAPTIONS

1. Vendors and visitors at Pasar Malam Desa Murni.
2. A small alley leading to Pasar Malam Kampung Sekolah Juru.
3. Pasar Malam “Ban Busuk”, located next to the Butterworth–Kulim Expressway (Source: Abdul Qawiy).
4. Pasar Malam Seberang Jaya (Source: Abdul Qawiy).
5. Pasar Malam Seberang Jaya (Source: Abdul Qawiy).
6. Pak Wiy (right) with the author.



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pies swaying, with vendors and customers scrambling to help keep them in place, while sudden downpours frequently cut visits short. I experienced this firsthand at Pasar Malam Desa Murni in Taman Utama, Sungai Dua—one of the most-viewed locations on Pak Wiy’s account—where gusts repeatedly interrupted business. This evening was a reminder of how vulnerable open-air markets remain to the weather.

Having witnessed many similar scenes, Pak Wiy singled out Pasar Malam Berbung Seberang Jaya as one of the most worry-free destinations during the rainy season. Indeed, his livestream sessions here are always uninterrupted. Operating every Wednesday beside the Seberang Jaya Wet Market, this pasar malam occupies a spacious permanent sheltered structure, having been gazetted as a pasar malam site through the successful efforts of the local Jawatankuasa Kemajuan dan Keselamatan Kampung (JKKK, Village Development and Security Committee). The large open area retains classic pasar malam vibes, while allowing visitors to browse comfortably regardless of the weather.

#### BUILDING TRUST, COMMUNICATING PERSEVERANCE

Livestreaming comes with privacy and representation challenges. In the overlapping spaces between visitors, vendors and business spaces, Pak Wiy manoeuvres carefully. After all, not everyone is comfortable with having an unfamiliar camera pointed in their direction, even in public spaces. For this challenge, Pak Wiy deploys a simple trick. “When livestreaming, I often keep a tight shot of the food,” he explained. “I choose to limit my interaction with the sellers, maybe around two to three seconds per stall. I don’t want to be a bother. They’re busy as it is.”

Some vendors might be friendly and wave away at his camera, but he also understands the hustle behind each stall. Initially, filming in their spaces was hard for him, but after frequent visits, they became accustomed to his presence. In fact, more vendors now stop him to promote their

products to his livestream viewers. “Sometimes I received feedback of growing sales from the vendors, so in return, they would recommend me as an insurance consultant to their acquaintances. A win-win for us!”

He must also stay vigilant in scanning his environs, particularly when he might inadvertently record working stations, food safety compliance and, most importantly, hygiene. In his effort to promote pasar malam stalls for his viewers online, he often highlights the best parts of each stall. “I avoided filming stalls that appear unhygienic or whose vendors don’t comply with food safety measures,” he admitted. He believes that this decision is important to protect both vendors’ dignity and viewers’ trust.

“I could recall a time where I accidentally captured a scene of live chickens being sold at one pasar malam during my livestream. At that time, I didn’t know that it is wrong to sell live chicken in pasar malam.” The local authorities happened to notice it on his livestream, and they took action against the vendor the very next week. “The vendors there were very mad at me, and I haven’t visited the pasar malam since.” This incident taught him a very important lesson about the responsibility that comes with filming in public.

For Pak Wiy, one of the main reasons why his livestream plays a significant role

in promoting pasar malam is because it eliminates a key uncertainty for potentially hungry viewers: whether a favourite vendor is actually present. Watching how viewers checked in with him about whether their favourite stall was open, I too wished that I had a livestreamer in my neighbourhood pasar malam. His real-time reviews have helped potential visitors make up their minds to visit on particular nights, after confirming that their cravings could be satisfied.

He has also witnessed stories of how people persevere, while maintaining and growing their small businesses. One which remains close to his heart is that of an elderly woman who travels weekly all the way from Yan, Kedah, to sell kampung vegetables and *ulam* at Pasar Malam Ampang Jajar. “Maybe the market is saturated in the kampung area, I’m still unsure. But travelling one hour and 20 minutes, in her ageing car, really struck my heart,” Pak Wiy explained. Her story reminds him of how much remains unseen behind every pasar malam stall, making him grateful to be a part of the environment. In connecting customers with vendors, as well as preserving the everyday stories of Seberang Perai’s pasar malam communities for future generations, the livestreamer has a profound role to play.



**HUSNA SHAFIRAH** graduated with a Bachelor in Applied Language from UiTM, specialising in English for Intercultural Communication. She writes about culture, community and lifestyle, often inspired by the stories of older generations.

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# NOT JUST COMMODITIES: WHAT ARE POP-UP MARKETS ACTUALLY SELLING?

BY SHERYL TEOH

“WAH, WHAT KIND of Muah Chee is this? So expensive one. You know you can get these for RM3 at a pasar malam?” my 79-year-old aunt exclaimed, seeing the piece of Daifuku mochi I had purchased from a stall at a pop-up market. Cut open, it was visually stunning: a Russian doll of elements, with a whole tangerine encased in a layer of lightly sweetened, homemade genmaicha red bean paste, wrapped in a thin, perfectly chewy layer of mochi. It was an inventive combination, but not one which needed getting used to—the flavours just jibed.

Economists distinguish between goods whose qualities can be judged before purchase and those whose qualities consumers only learn about afterwards. This mochi falls closer to the latter category, where important aspects of its quality—particularly taste—can only be assessed through consumption. The price tag, then, reflects more than just the cost of ingredients, but also the customer’s belief that the experience justifies the premium price. “Customers at pop-up markets are more willing to pay for higher-priced items,” one vendor told me, with the crucial caveat that the product feels genuinely unique. Meanwhile, a Styrofoam box of the usual Muah Chee—sticky balls of glutinous rice dough rolled in crushed peanuts, sesame seeds and sugar (you get fried shallots too, if you are lucky)—would not command the same price, even at a pop-up market.

The question is not simply why a similar product might cost more at a pop-up market. It is why customers are willing to

pay a premium for something they perceive as being different enough to be worth paying more for. At the pop-up market, such differentiation comes from ingenuity, craftsmanship, premium or organic ingredients, small-batch production or simply an experience that feels difficult to find elsewhere.

## SINCERITY AS A SCREENING MECHANISM

Littil’s stall is set up like an actual bedroom, which is not all that unexpected if it was in a brick-and-mortar furniture store. But at a pop-up market, the full-sized bed, with all its usual trappings—it is, after all, a bedding brand—and paper pendant lamp hanging overhead, does stand out. Charlie Chew and Fam Kai Cong, the founders, have managed to make their little nook look cozy and inviting amidst the hustle and bustle of the market.

But the bedroom set-up is not merely a marketing gimmick. It reflects Littil’s core





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philosophy “that bedding can be an important part of your home décor, not something that serves only one functional purpose”. Selling it online does not convey how the fabrics feel or how a mix-and-match palette can transform a room.

When there was not enough room to fit an entire bed into one pop-up location, Charlie’s mother hand-sewed a scaled-down, miniature bed-set for a prop, in every colour and print the brand carries. “It allowed customers to [...] mix-and-match in person,” Fam says, “and that really closed the deal for a lot of them because they were able to feel the quality of the fabric themselves.” This was a small, almost domestic detail, but a distilled version of what Littil is actually selling: evidence that someone cares and believes in their product enough to make sure you too can experience it before you believe in it.

These kinds of experiences are particularly characteristic of pop-up markets, especially thoughtfully curated ones. And they do not happen by accident: someone has to decide who gets a table there in the first place. Queen Lee, a curator of the immensely popular Hin Bus Depot weekend market, looks for much more than product quality. “I also look at the person behind the brand. Are they passionate about what they do? Do they personally make or create their products? Do they have their own identity? Are they willing to communicate with customers?”

What makes a well-made thing feel different from a commodity—a good that is essentially interchangeable, no matter who sells it—is not simply how it is priced, but also the care put into it. Craft reflects the desires of creators to do a job

well for its own sake. Such care becomes particularly important at a pop-up market because it is, in some ways, an unusually efficient place to communicate aspects that are difficult to put on price tags. Online, a small-batch maker has to translate craftsmanship into photographs, captions and claims: handmade, locally sourced and lovingly produced, for example. At a market, the maker is often standing behind their table, explaining why they chose a particular material, how something was made or what inspired a particular combination of flavours.

#### THE POP-UP AS A TESTING GROUND

Pop-ups do not just sell differentiated products; they also create a market in which difference can be tested. For small businesses, a pop-up is a relatively low-stakes place to test an idea against real customers. A baker can experiment with an unfamiliar flavour, a designer can see which prints people actually reach for and an organic farmer can experiment with pricing and packaging without committing to the cost of running a permanent shop. In these ways, pop-ups are particularly useful for testing new and unique products. Is there really a market for a genmaicha red bean tangerine Daifuku? Will people pay RM12 for it? Will they come back and buy another one? A stall at a pop-up market can answer some of these questions remarkably quickly.

There is a wider cultural concern here too. Pop-ups can inject energy into neigh-

bourhoods and give independent makers a platform, but as Jean (not her real name) says, the experimental nature and churn of these markets can also become part of a broader process of gentrification. Here, neighbourhoods fill with transient concepts and curated experiences, rather than businesses with the stability to serve a community over time.

The contrast with the pasar malam is instructive. These markets operate on the logic of commodity pricing, which is exactly why they work so well for everyday necessities. However, they are less suited for testing unproven products, whose prices depend on differentiation. As Charlie put it: “The crowd at a pasar malam is generally not looking for a brand; they are looking for functional products that offer good value and at low prices.”

My aunt was right about the price of Muah Chee. But she was comparing two products using the logic of the commodity market, where the key question is how much something costs for what it is. At a pop-up market, however, visitors ask a slightly different question: what else is this product worth to me? The answer might lie in craftsmanship, novelty, discovery or simply the feeling that someone has made something worth noticing.

RM3 buys you Muah Chee. RM12, in this case, bought me the delightful experience of discovering something I did not know I wanted, or even knew existed, but which I could immediately appreciate.



3

#### CAPTIONS

1. Organic vegetables being sold at Grow Market.
2. Crafts made from repurposed wood.
3. Charlie’s mother hand-sewed a scaled-down, miniature bed-set for Littil’s pop-up.



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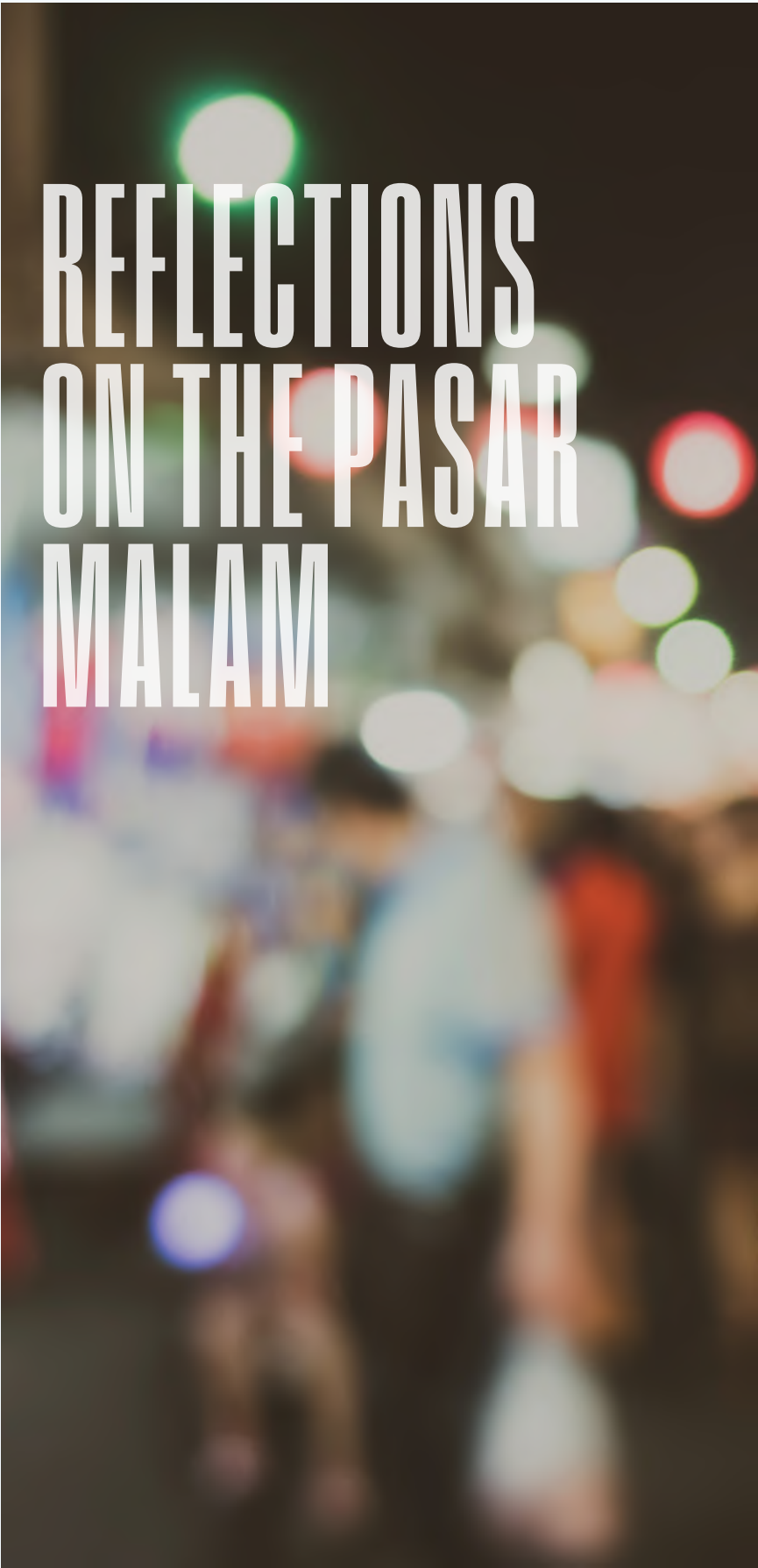
# THE HUMAN ELEMENT:

BY  
MUHAMMAD  
AMIRUL NAIM  
ROSMI

**“SAYA JUAL.”** I’m selling. *“Saya beli.”* I’m buying. This verbal exchange, the *akad muamalat*, was once a key feature of transactions at the pasar malam. But it is now fading away, part of a cadence of a world that no longer exists.

I am a millennial, a member of “the bridge generation” that grew up in an analogue world, which had to adapt to the digital revolution. My core childhood memories were formed in 2002. It was the year I truly fell in love with football, starting with Brazil’s World Cup campaign and Penang lifting the Football Association Cup after beating Perak. This era of tapes, CDs, football sticker books and strong local pride was entangled with my nostalgic trips to the pasar malam. Each visit was always an opportunity for me to learn about human connection, community and local trade, which I now recall as I walk down familiar lanes today.

# REFLECTIONS ON THE PASAR MALAM



### AN ECONOMY OF RECIPROCITY

Before the time of QR codes, contactless cards and smartphone e-wallet transfers, the night market was a local economy built entirely on physical cash, mutual understanding and neighbourly trust. Thus, going shopping required some conscientious planning. My parents would always stop at an automated teller machine to withdraw cash first. If the machine dispensed RM100 notes, my father would head straight to a nearby grocery shop to buy a small item, just to break the large bill into smaller notes. After all, passing a RM100 bill to a vendor for a RM2 item was looked upon almost as a sin. If this was unavoidable, we would politely apologise first. If not, a vendor who ran out of small change would then have to walk over to a neighbouring stall to exchange big notes for smaller ones.

Vendors' shouts filled the air, sometimes calling back and forth in funny, playful tones, ending up laughing together as they competed for customers' attention. "*Kak, mai lah sini, murah!*" (Sister, come over here, it's cheaper!). "*Satu tiga ringgit, dua lima ringgit!*" (One for three ringgit, two for five ringgit!). But as for the *akad muamalat* itself, this traditional exchange seemed redundant when I was younger. Why state the obvious, when money and goods had already exchanged hands? Only later did I understand its relevance. Traditionally, Malay-Muslims followed the Shafie school of thought, which requires an explicit verbal agreement to complete a transaction. You can think of it as an analogue to the handshake in business deals. But as modern business exchanges grow faster and more complex, many local Islamic scholars tend to adapt local practices in line with the Hanafi school, where the act of exchanging goods and money seals the deal without the need for speech.

While I understand the pragmatic side of this adaptation to a fast-paced world, I cannot help but feel that something is being traded away. We have lost direct eye contact, quick verbal acknowledgments and simple human connections between two strangers.

### IN PRAISE OF FLAWS

Pasar malam may have become faster-paced, more modern and, in many cases, quieter. One of the first things I miss is the loud roar of electric generators. As evening approaches, a familiar routine would take place on the streets. Vendors raced to pull-start the petrol generators stored at the back of their vans. Most brought two, so if the main unit stopped working, they would quickly pull the cord on the backup. As you can guess, the experience of visiting was not always a smooth one. But as humans, are we not drawn to the flawed and the imperfect: to the things that feel undeniably real?

Take piracy, for instance. In the early-2000s, an original music CD or DVD cost RM29–50. This was a lot to pay for entertainment; the pasar malam therefore became the primary place to buy bootleg media, where you could get the latest film releases for just RM5–10. This was also the peak era of professional wrestling, dominated by figures like The Rock, John Cena, the Undertaker, Rikishi and Stone Cold, whose exploits were also pirated.

However, buying these tapes and discs was always a gamble. Films were often recorded inside cinemas using handheld cameras. This sometimes meant that just when you were deeply transfixed by an intense,

action-packed scene, you might be thrown off by a dark silhouette of someone standing up to go to the bathroom. In some cases, the covers featured one movie, but the discs contained a completely different film. Other times, the subtitles were translated literally: "You are very cool, man" became "*Awak sangat sejuk, lelaki!*"! Despite their poor quality, catching these flaws brought us genuine joy.

### LESSONS IN HUMANITY

Things have changed significantly since, but the pasar malam still retains important memories. I recall the houses by the market, for instance, where specific pasar malam routes were set up right in front of residential houses. As a child, I used to think that those house owners were the luckiest people alive, because they could step out of their front gates and instantly be surrounded by endless food options. The reality was that these options actually offered an illusion of affordability (see also "Between profitability and affordability" in this issue). Whereas people used to say that if you wanted cheap food, you should go to the pasar malam, I do not think that this is true anymore. Sometimes, things are actually more expensive here.

Maybe the best thing about the pasar malam is not its commodities, but rather, its function as a gathering spot. It is, for instance, a site for bringing publics into being, such as by serving as an informal arena for grassroots democracy. For example, during the historic 2008 general election, political candidates like Yusmadi Yusoff, later elected member of Parliament for Balik Pulau, walked the lanes of the Simpang Empat Balik Pulau night market with his supporters, shaking hands, listening to locals and handing out campaign pamphlets directly. But it also hosted more intimate functions, by providing an unfiltered display of parental grit and hard work. Family life was inseparable from work: you would often see vendors running stalls with their young children playing in improvised spaces nearby—such as under the tables—complete with baby bottles, toys and folded cardboard beds.

So too was the pasar malam a site for performance (see also "Spectacle, 'snake oil' and satay" in this issue). Traditional medicine vendors frequented markets across the north of the peninsula. These oftentimes incredibly good talkers pitched all sorts of massage oils in exaggerated fashion. Mostly, people did not stop to buy their medicine, but just stayed because they were completely hooked by these sellers' eloquent pitches. Then there were the street musicians: visually impaired individuals sitting on plastic stools were ubiquitous, singing Malay classics from the 1970s–90s or *nasyid* (spiritual) songs. These engagements sent a message: they were not begging, but rather, offering their talents to earn an honest living. Back then, my parents would hand me some cash to drop into their baskets to teach me empathy. And now, as a parent walking down these same lanes, I find myself passing cash to my own children to do the exact same thing, continuing an unwritten lesson in basic humanity.



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# SPECTACLE, “SNAKE OIL” AND SATAY

BY  
EUGENE QUAH

## THE CURIOUS STORY OF PENANG'S PASAR MALAM

**THE SATAY SMOKE** reaches you before the stalls do: smell has never respected queueing etiquette. I had not been to a “pasar malam” (Malay for “night market”) for a long time, long enough that food trucks now outnumber the motorbikes of my childhood, when traders would arrive and unfold an ungodly amount of goods in what felt like seconds. The one at Tanjung Bungah has run every Tuesday night since around 1996; before that, it kept to the same weekly rhythm, a few streets over at Taman Concord.



The pasar malam embodies a contradiction. It has an air of both transience and permanence, of always having been there yet also not there, on account of this weekly cycle and its relatively recent institution. You would be forgiven for thinking that Penang's pasar malam is a centuries-old tradition, but it is not. Its current form was actually a response to the federal government's systematic winding-down of Penang's free port status after the formation of Malaysia. This was an economic blow so severe that it forced the state into immediate reinvention, scrambling to find new reasons for people to continue visiting the former entrepôt. What emerged was a tradition that was renewed weekly: as much theatre as marketplace, unmistakably Penang, and yet, like so much of Penang, adapted from elsewhere.

#### A TERM THAT GOT AROUND

The term "pasar malam" has spent most of its documented life meaning several rather different things. In 1853, a globetrotting German travel writer, Friedrich Gerstäcker, attended a Chinese "pasar malam" in Java, in what was then the Dutch East Indies (Indonesia today).<sup>[1]</sup> He described a theatre made of bamboo scaffolding, "looking like an overgrown rice hut", "standing by itself, in the middle of the free and open market-place" and lit by coconut-oil lamps. The market had an air of festivity, with gongs sounding, children scrambling onto posts for a better view and a set of gambling tables leased, rather brazenly, from the colonial government. It appears to have been a traditional *ko-kah-hi* (高甲戲, "Chinese opera", also known in Penang as *Toa-hi*, 大戲, "big show") instead. Regardless, this is one of the earliest documented mentions of the pasar malam.

The Dutch themselves, however, considered the term in relation to the fairs held before Muslim festivals. As an 1875 dictionary describes, it was a "*nachtelijke markt, zijnde een Mahom. feest*" (night market, being a Mohammedan festival). This was in reference to the Sekaten festival in Yogyakarta, a weeklong event of ceremony, festivities and pasar malam to commemorate the birth of Prophet Muhammad. By the 20th century, the term's meaning shifted again. On 8 April 1910, the *Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser* used "pasar malam" to refer to an agricultural fair in Jambi, Sumatra, inviting curious visitors from Ipoh to admire rubber and padi cultivation developments.

However, according to Matthew Isaac Cohen, an expert on cultural heritage and Indonesian performing arts, the pasar malam "was not a Native form, but rather a Dutch transplant". He argues that it was a descendant of the *boerenkermis*, the humble Dutch peasants' fair, dressed up for the age of inter-



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national exhibitions. It was institutionalised in 1904 with Batavia's Pasar Gambir. One such fair was graced by the Sultan of Solo later that decade, who by all accounts was less taken with the batik and craftwork on display, than with a motorcycle stunt billed as "The Cage of Death". He rewarded this performance with commendable generosity, presenting a gold watch each to the two riders.

The 1917 edition of the *Encyclopaedia van Nederlandsch-Indie* (Encyclopaedia of the Dutch-Indies), paints a picture of the pasar malam as just one of the many elements of larger agricultural shows. "[Cattle] and buffaloes, categories were also shown there for goats, sheep, and poultry, while after the exhibition national folk festivals were held, e.g. native horse races and a fair (night market)."

Cohen reckons that the pasar malam only became genuinely fashionable from 1922 onwards through advertising. Indeed, this decade's pasar malam boom tracks the boom in Indies advertising almost exactly, chasing what one 1925 trade publication candidly described as "an enormous native population" that had become newly worth marketing to.

#### "FUN & FROLIC"

Despite its popularity in the Dutch East Indies, the pasar malam took its time reaching the Straits Settlements. Singapore's amusement parks saw an early version only in the 1920s, with performing troupes shipped in from Medan, Sumatra. Penang waited longer still, and when its first documented pasar malam finally arrived, it was not a market, at least not in any sense that a contemporary shopper would recognise.

On 26 November 1938, the Fun & Frolic Park amusement ground<sup>[2]</sup> announced in the *Pinang Gazette*—in all caps, no less—that "SOMETHING NEW IN THE FIELD OF ENTERTAINMENT" was arriving at its grounds. This was purportedly Penang's inaugural pasar malam, an event which the advertisement managed to paint as both exuberant and faintly condescending at the same time.

#### PASAR MALAM AT THE FUN & FROLIC FIRST OF ITS KIND IN PENANG—A MALAY CARNIVAL SHOW

Entirely different in the art of Entertainment for pleasure seekers presenting an assortment of show in conjunction with the Malay Products (to prove that the local Malays can do something besides being show people) ... best Malay side shows ... Kronchong Parties and Malay vaudeville show etc..... In fact it's an all Malam Melayu not only for Malay fans, but an extraordinary Entertainment for all !

Like any good sales pitch, Fun and Frolic Ltd. concluded the advertisement with a sense of scarcity and urgency.

YOU MAY NOT SEE  
SUCH A SHOW AGAIN FOR  
A LONG TIME TO COME  
BE THE FIRST TO SEE IT!

This proved to be just marketing bluster for Fun & Frolic, and its pasar malam became a yearly fixture. It was often timed to coincide with Hari Raya Haji, in line with the Dutch dictionary definition of the pasar malam as a Muslim festival, but on one occasion, it was held in conjunction with Thaipusam. Fun & Frolic promoted the event as being "bigger, better and brighter than before" one year, "more spectacular than ever" the next, as if worried about diminishing returns. Then the war arrived in late 1941, and the amusement park, along with its pasar malam, fell quiet. Only sporadic pasar malam were organised afterwards, usually by political parties, to raise funds for various causes—including one by Tunku Abdul Rahman at Butterworth in 1951—proving the malleability of the term.

### OUT OF THE PARK, ONTO THE STREETS

By 1969, much of Penang's free port status had been revoked—that is, only short-listed items of revenue were not subject to taxation—and the state was in rather urgent need of new economic ideas. In September, the Malay Chamber of Commerce announced a Sunday night market at Tanjong Tokong, at the same location as a newly opened daytime market.

However, the first "modern" pasar malam, the kind organised by the City Council that we would recognise today, only opened on Sunday, 7 December 1969, along Pitt Street, Buckingham Street and Campbell Street. It did not go smoothly. *Berita Harian* reported that thousands had turned out, only to find that a handful of the market's 460 stalls were actually trading. Owing to overwhelming demand, the balloting process for stall allocations had proceeded too slowly. As a City Council spokesperson explained, "successful applicants had no time to trade" on their debut night.

The following month, *The Straits Times* noted that the market had found its footing. Clothes and shoes and biscuit tins abound, with bargain-hunters comparing prices stall to stall. But it noted, almost as a footnote to the festivities, that Campbell Street's own shopkeepers had threatened to close their shutters early rather than let the roadside stalls trade using the free light of their shopfronts. A skirmish over electric lighting, one gathers, is as good a place as any for a tradition to begin.

By October 1970, there were simultaneous pasar malam at two separate sites, where hawkers balloted for general goods and food stalls at Town Hall. Then came the itinerant years, which began less than 12 months after a launch night that had seemingly barely functioned. The market now moved between Campbell Street, Gurney Drive and the Esplanade, eventually taking the form of the neighbourhood rotations that Penang residents now take entirely for granted.

### THE SIFU AND THE SALESMAN

As a child in the 1980s, I remember the acts: elaborate sales pitches by self-proclaimed *sifu* (masters) hawking miraculous *hong yu*, Chinese medicinal oils warranted against every complaint, from rheumatism to snakebite. There were snake shows, cymbals and martial arts demonstrations offered as proof of efficacy, all hearkening back to the entertainments of the original pasar malam. Later, the register shifted. The pitches began to emulate the American television shopping channels of the 1990s, where demonstrations of kitchen gadgets drew the largest crowds of the night. In many Penang homes, one or two of these

## FUN & FROLIC PARK

**Fong Sen Nuan Cantonese Opera:-**  
 Day Show "SAT CHEE FONG KOO"  
 Night "MOO SAM BEE YAN"  
 Starring Miss Park Yon Liang, Mun Sow Chow and a brilliant cast of beautiful girls.

**THE CHINA GREAT TRAVELLING OPERA:-** Strongly supported by the latest creations in classical, modern and oriental dancing and special items of entertainment. Seats:-10, 20 and 30 cents.

**Chneh Lang Gaik Lau Choon Teochew Opera**  
 Day Show "TAIK CHENG PENG SAY"  
 Night "WONG GUAN PAW" Part 2

**Liberty Talkies:-**  
 TWO SHOWS NIGHTLY AT 7.30 & 9.30 P.M.  
 A Great Silent Picture. "HOAY SEOW TEW KAH CHONG"  
 Seats:-5 & 10 cents.

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**SOMETHING NEW IN THE FIELD OF ENTERTAINMENT**  
**PASAR MALAM**  
**AT THE**  
**FUN & FROLIC PARK**

FIRST OF ITS KIND IN PENANG—A MALAY CARNIVAL SHOW  
 Entirely different in the art of Entertainment for pleasure seekers presenting an assortment of show in conjunction with the Malay Products (to prove that the local Malays can do something besides being show people).  
 SEE decorated Malay stalls exhibiting all Malay Products never seen here before something new for the eye.....  
 ENJOY best Malay side shows, Ronggeng, Malay Berunding, Kronchong Parties and Malay vaudeville show etc.....  
 In fact it's an all Malay Melaya not only for Malay fans, but an extraordinary Entertainment for all! Expensive and gorgeous Malay costumes glittering to the eye. Bring the whole family, a show for all classes of people.  
 YOU MAY NOT SEE SUCH A SHOW AGAIN FOR A LONG TIME TO COME  
 BE THE FIRST TO SEE IT!

## FUN FOR ALL! FUN FOR ALL!

DURING HARI RAYA AND THAIPUSAM HOLIDAYS

—AT THE—  
**FUN & FROLIC PARK**

# Pasar Malam

MALAY CARNIVAL SHOW  
 2ND PRESENTATION  
 FIRST OF ITS KIND IN MALAYA

# MALAY FAIR

AT ITS BEST

ENJOY THESE NEW ATTRACTIONS  
 EACH A SPECIALITY TO ENTERTAIN ALL

1. KRONCHONG PARTY.
2. MAYONG.
3. RONGGENG.
4. JOGET JAVA.
5. HADRAH.
6. SIAMESE JEEKAY & VAUDEVILLE.

Have A Good Look And See All Exhibits In This Fair...  
 ENJOY SEEING BEAUTIFUL DECORATED STALLS

## Bigger Brite

THAN THE LAST PRESENTATION  
 Bring The Family to the PASAR MALAM  
 Bigger And Better Than Ever.

**GATE ADMISSION**  
 10 CENTS ONLY

FROM  
 TUESDAY  
 31ST  
 JANUARY 1939  
 —TO—  
 SATURDAY  
 4TH  
 FEBRUARY  
 1939  
 ONLY  
 5 NIGHTS  
 COMPLETE

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NIGHTLY FROM  
 7 P.M. TO  
 MIDNIGHT.

On-line — at pasar malam





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# CAPTIONS

Cover: View of the first series of pasar malam (of the kind that we know today) at Pitt Street, Buckingham Street and Campbell Street, taken before it moved to Gurney Drive on 7 January 1970 (Source: *The Straits Times*, 11 Jan 1970, collection of the National Library Board [NLB] of Singapore).

1. This pasar malam at Tanjung Bungah has been going strong for more than three decades. Originally held at the nearby Taman Concorde, it moved to its present location around 1996, when the market building was completed.

2. On 26 November 1938, the Fun & Frolic Park amusement ground announced the first pasar malam in Penang, “an assortment of show[s] in conjunction with the Malay Products” (Source: *Pinang Gazette and Straits Chronicle*, 26 Nov 1938).

3. The advertisement for the second pasar malam in Penang, organised by Fun & Frolic in early 1939 (Source: *Pinang Gazette and Straits Chronicle*, 31 Jan 1939).

4. The pasar malam personal computer, set up by Marzuki bin Mastan (Source: *New Straits Times*, via *The Straits Times*, 18 April 1986, collection of the NLB Singapore).

5. The author (in the green shirt) with a young Gerald Tan, long before he became an award-winning food journalist and news anchor, interviewing vendors at the Dato Keramat (Padang Brown) pasar malam around 1997. Even then, it had already been operating for over 25 years, being active as early as March 1970.

6. The Reeds sampling Malay Kuih at a lively pasar malam at the Esplanade. The couple, who ran a travel agency, were attending a tourism congress organised by the Association of Commission Travel Agents. This pasar malam was held in conjunction with the event (Source: *Berita Harian*, 24 Sept 1986, collection of the NLB Singapore).

## ENDNOTES

1. The term “Indonesia” had just been coined and was not widely adopted until it was popularised by the Penang lawyer, James Richardson Logan.

2. The park, “situated on the Phuah Hin Leong Compound”, opened in 1931, and was first managed by the rubber magnate Heah Joo Seang, together with Quah Beng Kee, the proprietor of Penang’s ferry service, and other notable merchants as shareholders. The company also managed Wembley Park.

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miracle devices are still collecting dust on top shelves. They never work as well once you have brought them home.

Somewhere along the way, the pasar malam also became an adjective. “Pasar malam quality” is a quiet admission that something is cheap, dubious or too good to be true. The counterfeit watches and pirated video discs did not create the phrase so much as confirm what people already sensed: that the pasar malam has always been a performance as much as a marketplace.

Not every pitch was a hard sell. In April 1986, a *New Straits Times* photographer found two rural children at the Bayan Lepas pasar malam, bent over a personal computer. “Not the proper place for a computer at all, really,” the caption allowed, with the faint bemusement of the era. The machine belonged to Marzuki Mastan, a toy-seller and part-time computer salesman who kept it beside the children’s games at his stall. He had brought it along “to promote computer literacy in the rural areas”, reasoning that “it is important that the rural children get used to computer technology at an early age”. Marzuki’s instinct was less eccentric than it appeared: after all, the pasar malam was charged with civic duties from the very beginning.

Alongside supporting small traders, one of its original purposes was tourism, and almost from its inception, the Penang market became a mainstay of guidebooks and tourist pamphlets. In September 1986, delegates from an American travel congress were received at a pasar malam staged for them at the Esplanade. A Kansas travel executive, Donald F. Reed, pronounced the sardine-stuffed Epok-epok as “*pedas tetapi enak*” (spicy but delicious), while his wife, Roberta M. Reed, observed that the local fare ran a good deal hotter than what they were used to at home.

By the time those delegates arrived, the “new” pasar malam was 17 years old. What had come to Penang as an amusement park spectacle, and was pressed into service in 1969 as a trade-and-tourism measure to shore up a battered economy, had become something no one thought to call new. It remains so. Every Tuesday in Tanjung Bungah, as has been the case for the past three decades, the tarpaulins come down by eleven, the plastic chairs are stacked up, the road is swept. By Wednesday morning there is no stall, no scaffold, no sign that anything stood there at all. Nothing is left to date it by; and a tradition that leaves nothing behind is easily mistaken for one that has always been there.

BY PHOR WEI XUAN

# RESPONSIBILITY FOR WASTE IS HIGHEST AT OUR MOST BELOVED SHARED SPACES

**FEW PLACES CAPTURE** the spirit of Malaysian community life quite like the pasar malam. Besides being valued for their convenience and vibrant atmosphere, they also offer glimpses into our everyday habits. How do small actions by members of the public—many of which are equally common at festivals and other occasions for public gathering—reflect our environmental awareness (or lack thereof), and how can greater responsibility for these shared spaces be encouraged?

#### WHAT A PASAR MALAM REVEALS

As the evening progresses, signs of a busy pasar malam become increasingly visible. Used skewers, drink cups, tissues and plastic food containers begin appearing along walkways and beside stalls, even when rubbish bins are not far away. By the time the market closes, stall operators and cleaning workers are often left responsible for restoring the site's cleanliness. Meanwhile, smaller items such as cigarette butts are frequently overlooked. Discarded along pavements and walkways after use, they may appear insignificant, but still reflect our wider tendency to overlook the consequences of small actions in shared spaces.

Penang's local authorities have not been passive in dealing with the cleanliness of public spaces. The Majlis Bandaraya Pulau Pinang (MBPP, City Council of Penang Island) organised a "Pasar Awam Bersih" (Clean Public Markets) campaign in July, which reflected ongoing efforts to keep public areas clean through community participation and coordinated cleaning. Such efforts are important for restoring shared spaces, but they also raise another question: how can less waste be left behind in the first place?

A pasar malam's waste problem is the result of many small decisions repeated over the evening. These behaviours are not unique to night markets; similar patterns can be observed along roadsides and in neighbourhood parks, recreational areas and residential areas. The pasar malam simply makes them more apparent because of the concentration of people and activities in a limited space on a distinct schedule.

At its core, this issue reflects a particular understanding of our relationship with shared environments. While some may assume that any waste left behind will eventually be managed by cleaners or local authorities, others may simply be unaware of where that waste goes or its consequences. Once discarded, rubbish does not simply disappear. It can become a lost resource, or else enter drainage systems and contribute to wider environmental problems.

#### FROM NIGHT MARKETS AND INTO WATERWAYS

Waste generated at pasar malam is not necessarily without value. A 2015 study examining night markets in Seberang Perai Selatan found that discarded materials contained significant amounts of recyclable and biodegradable waste. Across all nine locations surveyed, the total value of recoverable recyclable items was estimated at RM104 per day.<sup>[1]</sup> More critically, these recyclables made up less than 10% of the total waste generated; the remaining 80–90% consisted of biodegradable materials. This means that while some economic value exists in pasar malam waste, the vast majority—such as organics that could have been composted—ends up in landfills, or worse, enters drainage systems when improperly discarded. Oftentimes,

however, potentially valuable materials are discarded carelessly, mixed with general waste or thrown into unsuitable locations. Recovery becomes significantly more difficult when these resources are sent to landfills, while improperly discarded waste creates additional environmental challenges.

Beyond the waste left behind by visitors, hawker stalls and food businesses also generate food scraps, wastewater, oil and grease as part of their daily operations. These may be improperly discharged directly into drainage systems. Consequently, they can contribute to clogged drains, unpleasant odours and water pollution. The impact of poorly managed waste also extends beyond the immediate surroundings of a pasar malam. Litter carried away by rainwater into drainage systems may eventually enter rivers and coastal areas, through the infrastructure designed to manage urban water flow. Here, Malaysia's river conditions demonstrate how everyday disposal habits fuel larger environmental issues. The continued presence of polluted and moderately polluted rivers nationwide highlights the importance of preventing waste from entering waterways in the first place.<sup>[2]</sup>

While not unique to pasar malam alone, these challenges highlight the wider environmental considerations involved in maintaining food-based public spaces. Ultimately, the issue is not only how much waste we generate, but also how we view and manage it. After all, waste collectively shapes the conditions of our shared environments.

#### SMALL ACTIONS, SHARED RESPONSIBILITY

In Penang, stricter enforcement measures introduced in 2026 include the use of body cameras by local enforcement officers from MBPP and Majlis Bandaraya Seberang Perai (MBSP, City Council of Seberang Perai), alongside community service orders for minor littering offences. Those convicted may face fines of up to RM2,000 or be required to perform up to 12 hours of community service, including cleaning public spaces such as drains, markets, beaches and hawker centres.<sup>[3]</sup> The state is also taking a phased approach to reducing single-use plastics. From this month onwards, selected premises will be prohibited from providing single-use plastic bags. 55,000 reusable tote bags have been distributed and three ReBag Stations established across Penang to encourage the reuse of shopping bags. The initiative will also standardise the prohibition of plastic straws across MBPP's and MBSP's respective jurisdictions.<sup>[4]</sup>

Similar yet distinct approaches can be seen in night markets elsewhere. In Taiwan, improvement efforts go beyond encouraging visitors to dispose of waste properly, but also include initiatives such as promoting reusable utensils, offering incentives for customers with their own containers, providing reusable container rental services, improving waste separation and recycling facilities as well as helping food vendors better manage oil and wastewater.<sup>[5]</sup> Environmental responsibility is not created solely through enforcement or punishment alone, but when responsible choices are made accessible, encouraged and practised consistently.

Ultimately, a pasar malam's condition after closing hours reflects how a community values its shared spaces. As places where people gather, connect and experience everyday life, their preservation requires not only enjoying the offerings, but also considering what is left behind afterwards.

#### ENDNOTES

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**PHOR WEI XUAN** is a software engineer interested in the intersections between technology, society and everyday life. Outside of artificial intelligence and software development, he enjoys exploring ideas and experiences that shape the communities around him.

# FILLING BORROWED SPACE AND FLEETING TIME



1



2

BY **KENNETH WONG SEE HUAT**

## CAPTIONS

1. A hawker coats ingredients in batter while an earlier batch cooks in twin fryers. Within this compact, temporary kitchen, culinary knowledge is sustained through repeated gestures, practical experience and the rhythms of everyday preparation.
2. Prawns, shellfish and small fish are arranged in ready-priced portions on a temporary seafood stall. The display creates a small social cartography of the local food supply, while the acts of browsing, selecting, weighing and purchasing shape the market's everyday social choreography.
3. Fresh durians are opened, portioned and displayed for customers. Their seasonal appearance shows how the pasar malam operates as a temporal space whose contents and atmosphere continually change with local produce, availability and demand.

**EVEN BY MID-AFTERNOON**, there is still little to suggest that two ordinary streets in Taman Tun Sardon and Jalan Pantai Jerjak are about to become vibrant public spaces. But soon, vendors begin arriving and unloading crates of vegetables, seafood and household goods. Within two hours, both streets transform into a bustling pasar malam (Malay for “night market”)—only to disappear without a trace by midnight. After spending an afternoon observing both markets, from setup to closing, I started thinking of them as temporary architecture: intangible urban spaces that exist not because of permanent structures, but through shared routines, coordinated movements and the collective rhythms of neighbourhood life. Heritage is often imagined as something preserved inside museums, archives or other formal spaces. Yet Penang’s many pasar malam remind us that some of our richest cultural heritage survives precisely because of its fleeting nature.

## MAPPING THE RHYTHMS OF EVERYDAY HERITAGE

What fascinated me most was not the trading activity, but the preceding transformation and subsequent organisation. Before the first customer arrives, ordinary roads begin changing into commercial streets, pickup trucks become mobile shops and vans unfold into miniature warehouses. Nothing appears permanent, yet everything feels remarkably organised, down to the flow of the ensuing crowds despite the apparent congestion. Very little confusion occurs once the market begins operating. Customers instinctively slow down for elderly shoppers carrying groceries. Children dart between stalls while parents negotiate narrow passageways. Delivery trolleys pass quietly behind seafood counters, and neighbouring vendors occasionally help one another with unloading or packing. No one directs this movement. Yet hundreds of people continuously adjust their pace and position in response to everyone else. The market functions through unwritten coordination, forming a social choreography learned through

# THE PASAR MALAM AS PENANG'S TEMPORARY ARCHITECTURE

habit, observation and mutual accommodation rather than formal rules.

Both markets possess noticeably different personalities. Taman Tun Sardon retains the atmosphere of an established residential neighbourhood. Many shoppers appear to know the vendors personally. Purchases are often accompanied by conversations about family, work or local happenings. The market feels less like a commercial destination than a weekly gathering, where shopping becomes another way of maintaining community relationships. Elderly residents arrive early to buy fresh fish and vegetables, while familiar greetings travel easily from one stall to another. In contrast, Jalan Pantai Jerjak, surrounded by high-rise apartments and newer housing developments, attracts a more diverse mix of visitors, often strangers. Office workers stop by on their way home, university students arrive on motorcycles and young parents push strollers or carry children. Rather than serving a long-established community, this market temporarily brings together people whose daily lives rarely intersect.

In these ways, every pasar malam mirrors the social geography of the neighbourhood which it serves, becoming a living weekly map of the surrounding community. Every market, in turn, forms one node within a larger map of everyday Penang. In this sense, the vendors themselves create a form of social cartography.

#### TO EXIST IN TIME

Every vendor seems to know exactly where to park, how much space to occupy and when neighbouring traders will arrive. There are few instructions; their routines have been rehearsed weekly, sometimes for decades. The market exists only for a few hours, yet its temporary architecture is assembled with extraordinary efficiency.

This is what makes the pasar malam a *temporal space*. Its identity depends not on permanent structures, but on time itself. Remove the weekly rhythm, and the market ceases to exist. Watching both markets over the afternoon revealed a remarkably consistent temporal structure. The first phase is preparation, where wares are arranged carefully, sorted or hung up. As dusk approaches, daylight gradually transitions to rows of exposed lightbulbs suspended beneath canvas roofs. The changing nature of light signals the manifestation of the street into a market, where consumption becomes the major activity.

The customers change with the evening too. Older residents usually arrive earlier, hoping to purchase the freshest produce before larger crowds gather. Families appear around dinnertime, often combining grocery shopping with buying takeaway meals. Later in the evening, younger shoppers stroll more casually through the mar-

ket, browsing clothing, snacks or seasonal fruits before returning home.

The rhythm shifts with festive periods, vacations and the weather. Several vendors explained that business depends heavily on timing. School holidays, paydays, religious celebrations and public holidays often bring noticeably larger crowds, while rainy evenings or quieter weeks can dramatically reduce sales. Success, they suggest, depends as much on understanding the rhythms of neighbourhood life as on selling quality products.

Time and space intersect in cyclic ways. For many traders, relying on one market alone is insufficient. Some vendors participate only in the Wednesday market at Taman Tun Sardon, but many others follow an almost weekly circuit across Penang. Monday may be spent in one neighbourhood, Wednesday in Tun Sardon, and Thursday and the weekend at other markets. Their livelihoods depend not upon one fixed location but their constant mobility through multiple nodes. Rather than belonging to a single marketplace, they weave together different neighbourhoods through movement. Their weekly routes connect communities that may otherwise never interact, creating an invisible network of temporary public spaces spread across Penang.

#### MATERIAL CONSIDERATIONS AND HERITAGE TRANSMISSION

Behind the colourful stalls lies a less visible landscape. Portable generators hum beside water containers and gas cylinders. Storage boxes, spare clothing, ice chests and washing stations occupy narrow spaces hidden from customers' view. These backstage areas remind us that the apparent informality of the pasar malam depends upon an enormous amount of organisation and labour that often goes unnoticed. Furthermore, the cost of operating at dif-

ferent pasar malam varies considerably. Vendors tell me that site fees generally range from about RM10–25 per session, depending on the location and local organiser. While these amounts may seem modest, they represent only one part of a larger economic reality that includes the costs of fuel, ice, equipment, transportation, ingredients and labour. Hence, there are also material considerations at play, implicitly shaping seemingly spontaneous rhythms.

Despite the economies of scale and convenience offered by supermarkets, convenience stores and online delivery, which are reshaping consumer habits, the pasar malam survives because it offers something more: *relationships*. Here, buying vegetables may also involve exchanging neighbourhood news, discussing recipes or catching up with familiar vendors. Seafood sellers explain the freshness of their catch, while fruit sellers recommend the sweetest seasonal varieties. Knowledge also passes quietly from one generation to the next through repeated practice rather than written recipes. Young assistants may prepare fried noodles beside experienced cooks, learning about timing, seasoning and customer interaction through observation and practice, rather than formal instruction. In these ways, food tells a deeper story about how relationships extend business continuity across time.

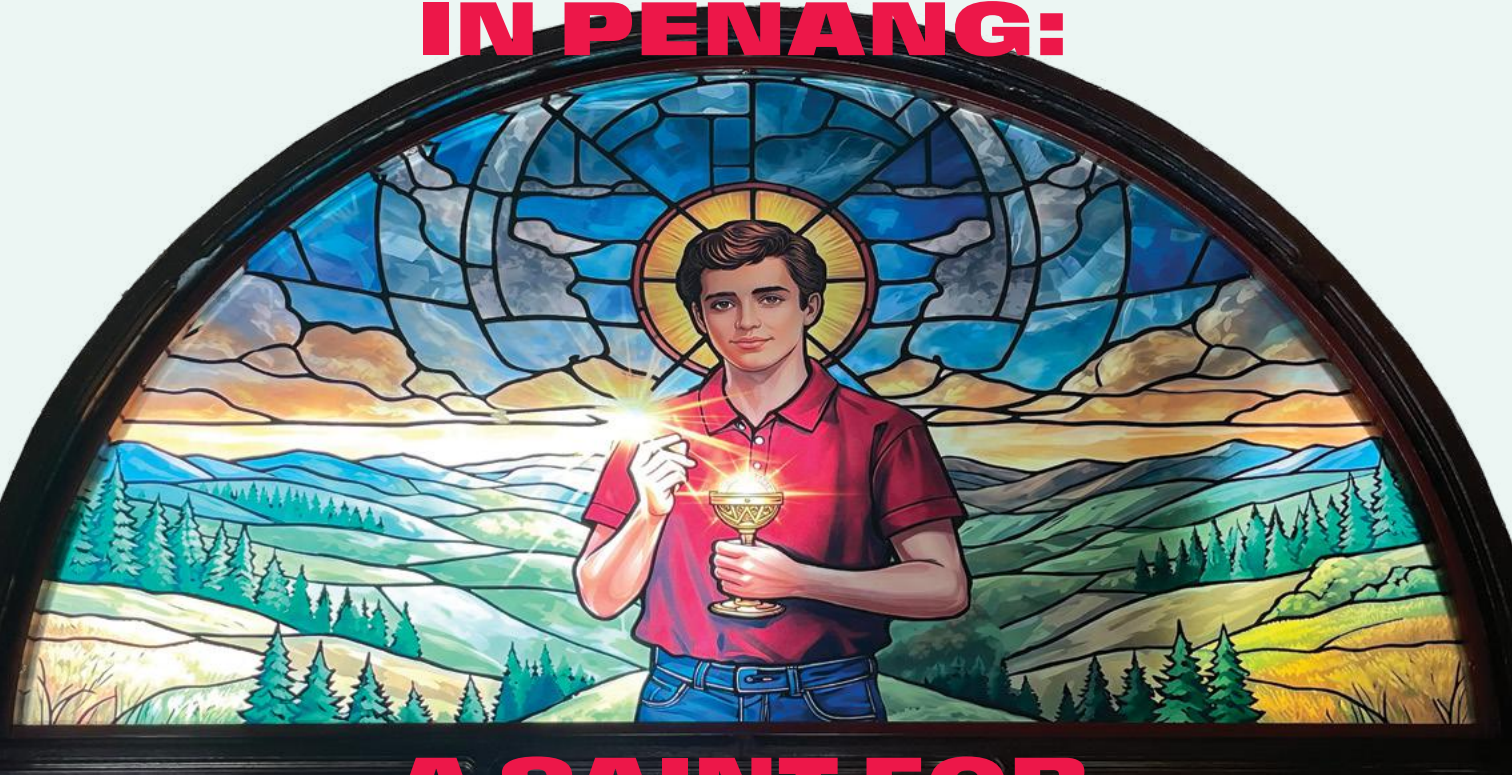
Taman Tun Sardon and Jalan Pantai Jerjak are just two spaces where a living architecture binding space and time allows commerce, memory, movement and community to temporarily converge. Before midnight, the lights are switched off, the canopies folded away and the streets returned to the traffic. Yet the relationships, routines and rhythms wait patiently for the following week. At a time of rapid change, this quiet rhythm of (dis)appearance becomes a form of living heritage worth recognising, celebrating and sustaining.



**KENNETH WONG SEE HUAT** is an independent curator, writer and founder of People Ideas Culture, who develops Southeast Asia-focused work through psychogeographic, site-responsive and community-engaged practices.



# ST CARLO'S RELIC IN PENANG:



## A SAINT FOR THE DIGITAL AGE

BY SHENNA THAM

**“WHEN I FIRST** received the relic of St. Carlo, I felt immense joy and was deeply blessed,” said Raymond Raj, parish priest of the Cathedral of the Holy Spirit (CHS) in Penang. For many Catholic worshippers at CHS, this relic’s arrival marked more than a ceremonial occasion. It represented a rare encounter with a modern figure of faith, whose life continues to resonate strongly with younger Catholics around the world.

### MEETING THE MILLENNIAL SAINT

In an age of smartphones and social media, one of the Catholic Church’s most compelling young figures is, perhaps unsurprisingly, a teenager who was best known not only for his faith, but also his fluency with technology. Now, the relic of the late Carlo Acutis (1991–2006) is drawing parishioners to a much older form of devotion. His presence—even if only through a lock of his hair—brings into focus the enduring relevance of longstanding religious traditions within an increasingly modern and connected world.

What makes St. Carlo particularly compelling is how ordinary he seems. Ordinary in a way that feels strangely familiar, as though he could have been just another student passing through a school corridor. He played video games, used technology and attended school like so many others. Unlike earlier saints, whose lives can feel distant or shaped by another era, St. Carlo represents a form of holiness grounded in contemporary life, one which feels immediate and recognisable. St. Carlo was fas-

cinated by computer coding and taught himself basic coding languages, using his computer skills to create a website documenting Eucharistic miracles worldwide. Canonised by Pope Leo XIV on 7 September 2025, St. Carlo’s efforts were reflective of a generation of believers shaped by the digital age.

In Catholic tradition, relics are physical objects associated with saints, which are preserved as tangible reminders of their lives and faith. They are generally classified into: (1) first-class relics (parts of the saint’s body); (2) second-class relics (items personally used by the saint); and (3) third-class relics (objects touched to a first- or second-class relic). CHS received this first-class relic of St. Carlo on 25 October, a year after the Parish Pastoral Assembly during which a project to set up a “Saints Corner” was initiated. It would be placed alongside that of St. Elena Guerra (1835–1914), an Italian religious sister and educator who had successfully petitioned Pope Leo XIII to renew global devotion to the Third Person of the Trinity.

**CAPTIONS**

1. Stained glass window in the chapel.
2. Reception of the relics at CHS.
3. The display of St. Carlo's relic in the chapel.
4. An image of Carlo Acutis.
5. Informational display of St. Carlo.



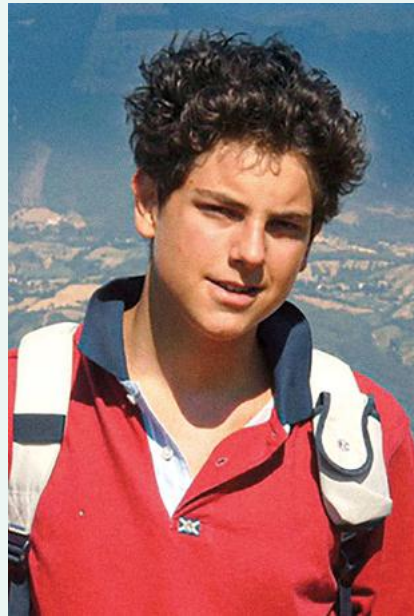
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**SHENNA THAM** is a former intern at Penang Institute with a passion for writing, fashion and visual culture. Inspired by faith and gothic romanticism, she sees life as a metaphor shaped through beauty and memory.

CHS's interest in the relics is also shaped by the particular significance of these saints to its community. St. Elena holds a special connection to the Holy Spirit, after whom the cathedral is named, while St. Carlo represents a more contemporary figure of faith and serves as a role model for the church's vibrant youth. Bringing their relics to CHS would therefore offer the community an opportunity to reflect more closely on their lives and the values they represent. Such a space allows parishioners to encounter the saints as examples to whom they can turn in prayer.

David Chan, then the church's youth advisor and also this project's initiator, hopes that the relic will provide young Catholics with a role model whom they can identify with, pray to and seek guidance and intercession from. Joachim Robert, who helped facilitate the project while in Rome, notes that bringing the relic to the cathedral involved months of preparation, beginning with submitting official letters of request from both the church and the bishop on behalf of the parish.

#### RELICS AND RELEVANCE IN A CONNECTED WORLD

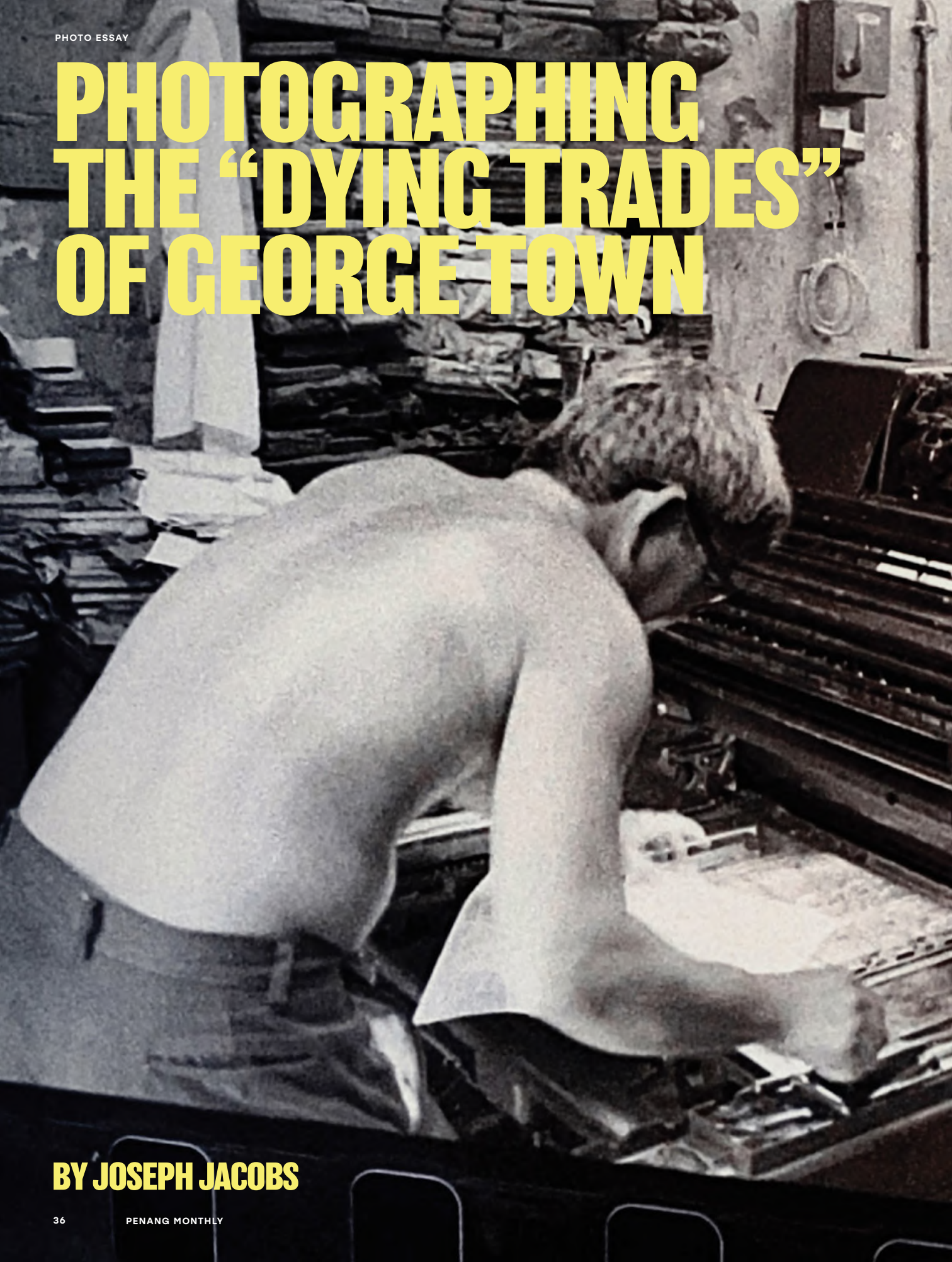
For Catholics, relics serve as points of connection, making the idea of holiness more immediate and accessible. This practice, which dates back to the early centuries of the Church, remains a way of expressing devotion and remembrance.

In an age of digital spirituality, faith is no longer confined to churches and scripture alone. It exists online, in social media content and among digital communities. St. Carlo's life challenges the idea that technology distracts from faith. Instead, it shows how digital tools can become part of spiritual expression. "[T]he internet creates more opportunities to learn about faith, though conflicting beliefs online can also create confusion," a youth from CHS reflected. Another noted that this does not weaken traditional belief, but instead reinforces its endurance across generations. "It proves that a saint does not have to belong to a distant or ancient past to remain relevant today."

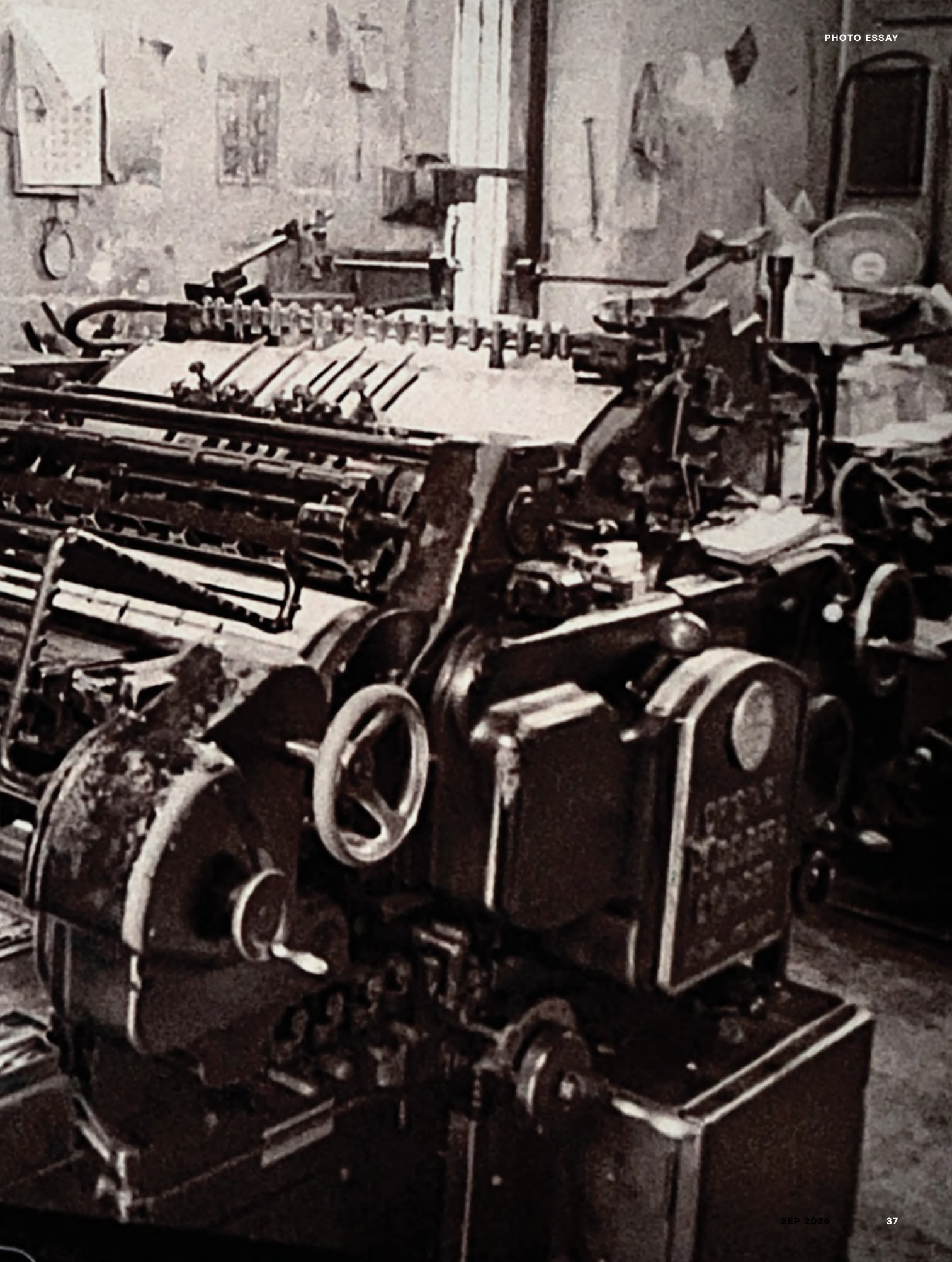
The growing attention given to figures like St. Carlo reflects a broader shift in how faith is understood and experienced today. Modern saints do not replace tradition, but reshape how it is perceived, offering new points of connection for those navigating belief in a rapidly changing world. While the medium of devotion—that is, the practices and structures through which Catholics express faith—remains the same, the figures who inspire that devotion are changing, offering new models of faith for younger generations.

For many, Carlo Acutis does not feel distant or unreachable. He feels familiar, which may be precisely why his story resonates. In a world increasingly shaped by screens, algorithms and constant connectivity, his life suggests that faith can still exist meaningfully *within* modern realities. The presence of his relic at CHS Penang ultimately reflects an enduring desire to seek holiness in forms that feel immediate, recognisable and deeply human.

# PHOTOGRAPHING THE “DYING TRADES” OF GEORGE TOWN



BY JOSEPH JACOBS



**I WAS FLÂNEUR-ING** among artisanal traders along the streets and alleys of George Town in 1996, with a Leica R firmly strapped to my hand. Even then, it felt like stepping back in time. The narrow and busy streets hummed with the sound of traffic and rhythms of artisanal tradesmen. This was before UNESCO's 2008 World Heritage Site inscription, when many heritage crafts were still operating in their original shophouses. However, they were already under pressure from rising rents and modernisation. My experience then was as much about showing *presence*, as it was about capturing valued and dying lifestyles. Shooting with my Leica was a rewarding experience. The manual camera's tactile controls and optical clarity encouraged a slower and more deliberate approach; one which matched the unhurried pace of the artisans themselves. Revisiting these images three decades later, they bring back memories of the roar of the blacksmith's fire coupled with the clink of his hammer, or the quiet focus of the basket-weaver, pulling strands of rattan with his skilled fingers.



#### 1: THE KEY-CUTTER

Their work is associated with locksmithing, one of the oldest trades with roots in Ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia. The earliest locks were simple wooden devices, but medieval locksmithing became more sophisticated, with craftsmen producing more complex keys and locks. Locksmithing grew out of blacksmithing. Indeed, early key-makers were often metalworkers who could forge, file and fit keys to locks. Before key-cutting machines were invented, keys were hand-filed to match each individual lock, which made this work highly skilled and time-consuming.

#### 2: THE WATCHMAKER

Penang's watchmaking history is one of family-run repair shops. Its watch businesses began as small trading shops serving a port-city where imported goods, fashion items and timepieces were in demand. Their existence as dedicated tradesmen reflects a deeper craft tradition where trained watch mechanics handled strap changes, movement replacements, overhauls and restorations. Repair work for mechanical watches required skilled labour, long before digital and quartz watches became dominant.





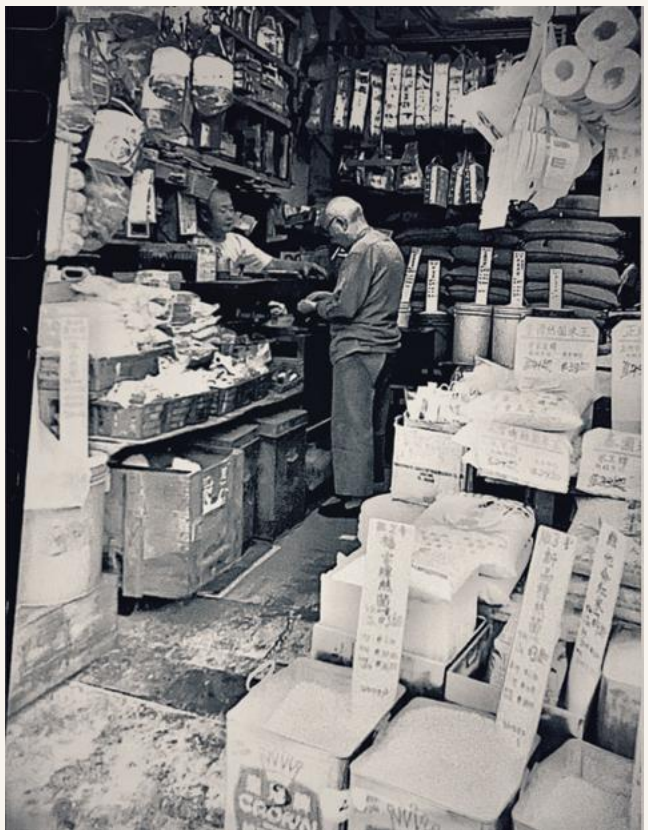
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### 3: THE BARBER

Old barbershops are part of Penang's living heritage, with some still operating from pre-war shophouses, preserving their old-school tools and techniques. These shops were important because Penang, especially George Town, has long been a port-city where small trades like barbering became embedded in neighbourhood life. Traditional barbers often served the same local customers for decades. Their appeal today comes from authenticity: old barber chairs, straight razors, simple service menus and interiors that have changed very little over time.

### 4: THE GROCER

Penang's grocery stores are closely tied to its shophouse tradition, where the ground floor was used for commerce and upper floors for family living. These shophouses developed out of late-18th-century urban planning practices. Grocery stores (also known as *chai diam ma*) fit naturally into this building type, whose narrow street frontage and covered five-foot ways made them ideal for small retail businesses. Traditional Penang grocery stores usually carried everyday essentials, rather than modern supermarket goods. Rice, dried goods, cooking staples and household items, often sold as loose items, were sold by weight or measure.



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### 5: THE BASKET-WEAVER

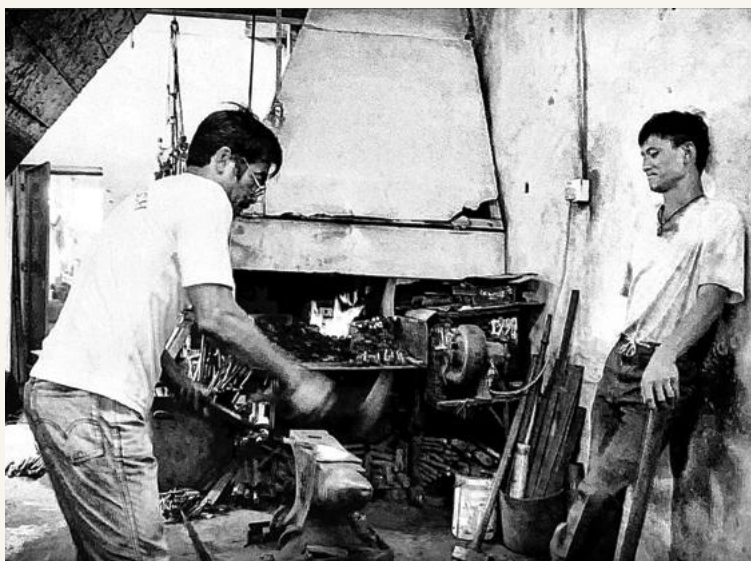
Basket-weaving has long been part of Penang's Chinese and Malay craft traditions. Rattan, pandan leaves and palm leaves were commonly used for making practical household goods and decorative items. These materials were readily available in this humid tropical setting. Rattan was particularly valued for its strength and flexibility. In fact, baskets were popular among the Chinese community for sending goods to relatives in China during its "Great Famine".

## 6: THE TAILOR

Penang's artisan tailors are among its skilled traders, whose tradition grew out of its long role as a trading port. The presence of migrant communities created a steady demand for custom clothing. Many Penang tailoring businesses were passed down through families, with skills taught by parents to children. The industry was first disrupted by the Second World War, and later by modern fashion retail outlets, but has survived through specialist shops. Today, tailors are valued as a living heritage because they preserve techniques that mass production has difficulty replacing.



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## 7: THE BLACKSMITH

Penang's blacksmithing history is especially associated with family-run workshops in George Town and Seberang Perai. The craft once supported everyday life by making tools, anchors and agricultural or marine hardware, aside from providing repair services, but only a few workshops remain today. The first blacksmith in Penang was supposedly a Yung Ting Hakka, and later blacksmiths from the same community inherited the trade along family lines. Today, blacksmithing is remembered as a dying heritage craft and is often highlighted through street art.

## 8: THE STONEMASON

Penang's stone-carving tradition is closely tied to clan temples, tombstones and heritage monuments. This craft survives mainly in the form of decorative granite work, memorial stones and the restoration of historic sites. Tombstone-carving is part of the broader tradition of memorial stonework among its multicultural communities.



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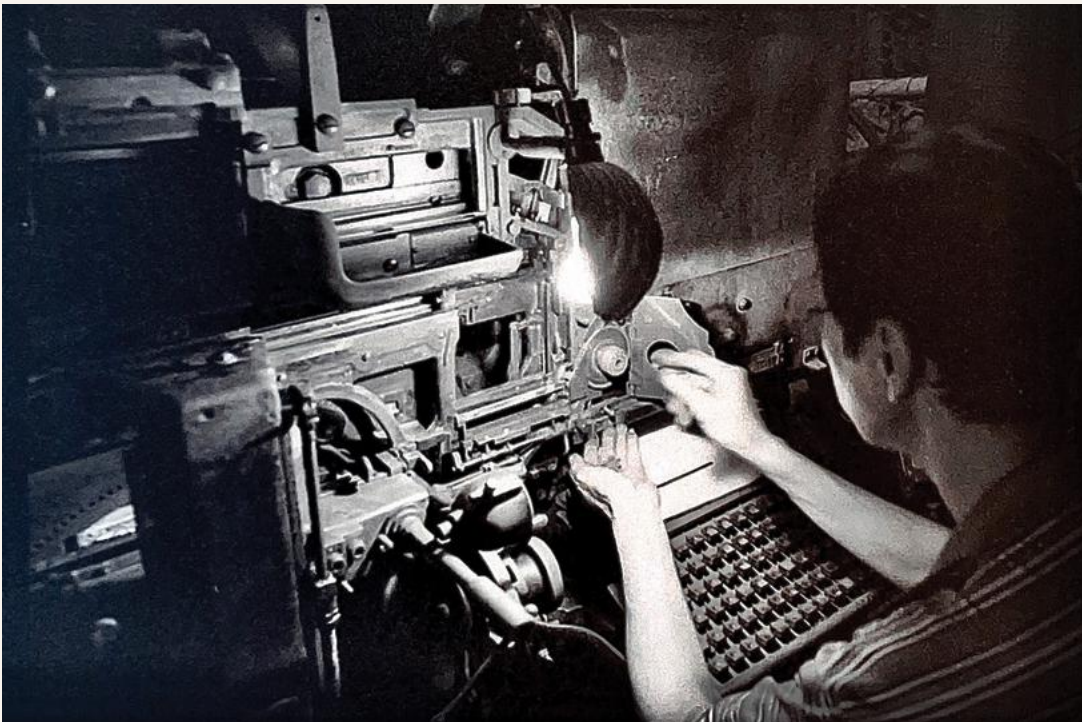


#### 9: THE GOLDSMITH

Goldsmithing dates back to at least the 18th century, when Penang Island's role as a trading port helped attract Chinese migrant craftsmen and others. By the early-19th century, the trade was organised enough to support a formal guild. Indian goldsmiths have also been part of Penang's jewellery scene for many decades, especially in "Little India" and along old trade streets. Their craft is closely tied to South Indian styles, and encompasses repairs, remodelling and custom-made pieces. Today, ethnic Indian goldsmiths still serve both cultural and practical needs by making bridal jewellery, repairing pieces and offering bespoke designs. The trade remains a visible part of Penang's multicultural commercial history.

#### 10: THE LINOTYPE PRINTER

The linotype was a landmark hot-metal typesetting machine invented by Ottmar Mergenthaler in the 1880s. Printers could now cast an entire line of type at once, instead of setting individual letters by hand. The invention dramatically sped up newspaper—and book—production by allowing operators to type on a keyboard and assemble brass matrices into a line, which they then cast as a metal slug.





**JOSEPH JACOBS** is a freelance photographer based in Australia, who continues to photograph on film and with a Leica camera. He has travelled widely and has a particular interest in capturing images to record a vanishing age.

## CAPTIONS

1. Dancers usually stay in their own “lots” when practising in a studio.
2. Chen in Latin ballroom garb.

## ENDNOTES

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# ON A FIRM FOOTING: BALLROOM DANCING IN PENANG

BY AADAH LEE  
AND RACHEL YEOH



**AADAH LEE** was an intern at Penang Institute. When not writing articles, she is constantly talking about biology and aims to be a researcher in the biomedical field, much to everyone's chagrin.



**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.

**IT WAS UNMISTAKABLE**—Chen Chye Tee heard sharp, syncopated brass sections filling the crisp Barcelona air, followed by trumpets and trombones pumping their buzzy tones. Led by the melody, the ballroom dancer and instructor at Montana Dance and Art Centre hurried her travel companions along, until they found themselves at a bar where the tune originated from. Her eyes fell upon the dance floor, where people were engaging in social salsa. The whirl of colours and movements beckoned her to join the throng.

“It is an international language,” Chen explained, “we don’t need to know the other dancers, but if you know how to dance, for example, the salsa, when the man raises his hand, it is the cue for the lady to turn. Or if he circles his hands three times, it means the lady has to twirl three times. One leads and the other follows.” Chen provides that tutelage so that her students can converse in this shared language on the dance floor.



### SOCIAL LIFE IN MOTION

Dancing is one of humanity's oldest art forms, with historical records dating back 9,000 years. However, those who are not exposed to formal tutelage today might instantly associate it with nightclubs and disco music.

Ballroom dancing, specifically, has roots in the European court dances of the 17th and 18th centuries. Through events known as assemblies, where limited groups of invitees gathered, a more social element of this art emerged. Individuals and families established studios to teach steps, patterns and musicality, allowing the general public to also learn formal dance.<sup>[1]</sup> By the 20th century, ballroom dancing had extended beyond ballrooms into public, open-air dance halls; the social elite even sponsored events for working-class women to dance their way up the social ladder.<sup>[2]</sup>

A distinct term emerged: social dancing. Although formally categorised under the ballroom dance umbrella, it emphasises flexibility and adaptability, as opposed to being more rule-based.<sup>[3]</sup> Ballroom dance soon underwent a major transformation, with emerging music styles such as jazz and swing, popularised by African-American musicians, which employ upbeat and lively movements. This led to the creation of new dance styles such as swing and fox-trot.<sup>[4]</sup>

Ballroom dancing also surged in popularity in Malaya in the early- to mid-20th century. Expatriates and country clubs helped further this movement, which gained a steady audience of middle-aged folks looking to break away from the normality of daily life. In recent years, there has been an uptick of interest among youths, drawn to the social aspect of this activity; namely, meeting new people after working long hours.

While ballroom dancing may not be the most commonplace hobby today, Chen says that there are thousands in Penang who are taking to it. As expected, however, many cite age or inexperience as a common argument for *not* participating. Some cling onto the stigma that ballroom dancing is

an elderly activity. Others say that they are simply too old and inflexible, a claim which practitioners refute. "It's as easy as walking, just with rhythm," remarked Sabrena Arosh from West Coast Swing Penang.

### COMPETING ON THE DANCE FLOOR

In social dances like West Coast Swing—which evolved primarily from Lindy Hop—movement is built on a basic linear foundation. Dancers travel back and forth within an allocated lot. Each person takes up a role (either a lead or a follower) in a walk-walk-triple step-triple step pattern. The lead initiates the movement, establishing the pattern to follow and determining how it fits with the music. The follower follows the momentum and stylises it as they go along.

Competitive West Coast Swing consists of three activities: workshops, the actual competition and an informal social dance session afterwards. Competitions are split into two categories: "Strictly" (where dancers enter with a chosen partner and are judged against other couples) and "Jack & Jill" (the random allocation of dancers). Points are only earned in the "Jack & Jill" category, which contribute towards one's world ranking. Depending on the points accumulated, dancers are separated into tiers which determine the category which they are allowed to compete in.

Meanwhile, ballroom Latin is a different ballgame altogether, where competitors have to showcase the cha-cha-cha, rumba, jive, samba and paso doble. Unlike swing dances, these centre on fixed, long-term partnerships, rather than random pairings. Competitions are structured primarily by skill levels—ranging from beginner syllabus categories (bronze, silver and gold) up to the open amateur and professional divisions—and by age brackets.

Penang is a hub for these competitions. In 2026 alone, the state hosted the Penang Medalist Dance Championship in May and the Open World Dancesport Penang Championship in August, and it will host the ADC Asian Cup cum Penang International Ballroom Championships in

November. However, many opt to not dance competitively: conventions are expensive to attend, costing upwards of USD200 (approx. RM815) per person, and often last for days, besides ranging from early in the morning until midnight, with no breaks in-between. It takes a lot of resources to prepare for competitions, where anxiety can immobilise even the best dancers.

### AN ACTIVITY FOR ALL AGES

Children as young as four to five can begin their journeys. Chen began her training in ballroom dancing at 18, after 10 years as a jazz dancer. "I started late, and I practised a lot and became good at it. When you start ballroom dancing as a child, you learn how to loosen and move your body, and breathing techniques. It is also the time when you learn to strengthen your core. [...] I teach those who are older, in their 50s to 60s, how to move gracefully. They just want to feel good and look good. Ballroom dancing gives them confidence to do just that."

After teaching ballroom Latin for two decades, Chen sees it having a bright future as both leisure activity and sport. "More and more children are opting to pick up ballroom Latin after learning ballet; it is less stressful, has broader techniques and they also like the costumes that come with it." Those who are older are often inspired by shows such as *Dancing with the Stars*, for example, which showcases both social and ballroom Latin dances.

There are also social factors to consider. "The fun is in meeting new people from diverse backgrounds," Sabrena added. "The beauty of it is that it's a close-knit community. Most people tend to be really warm and friendly, and that's probably due to the nature of the dance. You really do learn a lot about people here."



# THE BIG GENERATIVE AI CHALLENGE ASSESSING AND EMBEDDING AUTHENTICITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION

BY WONG TEIK AUN



## THE WIDESPREAD AVAILABILITY

and use of generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) tools, such as DeepSeek and ChatGPT, present significant challenges to gauging the authenticity and originality of higher education assessments. Despite the emergent challenges, the rise of GenAI does not signal the end of assessments altogether. Rather, it necessitates their evolution to determine the degree to which *authentic* learning takes place. What are the implications for the institutional integrity of higher education, and what types of assessment can ensure that students are still learning, even as the usage of these tools becomes inevitable?



**WONG TEIK AUN** is a senior faculty member at a private institution of higher learning.

## HIGHER EDUCATION IN THE TIME OF AI

The prevalence of GenAI tools can potentially undermine the integrity of higher education itself. Whether gauged through written assignments, essays or other assessments, it is increasingly difficult to ascertain if students are actually doing the hard work required of them. Traditional assignments are text-based: they require students to read texts and produce lengthy reflective essays, or conduct and report on specialised research. In short, they demand time, critical ability and sustained attention. But they can now be completed with relative ease using GenAI tools, which essentially offer an alternative to original written engagement. As a result, such assessments can be easily gamed, and can no longer claim to reliably measure student learning or capability.

Indeed, the extent of GenAI usage is nearly impossible to measure accurately. AI-detection functions do exist on learning management platforms, but these can only provide estimates on the likelihood of AI use. Such indeterminacy hardly constitutes an objective platform for properly determining whether or not students are applying themselves. When the validity of assessment systems is compromised, the ability of educators to determine quality and appropriately reward genuine effort, critical thinking and academic excellence is diminished.

This problem is not limited to students: I have also had negative experiences in this regard. Several of my research grant applications were unsuccessful until I figured out that others were using GenAI to

enhance their own proposals. While it is perfectly fine to improve one's research proposal, what matters is the *means* by which this is done. I do so in the traditional way, that is, by conferring with peers and experts. Where I draw the line is when researchers who are not even familiar with, let alone passionate about, a research topic succeed in garnering resources through their GenAI-generated texts.

Ultimately, students are the ones who are most affected by the normalisation of these approaches, since their learning may be impeded and genuine achievement goes inadequately recognised. Those who become overly reliant on GenAI before their intellectual capacities are fully formed or mature risk becoming intellectually compromised. Think of GenAI as a set of wheels: for the intellectually mature, it functions as a bicycle, allowing one to go faster; whereas for the intellectually immature, it is akin to a set of training wheels, which discourage independent reasoning. Paradoxically, students who produce original work or rely minimally on GenAI may be disadvantaged compared with peers who use these tools heavily, since their efforts will be assessed alongside highly polished, AI-generated outputs. Taken together, these dynamics risk fostering an unhealthy cycle of dependency and overreliance on GenAI among all members of the academic community: whether students, researchers or educators.



#### **A MODEST PROPOSAL FOR VALID ASSESSMENT**

The solution is not necessarily for educators to restrict or police the use of GenAI. Rather, its presence should be acknowledged and strategically integrated into the learning process. Is it possible to respond to GenAI's affordances by rethinking assessment design altogether? How can we ensure that student work remains authentic, meaningful and reflective of their intellectual abilities? How can we incorporate increasingly ubiquitous GenAI use without compromising learning outcomes?

Doing so demands a fundamental shift away from conventional assessment formats such as research papers and reflective essays. Instead, educators must develop "assessments of authenticity" that prioritise the internalisation of lived experience as a foundation for learning, where GenAI serves as a supplementary tool to enhance analysis, reflection and communication. A key underlying principle is the incorporation of physical or experiential components, which remain areas where GenAI has limited reach. The proposed framework below contains at least four promising domains which centre students' abilities to balance experiential learning against the appropriate use of GenAI, thus subjecting them to fair evaluation.

##### **1. ROLE-PLAYING**

In simulating actual situations, such as business negotiations and meetings, students take on various roles, each with prescribed characteristics, priorities and objectives. The context of these situa-

tions is constructed with attention to detail and realism. Subsequently, students can write a reflective essay on the authentic learnings that emerge from this experience, and they can then use GenAI tools to assist with and enhance the report-writing process.

##### **2. FIELD INTERVIEWS**

Students conduct real-life interviews with research participants, and are required to analyse and report the results in video format. The core concept is that interviews provide students with an authentic experience, upon which they anchor learnings, understandings, analyses and conclusions. Subsequently, they can use GenAI to further research, deepen analysis and enhance video production quality.

##### **3. THIRD-PARTY STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT**

An external party, for example a non-governmental organisation, is incorporated into the assessment process. Students have to understand this party's mission, objectives, priorities, requirements and strengths, among other metrics. They may then conceptualise, plan, propose, publicise and execute a funding and awareness-raising on-campus event in support of this stakeholder. Subsequently, the stakeholder evaluates student performance and provides feedback. As a practical hands-on and outcome-based activity, students' creativity, innovation, management and marketing ability as well as other soft skills can be gauged by a critical third party.

##### **4. WORKSHOP DEVELOPMENT**

Students conceptualise, design and deliver an in-class workshop for other students. This format encourages them to focus on activities such as games, exercises and discussions, rather than passive presentations and lectures. Incidentally, workshops centred upon leadership development lend themselves particularly well to assessment, since they arguably help participants build their own leadership capabilities by exercising cognitive and practical understanding. In playing the roles of trainers and facilitators, students experience authentic, experiential and meaningful learning.

Taken together, these four domains emphasise depth of understanding, real-world engagement and the development of higher-order skills, while reducing room for dependency on superficial or AI-generated submissions. If implemented, they may represent a shift towards more student-centred and quality-driven educational practices. Realistically, none of these assessments are perfect: indeed, my colleagues and I are continuously fine-tuning and improving the details. Neither is it reactionary. By embracing GenAI as a complementary tool and anchoring assessments in authentic learning experiences, educators can preserve the integrity of higher education while fostering deeper and more meaningful student learning.

# ADVANCING INDUSTRIAL EXCELLENCE THROUGH SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT AT PENANG'S INDUSTRIAL PARKS

BY KENNETH ONG

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**THE SUCCESS OF** the Bayan Lepas Free Industrial Zone has played a pivotal role in shaping Penang's economic landscape. Now home to over 350 multinational corporations from the US, Japan, Germany and Singapore, the state remains one of the world's most attractive investment destinations for manufacturing. This thriving ecosystem has driven the rapid proliferation of 12 industrial parks statewide, currently covering approximately 7,000 acres.<sup>[1]</sup>

Rapid industrialisation, however, comes with steep sustainability challenges spanning environmental protection to social and labour inequality. To address these issues without sacrificing Penang's global competitive edge, the Penang Development Corporation (PDC) and the state government have doubled down on green-focused initiatives in the next-generation industrial parks being built at Seberang Perai. Beyond advancing industrial goals, these parks also aim to address broader sustainability concerns.



### AN ECO-FRIENDLY INDUSTRIAL PARK

Among Penang’s upcoming industrial developments, one key venture is the Bandar Cassia Technology Park (BCTP), which is specifically designed to tackle environmental sustainability through green initiatives. 303ac of industrial land have been allocated for its development, with its final phase set for completion by end-2026. Strategically positioned at the heart of Bandar Cassia, BCTP is also part of a full-fledged smart eco-township blending high-tech industrial hubs with family-friendly residential communities.<sup>[2]</sup>

BCTP aims to attract green and high-tech industries (including electrical and electronics, medical devices and automation), with strict adherence to environmental, social and governance (ESG) principles and sustainable development goals (SDGs). According to Chief Minister Chow Kon Yeow, potential investors undergo a rigorous selection process and are required to adhere to ESG principles. Hence, the resulting industries are driven to use renewable energy solutions, reduce wastage of resources and adopt energy-efficient technology: all key contributors to environmental sustainability. One approved tenant is Taiwan’s Siliconware Precision Industries, an advanced semiconductor packaging and testing provider committed to eco-friendly construction, energy savings and waste reduction.<sup>[3]</sup> Meanwhile, Aixtron, a prominent German chipmaker, is also establishing a manufacturing facility in BCTP with sustainability at its core.<sup>[4]</sup>

### BALANCING GROWTH WITH WELLBEING

Alongside BCTP, two other industrial parks deserve attention. One is Batu Kawan Industrial Park 3 (BKIP3)—one of the state’s flagship industrial parks, also located in Bandar Cassia—which houses global tech giants such as Lam Research, Micron and Boston Scientific, alongside homegrown champions like Vitrox. There is also Penang Science Park South, which is located just outside Bandar Cassia, in the neighbouring Simpang Ampat corridor. Both are slated for completion in 2031, offering a 60-year leasehold model to investors. This framework allows the state to retain ownership of scarce industrial land, while providing investors with lower upfront land costs to boost these parks’ overall competitiveness in the global market. Furthermore, PDC has also partnered with Tenaga Nasional Berhad to roll out an “infra-ready concept”, thus guaranteeing incoming companies immediate access to essential utilities such as pre-installed grids and high-speed telecommunication networks.<sup>[5]</sup>

The provision of housing for workers is also a key concern. The foreign workers’ village dormitory project in BKIP3 (launched 2023) is finally set for completion by this year, offering medium-density housing to accommodate at least 8,000 workers.<sup>[6]</sup> Penang Science Park South will also feature dedicated employee housing. Its dormitory complex, developed by PDC and the state government, is slated for completion in 2027. It features two 20-story hostel blocks comprising 836 apartment units, also capable of accommodating 8,000 workers and complete with essential amenities such as supermarkets, food courts, clinics and recreational spaces. It is aligned with international labour standards and Malaysia’s Employees’ Minimum Standards of Housing, Accommodations, and Amenities Act 1990 (Act 446). This centralised dormitory helps streamline enforcement efforts by the authorities to ensure

| Rank            | State                             | SDG Index Score |
|-----------------|-----------------------------------|-----------------|
| 1               | Federal Territory of Labuan       | 72.55           |
| 2               | Negeri Sembilan                   | 71.31           |
| 3               | Terengganu                        | 71.07           |
| 4               | Melaka                            | 69.94           |
| 5               | Johor                             | 69.04           |
| 6               | Kedah                             | 68.95           |
| 7               | Pahang                            | 68.93           |
| 8               | Perak                             | 68.13           |
| 9               | Federal Territory of Kuala Lumpur | 68.11           |
| 10              | Selangor                          | 68.04           |
| 11              | Pulau Pinang                      | 67.84           |
| 12              | Sarawak                           | 66.81           |
| 13              | Perlis                            | 66.13           |
| 14              | Sabah                             | 64.25           |
| 15              | Kelantan                          | 63.70           |
| <b>Malaysia</b> |                                   | <b>67.82</b>    |

Table 1: Ranking SDG index scores in Malaysia <sup>[9]</sup>

workers’ safety, while its close proximity with the industrial zone ensures some distance from residential neighbourhoods. In this way, it addresses potential challenges faced by local Penang communities, including property value depreciation, unregistered foreign workers and social concerns.<sup>[7]</sup>

### BRIDGING SUSTAINABILITY GAPS

According to the United Nations’ *SDGs for Malaysian States 2025* report, Penang ranks 11th out of 15 Malaysian states and federal territories, earning an overall SDG index score of 67.84 out of 100 (see Table 1). Across the 17 SDG framework indicators, the state particularly underperforms in terms of land sustainability (including deforestation, biodiversity conservation and land degradation).

Consequently, PDC and the state government are taking steps to address these environmental gaps, including through a recent green initiative to plant 1,000 mangrove trees along coastal zones, thus supporting long-term carbon reduction objectives.<sup>[8]</sup> Penang’s triad of next-generation industrial parks must therefore support these efforts by demonstrating an evolving model where economic growth and sustainability can coexist. While bridging Penang’s remaining SDG gaps require continuous effort, these holistic developments lay a strong foundation for the maintenance of Penang’s industrial excellence, while advancing long-term sustainability goals.

### CAPTION

1. A map showing the locations of BKIP3, BCTP and Penang Science Park South in Seberang Perai.

### ENDNOTES

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3. Azanis Shahila Aman. (2024, May 24). Siliconware Precision breaks ground on RM6b semiconductor testing and packaging facility in Penang. *New Straits Times*.
4. MIDA. (2026). AIXTRON’s New Facility in Penang Reinforces Malaysia’s Position as Important Hub for Advanced Semiconductor Manufacturing.
5. Kok Hoay. (2024, Feb. 23). PDC to offer maximum 60-year lease for BKIP 3 land. *Buletin Mutiara*.
6. Riadz Akmal. (2023, Dec. 6). PDC and MyEG Lodging ink agreement to realise workers’ village project in BKIP3. *Buletin Mutiara*.
7. Lee E. (2025, Feb. 28). Penang embarks on centralised worker dormitory project for sustainable development. *Buletin Mutiara*.
8. Kok Hoay. (2026, Jun. 8). PDC hosts inaugural Sustainability Conference to drive green growth. *Buletin Mutiara*.
9. Malaysian States SDG Index. (2024). <https://dashboards.malaysia.sdgindex.org/rankings>

# FROM GERMANY TO PENANG ADVENTURES OF THE “KOPITIAM CHAIR”

BY  
LIM GUO JING



THE “KOPITIAM CHAIR” is a quintessential “local” sight in Penang’s eateries. These bentwood chairs, however, actually have a transnational lineage, being entangled with the iconic chairs produced by the Thonet company from Germany. Such furniture was lightweight, durable and inexpensive: all qualities conducive for industrial-scale furniture manufacturing and the export market. Yet they remained elegant, won admirers from Southeast Asia to Latin America from the 19th century onwards, and are now sought after by antique dealers and vintage enthusiasts alike. How did these chairs become popular fixtures in our local eating establishments, and what can they tell us about cosmopolitanism, aspiration and global trade?

## GERMAN INNOVATION, SWEDISH UPSCALING

The bentwood technique, invented by Michael Thonet (1796–1871), involves steaming wood, typically beech, at high temperatures to soften internal fibres, thus allowing it to be bent into desired shapes (usually over cast-iron moulds). Trained as a cabinet-maker, Thonet took over his father’s carpentry workshop in Boppard, a picturesque town in Middle Rhine, Germany, in 1819. His achievements gained the attention of Austrian Chancellor Prince Klemens Wenzel von Metternich, who eventually advised him to move to Vienna. Thonet participated in the 1851 Great Exhibition in London, where he exhibited a range of bentwood furniture and gained international praise for his manufactures. On 1 November 1853, he founded Gebrüder Thonet (Thonet Brothers), overseeing management with his sons in operational roles.<sup>[1]</sup>

In 1856, Thonet made a breakthrough by moulding solid wood, rather than merely working with glued-together veneers. Not only was this a cheaper process, but patents guaranteed the Thonets a virtual monopoly on production. A second breakthrough was the production of Model No. 14. This chair was a masterpiece of simplicity, consisting of only six wooden elements—two front legs, a curved element forming the rear legs, backrest, seat and foot ring for stabilisation—held together with only ten screws. Capable of easy (dis)assembly and taking up little space, Model No. 14 was amenable to international distribution. Up to 36 chairs could be transported in a single cubic metre crate.

Thonet’s legacy of flat-packed shipping and mass production later inspired IKEA’s business model, minus the latter’s do-it-yourself innovation and engineered materials (such as particleboard or medium-density fiberboard). Thonet’s advantage, however, remains bentwood’s durability. Its furniture has also become heirlooms despite their omnipresence. Indeed, by

1930, more than 50 million chairs had been produced, marketed through Thonet's networks of retail outlets and multilingual catalogues worldwide. Model No. 14 was at the forefront of the company's democratisation of luxury, which even distant Malayan buyers could afford.<sup>[2]</sup>

### THE EARLIEST APPEARANCE IN MALAYA

By the turn of the 20th century, the global popularity of bentwood furniture extended to the European colonies in Southeast Asia. British free ports in the region allowed for goods to be traded without taxes, duties or tariffs. Penang attracted merchants of various nationalities, and a comparatively diverse range of imported European goods appeared. Bentwood furniture was imported and distributed by trading companies such as Katz Brothers Ltd., which arrived flat-packed by steamship, before being assembled and varnished by local retailers.

Bentwood chairs became highly sought after by local elites and colonial administrators, becoming a common fixture in government premises, hotels, schools, homes, hospitals and Chinese associations alike. Arguably, their presence materially symbolised how Malaysians were embracing modernity. Somewhat unexpectedly, these chairs became highly visible in the 1920s–40s with the rise of kopitiams across Malaya, primarily fuelled by the Hainanese. Facing serious economic and political challenges such as the Great Depression and the Second World War, many Hainanese set up food and beverage businesses to survive, serving meals based on those they once prepared for colonial employers. This led to a boom in kopitiams, which drove demand for bentwood chairs.

One noteworthy early retailer was the iconic Pritchard & Co. Ltd. As recounted by historian Marcus Langdon, Pritchard's was the first British department store set up in northern Malaya, headquartered in Penang with branches in Ipoh, Butterworth and Sungai Petani.<sup>[3]</sup> Among its vast array of imported goods was Model No. 14. Once located on Union Street, Pritchard's was a symbol of Penang's rich commercial history.

Europeans were not the only retailers of "kopitiam chairs". One noteworthy bentwood furniture agent and importer was Lim Teck Lee (Pte) Ltd. Established in Singapore in 1918, with branches in Penang and Kuala Lumpur, this wholesaler, importer and exporter of industrial raw materials rebranded Czechoslovak-made furniture under the "Cock Brand", furnishing local kopitiams for generations. Judging from its old bentwood chair advertisements, some of these chairs were manufactured by Ligna (now TON), which was established by the Czechoslovak government after it nation-



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### CAPTIONS

1. The authentic bentwood "kopitiam chair" is now an icon of nostalgia (Source: the author).
2. At work repairing the rattan seat of a Thonet Model No. 14 (Source: the author).
3. Early bentwood chairs at a military dinner party in Penang (Courtesy of Ganesh Kolandaveloo).
4. Bentwood chair advertisement by Lim Teck Lee showing embossed patterns for seat designs in *The Straits Times*, 11 June 1955 (Courtesy of Ganesh Kolandaveloo).
5. Ligton bentwood chair, manufactured by Ligna. Advertisement by Lim Teck Lee Co. Ltd. in the *Singapore Standard*, 18 February 1956 (Courtesy of Ganesh Kolandaveloo).



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alised a Thonet factory in Bystřice pod Hostýnem in 1946. One particular design can even be traced back to Model No. 98 from Thonet's 1902 catalogue. Designed in the Vienna Secession (or Austrian Art Deco) style, its elegantly proportioned spindle-back design offered comfort, while a moulded plywood seat boasted embossed art nouveau patterns.

### IN THE AGE OF PLASTIC

With the introduction of plastic monobloc chairs to kopitiam and other local eateries in the 1980s, the visibility of bentwood chairs plummeted. Their replacements were both lightweight and easily stackable, allowing shop-owners to quickly clear street-side and indoor dining areas after closing time. Further, plastic was practically impervious to Penang's harsh tropical climate, and was less easily damaged than wooden furniture, especially those with rattan seats! Their unmatched durability and affordability proved serious competition, and kopitiam began transitioning away from their decades-old decaying and broken bentwood chairs.

This marked a new era in kopitiam ambience. However, the bentwood chair remains its defining essence in the popular imagination, as their ubiquity in "nostalgic" kopitiam or vintage-themed eateries (such as Oriental Kopi and Old Town White Coffee) shows. They have contributed to a renewed surge in demand for bentwood chairs, and local furniture manufacturers have recently started producing replicas made mostly of rubber wood.

As Mahen Bala writes: "chairs are never neutral. As indispensable as they are in our daily life, they are also intensely social and political objects. Their symbolic weight is so normalised it escapes attention."<sup>[4]</sup> These kopitiam chairs can be seen as a medium for democratising comfort,

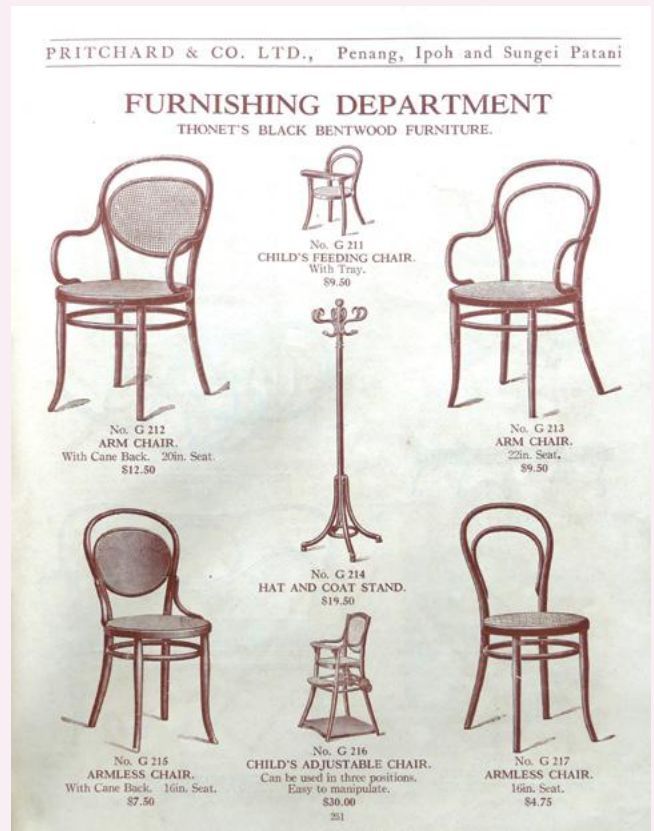
6. Pritchard's at Union Street, now a Maybank branch (Source: Langdon, *Pritchard's of Penang*, pic. 264).

7. Bentwood chair advertisement by Lim Teck Lee in *The Straits Times*, 29 August 1953 (Courtesy of Ganesh Kolandaveloo).

8. Men's Outfitting Department at Pritchard's (Source: Langdon, *Pritchard's of Penang*, pic. 213).

9. Endpaper of Pritchard's catalogue ca. 1925 (Source: Langdon, *Pritchard's of Penang*, pic. 8).

10. Bentwood chairs with fan-shaped backrests in the dining room of the E&O Hotel, 1928 (Courtesy of Ganesh Kolandaveloo).



modernity and some degree of luxury for all, whether in public spaces or private premises. More than just furniture, they embody Malaysia's—and Penang's—transnational cultural heritage in complex ways. When you next sit on an old bentwood chair, savouring your favourite kopitiam breakfast, spare a moment to ponder this fascinating background, and the various actors—whether Thonet, Pritchard's, Lim Teck Lee or various unnamed kopitiam entrepreneurs—whose unlikely intersections made this setting possible.

**\*Note:** Thanks to Helen Thonet of Thonet GmbH's authentication department, for answering some research questions and sharing historic catalogues: [https://hauspublikationen.mak.at/viewer/image/AC102/19/LOG\\_0020/](https://hauspublikationen.mak.at/viewer/image/AC102/19/LOG_0020/). Many thanks to Marcus Langdon for sharing photographs from the Robert Hussey Collection, as published in *Pritchard's of Penang: Enterprise, Secession, and Murder* (Entrepot Publishing, 2025) and Ganesh Kolandaveloo for sharing Lim Teck Lee's advertisements and useful historical photographs.



### ENDNOTES

- Several companies are descended from the original company (Thonet GmbH, Thonet Vienna, TON [Czech Republic] and Fameg [Poland]) and still operate today.
- Model No. 18 deserves special attention too. It is popularly known as the "South American chair" because of its commonality in that continent, according to the Boppard Museum.
- For a history of the company, see: Langdon, M. (2025) *Pritchard's of Penang: Enterprise, Secession, and Murder*. Entrepot Publishing (with photographs from the Robert Hussey Collection).

- Mahen Bala. "On the Spatial Politics of Sitting." *Sleeping Chairs* (exhibition), Pak Peng Building, 16–17 May 2026.



**LIM GUO JING** is a vintage enthusiast who documents built heritage and historical furniture. He weaves rattan seats as part of his furniture restoration process, and is a graphic designer by trade. Follow him on Instagram at @guo.lim.

# REVISITING THE ADAGIETTO: THE FOURTH MOVEMENT IN CLAY EXHIBITION

BY ERIC YEOH

**MUSIC AND VISUAL** arts share a profound symbiotic relationship, each continually inspiring the another. Composer Modest Mussorgsky, for example, was inspired by paintings to compose *Pictures at an Exhibition*, while visual artists have long used music as a muse to guide their creative processes. This conceptual linkage led to the Penang Pottery Club's (PPC) latest exhibition, *Adagietto: The Fourth Movement in Clay*, at Blank Canvas, which celebrated the club's 20th anniversary by examining how ceramics—like music—transcend language to stir our latent feelings.

## THE LOVE LETTER AS INSPIRATION

The PPC has come a long way since it was founded in 2006 by a small group of Japanese ceramicists who wanted to nurture a community for ceramic arts in George Town. Its first public exhibition, *Earthly Investigations*, held at Penang Institute in 2022, formally defined the club's *Dao Shang Shao* ("Island Firing") philosophy. This unique Zen-based movement creates a distinct, modern identity for Penang-style pottery by using local materials, both for the raw clay bodies and to fuel its dual gas- and wood-fired kilns.

The fourth movement from Austrian-Bohemian composer Gustav Mahler's Symphony No. 5, which was composed as a "love letter" during the courtship of his future wife, Alma Schindler, served as the core inspiration for this exhibition. Written without text, this movement is famous for its gentle, rolling harmonies of strings and harp. These melodies represent the breaths, pauses and air between speech, expressing emotions otherwise impossible to capture in words. Taking cues from Mahler's enigmatic piece, this exhibition brought

together five diverse artists whose experiments evoked specific emotions and moods using texture, glazing colours and the physical forms of both fired and unfired ceramics.

*Adagietto* demonstrated how clay, in the hands of skilled artists, can speak of complex relationships, abstract emotions and inner insecurities. Together, they can present the act of confronting one's truest, darkest self, while transforming inner turmoil into something beautiful. The exhibition invited viewers to reflect and draw deeply on their own experiences to find moments of shared vulnerability with the art pieces.

## MATURING FROM STUDENTS TO ARTISTS

The featured artists all started as students of PPC's lead ceramicist, Ooi Woi Leong (who has served since 2017), before becoming members of the club. They eventually became friends and collaborators in Penang's art scene. A consummate potter, Woi Leong trained under Japanese ceramicist Okamoto Yasuo. For *Adagietto*, Woi Leong presented two pieces: "Heading North" draws inspiration from migratory bird formations in flight, exploring the idea of home as a state of mind, rather than a physical place while "Unspeakable" features poetry written in graphite on clay, inspired by stories that his father shared with him, particularly regarding China's 1911 Second Guangzhou Uprising, a failed armed revolt against the ruling Qing Dynasty preceding the successful Xinhai Revolution. These retellings of historical narratives form the foundational bond that he shared with his father.

Forrest Wong, another member of PPC, co-founded P(art)Y LAB in 2016. By blending personal history and cultural narratives, he challenges conventional artistic boundaries, and was a 2019 finalist for Malaysia's Bakat Muda Sezaman (Young Contemporaries) Award. Forrest presented "Gradually", a series of clay figures arranged inside, outside and around the gallery. Drawing from the ancient mythological figure of Nüwa, who created humanity from clay, this work reflects humanity's primordial relationship with the earth. His second artwork, "Slowly", initially consisted of various mounds of soil. As the soil dried, the mounds cracked and detached from the floor, illustrating how the body and its surroundings are never permanent, but continuously transforming over time: a concept that he underscored by using lit and unlit candles to indicate its passage.

What began as a weekend hobby while working as an interior designer became Hong Jing's starting point for working with clay. For her, pottery has grown from a side project into a meaningful vocation.



## CAPTIONS

1. "Heading North" by Ooi Woi Leong.
2. The opening ceremony featuring Mahler's eponymous piece playing in the background.
3. Guests mingling with the artists at the opening ceremony.
4. The interactive "Colour Strata" piece by Oscar Ang.
5. "Gradually" by Forrest Wong.



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Her four pieces in this exhibition (“Prelude—Peeping”, “In Between—A Close Call”, “In Between—By the Back Door”, and “The Finale—Jumping Back In”) are complex structures made from meticulously hand-woven slices of clay. Using local clay in its original colour, Jing utilised oxides as a medium to explore the gradual transition from light to darkness. Jing shared that working with her hands allows her to express creativity and imagination, guiding her pieces with a balance of aesthetics, form and function, laced with a hint of playfulness.

Oscar Ang established his own studio, Toki Kobo Pottery, in Bukit Mertajam in 2024. His piece, “Colour Strata”, was inspired by the rock cairns which he observed during his travels. Attempting to imagine the emotional states of the people who created those cairns, he experimented with musical reinterpretation by replacing notes and chords with colours, while exchanging melodies for compositions of stacked coloured stones. As an interactive artwork, subsequent public engagement indirectly revealed the emotional states of audience members through the specific colour-and-stone combinations they created during the exhibition.

Ch’ng Joo Pyin, a long-time PPC member and full-time artist in the *Dao Shang Shao* movement, previously participated in *Earthly Investigations* alongside Woi Leong. Now, she contributed two works, both of which deal with loneliness, isolation and her personal insecurities as a full-time artist. “The Greatest Distance” features several framed pairs of fowl-shaped sculptures, indicating that things are not always what they appear to be, while “Behind the Door” consists of two ceramic houses, each exaggerating their differences through shape, style and placement to project her artistic insecurities into acts of physical creation.

#### THE ROLE OF THE CURATORS

The involvement of Singaporean co-curators Yu Ke Dong and Goh Cheng Hao in *Adagietto* was serendipitous, a classic case of being in the right place at the right time. Their involvement in a previous art project, *Nine Chairs* by Singaporean artist John Clang (See *Penang Monthly*, July 2026), led to a chance conversation with Woi Leong, who was visiting this installation. Woi Leong was then looking for fresh perspectives to help curate PPC’s second public exhibition. Eager to avoid a conventional showcase of standard pottery wares, his efforts to bring the two young Singaporeans aboard as co-curators were crucial to *Adagietto*’s success. Ke Dong, an art writer and researcher specialising in contemporary Southeast Asian art, recently graduated with a double-major in English Literature

6. “The Greatest Distance” by Ch’ng Joo Pyin.

7. “Behind the Door” by Ch’ng Joo Pyin.

8. The group behind the exhibition. From left to right: Oscar Ang, Hong Jin, Ch’ng Joo Pyin, Forrest Wong, Ooi Woi Leong, Goh Cheng Hao and Yu Ke Dong (Source: PPC).



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and Art History from Nanyang Technological University, while Cheng Hao, a writer-curator, researches text and redaction in contemporary Southeast Asian visual culture. Both co-curators shared that they had a wonderful experience despite the logistical challenges involved. Group and one-to-one sessions took place entirely online, meaning that the team only met physically *once* before the exhibition opened! Regardless, Ke Dong and Cheng Hao hope to continue collaborating with Penang’s vibrant arts community in the future.

Overall, *Adagietto* was both captivating and refreshingly contemporary, proving that clay as a medium—much like music—transcends words to leave a lasting emotional impact. Ultimately, the exhibition embodied the original ethos of Mahler’s piece: that in the face of our daily struggle to exist, humanity must continue believing in the possibilities of beauty, truth and love.

*\*Note: Adagietto: The Fourth Movement in Clay was held from 22–31 May at Blank Canvas.*

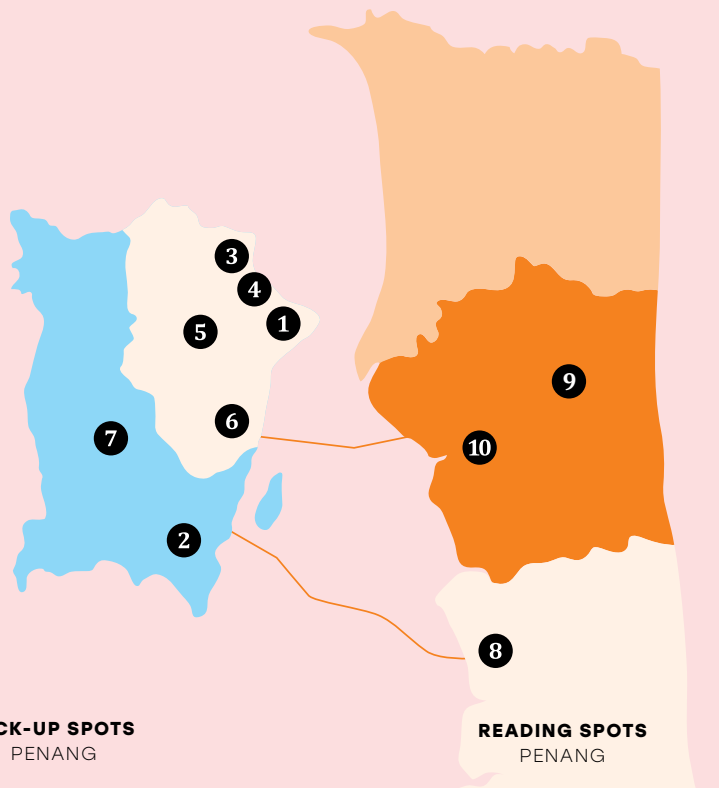


An engineer by profession, **ERIC YEOH** is a Penangite who is passionate about Penang and its arts scene. He is also a keen photographer who enjoys uncovering new attractions in and out of Penang.



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# HERE'S WHERE YOU CAN FIND PENANG MONTHLY



## PICK-UP SPOTS KL/SELANGOR

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

## PICK-UP SPOTS PENANG

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

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

## READING SPOTS PENANG

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



## WORKING TODAY FOR TOMORROW

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

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

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

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

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

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



**PBA**  
Perbadanan Bekalan Air  
Pulau Pinang Sdn Bhd  
199901001061 (475961-X)

Memenuhi segala keperluan bekalan air anda  
Meeting all your water supply needs

PENANG  
2030