

PENANG MONTHLY

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PENANG'S HERITAGE BRANDS

COVER STORY
THE HUMAN
LEGACY BEHIND
PENANG'S
HERITAGE BRANDS

FEATURE
THE MIGHTY
CHANG: VARIATIONS
OF THE CHINESE
WRAPPED GLUTINOUS
RICE DUMPLING

LEST WE FORGET
A QUESTION
OF DECENCY:
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COVER STORY

8

THE HUMAN LEGACY BEHIND PENANG'S HERITAGE BRANDS

**EDITORIAL**The Inclusive Ownership of
Penang and its Paradoxes

4

FEATUREPhoenix Press Rising:
Publishing as a Creative Industry

14

FEATUREBuilt to Last: Lessons to
Learn from Penang's
Many Heritage Brands

6

FEATUREPenang as a Heritage
Linguistic System

16

FEATURE

18

DIVERSITY IN EDUCATION

THE PROMINENCE OF
PENANG'S HERITAGE
PRIVATE SCHOOLS



FEATURE
Managing the Times:
Businesses Evolve to Thrive

22

PENANG PROFILE
Speaking of CHT... on Penang
Seizing the Moment and Breaking
from Industrial Silos

30



**So, *what* makes a brand
a heritage brand, and how
has it endured?"**

**—TONY YEOH IN
THE HUMAN LEGACY BEHIND
PENANG'S HERITAGE BRANDS**

**FEATURE
24**

A REPUTATION FOR STYLE SUSTAINED BY HERITAGE BRANDS



**LEST WE FORGET
34**

A QUESTION OF DECENCY TWO NUDE MEN AND THE PENANG SWIMMING CLUB

**FEATURE
26**

THE MIGHTY **CHANG**

VARIATIONS
OF THE CHINESE
WRAPPED
GLUTINOUS
RICE DUMPLING



FEATURE 44
A Watery Conundrum:
Improving Water Supply
Amidst Climate Change

FEATURE 47
Penang Hill Festival 2026:
Highlighting Natural
and Cultural Heritage

FEATURE 49
Designed by Penang: Cultivating
Local Champions for the Global
Semiconductor Value Chain

FEATURE 51
Urut-Urut: A Care
Partnering Journey

FOR ARTS' SAKE 54
Mai Cerita: A Student
Project with High
Intercultural Ambitions





THE INCLUSIVE OWNERSHIP OF PENANG AND ITS PARADOXES

BY OOI KEE BENG

PENANG IS FULL of inhabitants who were not born here. In fact, there is some oft-reiterated “test” to decide if someone not born on the island is truly a Penangite or not. So far can the triviality over identity go.

On a good day, I think of Penang as an inclusive, if ironic, entity, having a bit of everything. It has hill and sea, east and west, old and new. It is provincial yet cosmopolitan, a cultural hub yet national fringe, industrialised yet relying greatly on small family businesses (some of which have since become heritage brands explored in this issue). It has a relatively small population, but also a reputation for bad traffic jams. It attracts people from all parts of the world, yet is notorious for its brain drain of talent to foreign lands.

On a bad day, I think of Penang as being neither here nor there, neither this nor that. This could mean a fragile identity and weak self-understanding, or even a lack of vision and passion. But if that means that it is in a constant state of becoming, of transformation, of indefinability, then it is a good sign. It is adaptive and undefinable because it does not fear change.

We also hear how Penang—and Malaysia, for that matter—is full of potential. This is a back-handed compliment. Does it mean that Penang always underperforms, or that it does not control its own fate? “*Penang can be improved, and easily!*” is the general public conviction, and its political leaders should remain cognisant of this sentiment if they want to win votes.

Penang can be thought of as both island and mainland, port and settlement, sea and land. It is recognised by UNESCO for having a city with a famous entrepreneurial past as well as rich natural biodiversity.

But I would simply say that identity is ultimately a subjective matter. You are a Penangite if you think you are attached enough to belong to the place. No bureaucrat—or fellow Penangite, for that matter—can tell you that you are not a Penangite if you *feel* for the place, if you wish for more realisation of its potential, if you have joyfully experienced how welcoming it is of alien things, if you have seen how independent its inhabitants naturally are. How practical, how inclusive, how resilient. What matters, therefore, is your own sense of *psychological ownership*.

Penang is small enough, comprehensible enough, cultured enough, progressive enough, educated enough and worldly-wise enough for its inhabitants and long-term visitors to not only wish it well, but to care and own it enough, to suffer its lack of perfection. And moan over it. When you feel that deeply, then you have become a Penangite. Your suggestions might not be practical, but that should not stop you from suggesting solutions for Penang’s lack of perfection.

This philosophical, psychological and personal sense of ownership is an interesting phenomenon. It is a claim of cultural ownership: a strong sense of agency, proactivity and responsibility for the place. It means unease over the practically criminal fact that Penang is not yet a better place than it is now. Such a crime may be committed by neglect, incompetence or a lack of care or vision, or even maliciously: driven perhaps by essentialist contestations over identity.

What makes a person a Penangite is not a question of one’s place of birth or residence, or how much of an economic stake they have in the state—that is, *material ownership*—but is instead heavily tied to this psychological sense of ownership: whether they care about the place or not.

Caring about Penang, in turn, means that one has deeply felt its uniqueness, which consequently leads to an understanding of the existential dangers and cultural pressures that Penang always confronts. Knowing Penang’s innate and fragile qualities also means being cognisant of where such threats come from, whether internal or external.

Penang’s identity is not a domestic matter alone. If anything, Penang is international. It belongs to the world, a rare (generally) positive leftover of colonialism and globalism, of the 20th-century fall of empires, of the sufferings of starving millions, of ideological battles fought on lands and seas.

Something good, some deep humanitarian logic, has had to come out of all that bad stuff. To a pertinent extent, that something is little Penang. Anarchistic and chaotic, yet welcoming and resilient. If you own that sense, if you feel that in your gut about Penang, then you are a Penangite.



LESSONS TO LEARN FROM PENANG'S MANY HERITAGE BRANDS

BY
**BERNARD
CHEAH**

"WHAT SHOULD WE eat once we arrive in Penang?"

Every Penangite has fielded this question, and their response is always a list delivered with conviction. But lists signal more than personal preferences alone. They also identify brands so deeply embedded in Penang's collective identity that to miss them means not really experiencing Penang at all. The question worth asking is not which brands make the list, but *how* they get there, and *what* they do to stay.

Three branding principles from Penang's time-tested institutions provide universal take-home lessons for aspiring and established businesses alike.

BUILT TO LAST



EXPERIENCE COMPLETES THE PRODUCT

There is a persistent belief among business owners that if their products are good enough, then everything else follows. But heritage brands demonstrate that what customers remember, return for and tell others about is rarely the product alone, but also the experience it comes packaged in.

Penang Road Famous Teochew Chendul was founded in 1936 by Tan Teik Fuang, a Chinese migrant who pivoted from locksmithing to desserts after recognising that Penang's heat demanded ice-cold refreshment.^[1] His stall has remained at its original location along Lebu Keng Kwee, off Jalan Penang, for almost 90 years, but has since expanded into a nationwide franchise. Yet any Penangite will still describe the original location, with its long queues and Chendul that barely survives the hot journey from stall to table. The owners could have moved indoors, where air-conditioning is available, but did not. Whether instinctively or by design, the outdoor setting, with its controlled chaos, became part of the product rather than an inconvenience to access.

Ghee Hiang, founded in 1856 and widely regarded as one of Penang's oldest brands, offers a parallel lesson. Its Tau Sar Pneh recipe has not changed, while its logo has remained the same since 1926. When the brand renovated its Lebu Pantai outlet, the design direction deliberately evoked a late-19th-century Straits Settlement shophouse. Step inside, and the environment communicates the brand's story before you purchase a single item. As executive director Ch'ng Huck Theng once said: "Some things have to evolve and some things have to stay." What stays is the experience of purchasing the product, and what evolves are the channels of communication. Customers do not post photographs of Tau Sar Pneh on a plate, but share their trip to Ghee Hiang with others.

The lesson here is not to manufacture queues or simulate heritage. It is to be deliberate about every touchpoint—from physical space to packaging, from waiting in line to the moment of handover. Experience is not what happens after a product is sold, but emerges around and is designed alongside the product.

NON-NEGOTIABLES DEFINE THE BRAND

Every enduring brand has a set of principles that it will not abandon, where values are so closely tied to identity that any compromise renders the brand unrecognisable. These are not mission statements in annual reports, but the decisions that brands repeatedly make under commercial pressure. They signal exactly who the brand is, and whom it is for.

The Eastern & Oriental (E&O) Hotel provides the clearest illustration of this principle. Founded in 1885 by the Sarkies brothers, luminaries such as Rudyard Kipling, Somerset Maugham and Charlie

Chaplin have stayed within its walls. In a 2019 press release, the E&O's management explicitly insisted upon some details when the property underwent renovation. The Java tree would stay. The manual lift would stay. The dome and cannons would stay. These were not merely aesthetic choices, but defining acts of brand-consolidation.^[2] The press release was also a declaration that some things were not available for commercial negotiation. Today, stays in the Heritage Wing begin at RM1,286 per night. The price of entry is itself non-negotiable, signalling that the E&O is not competing in terms of accessibility. Rather, it is delivering an experience so exclusive that only a particular kind of guest would seek it out. This clarity of positioning is precisely what has kept the E&O relevant for over 140 years.

Then there is Him Heang, established in 1948 and still operating from a single outlet on Jalan Burma. It has no agents, satellite stores or franchisees in an era when scalability is treated as the primary marker of business success. But Him Heang's refusal to expand is itself a brand strategy, where scarcity is non-negotiable. Rather than a limitation, it is the brand's selling point. This then begs the question of what a business should refuse to change. The answer to this question may lead to the beginning of a distinct brand identity.

THE COMMUNITY BECOMES THE BRAND

Penang's most durable brands share a common characteristic. At a certain point in their history, they stopped being just businesses, and actually became part of their community's identity, which then carried the brand forward without being asked, paid, or even aware that it was doing this at all.

Hameediyah Restaurant has occupied the same address on Lebu Campbell since 1907, when its founder, Mohamed Thamby Rawther, a spice trader from Tamil Nadu, began selling Nasi Kandar, hawking rice and curries balanced on a shoulder pole to dock workers at Weld Quay. But what sustained Hameediyah across seven generations is not just the family's commitment to the craft or a century's worth of unchanged recipes. It is the community of customers who keep coming back, bringing others with them. A long trail of customers is a common sight outside Hameediyah, both on ordinary days and during peak seasons. Every person in the queue is also an advertisement that no agency can design.

Even Penang's schools operate similarly, in their reliance on alumni networks for longevity. St Xavier's Institution (est. 1852) was bombed at the end of the Japanese Occupation but was then rebuilt, while Chung Ling High School (est. 1917) remains Southeast Asia's oldest surviving Chinese high school. These institutions did not build alumni networks as a retention strategy. Rather, such



networks emerged because a shared schooling experience became a permanent part of how former students identified themselves. For example, when a former Xavierian introduces themselves at a business event, their school is part of that introduction.

WHAT CAN GROWING BRANDS LEARN?

None of the businesses examined here set out to become heritage brands. They set out to achieve more quotidian goals: to serve customers, hold themselves to particular standards and survive year-on-year. Their heritage was a by-product of their brands' consistency, clarity and community.

Mei Tan is a second-generation leader of Asia Green Group and co-founder of Innovatif Plus, a platform built to help next-generation family business leaders carry their legacies forward. She described how these leaders did not fear failure, but welcomed change. "If we don't innovate, the whole ship is going to sink." Her answer to this challenge is the same one that many of Penang's heritage brands have instinctively arrived at: keep values, change methods.

"We are the same brand, but better," remarked Mei. A brand's identity is not merely what a founder built. It is why they built it, and whether subsequent generations understand the distinction well enough to honour its legacy. This is a lesson that emerging brands can learn too.

CAPTIONS

1. The E&O Hotel along Lebu Farquhar. As a testament to its enduring allure and prestige, the E&O's exclusive old-world charm made it one of the filming spots for the *Crazy Rich Asians* movie.
2. As the afternoon sun hits its peak, a long line stretches down Lebu Keng Kwee, all clamouring for a bowl of Teochew Chendul.

ENDNOTES

1. Hakem Hassan. (2023). "How Penang Chendul started as a roadside stall 87 yrs ago & grew to 30 outlets in M'sia." *Vulcan Post*.

2. E&O Hotel. (2019). "History Lives on at E&O Hotel" (press release).



BERNARD CHEAH is a brand marketer, ICF coach and soon-to-be HRD Corp trainer who listens between the lines to uncover the unspoken stories within people, brands and the spaces in between.

THE
HUMAN LEGACY
BEHIND
**PENANG'S
HERITAGE BRANDS**



BY
TONY YEOH

AGAINST THE MORNING light filtering through the metal arch at Lebuhr Campbell, once George Town's commercial spine, the street stirs into motion. Shutters rise unevenly, metal gates scraping open with habitual reluctance, while cars edge into narrow parking spaces. The day begins with these small, fragmentary acts of preparation by the famed heritage brands on this street. But not all of them have survived to this day. The shutters of the Kimnovak school uniform store that operated along Jalan Magazine are permanently closed, while some of Penang's oldest names have already disappeared without leaving records behind. What still opens today is not guaranteed survival, but is, in fact, being tested daily.

The difference between survival and closure hinges on a more nuanced understanding of what "branding" means. It is not merely image or communication, but also consistency in fulfilling expectations. By thinking of a brand as a set of expectations to be repeatedly met under evolving conditions, a heritage brand should be considered less in terms of its longevity, but in terms of *inheritance*, *interpretation* and *legibility* instead. So, *what* makes a brand a heritage brand, and *how* has it endured?





A LIVING TAPESTRY OF ENTERPRISE

A walk along Lebuhr Campbell offers a good starting place to answer this question. A shared feature is its brands' deep connection to craftsmanship. Be it making jewellery or blending herbal remedies, they are custodians of specialised knowledge, passed down through generations. Names such as Woo Hing, Nam Loong and HABIB continue to anchor the trade in watches and jewellery, their presence signalling certainty rather than novelty. Old medical halls, including Yin Oi Tong (est. 1796), were once a refuge for migrant labourers confronting opium addiction, illness and the vicissitudes of physical work.

Traditional foods have become brands too. Tourists queue patiently for Kaya Toast at Toh Soon Café, a narrow alley off the main street humming as orders are called, where bread is flipped over charcoal and coffee poured with a practised tempo. Every unhurried movement carries the weight of refined repetition. Meanwhile, Hameediyah Restaurant's kitchen is already suffused with the aroma of spices long before the lunch crowd gathers. A pot's contents are tasted, paused over and instinctively adjusted. There are no written cooking instructions; rather, every stir and simmer is orchestrated by memory. Here, subjective judgments and small acts of calibration matter more than speed. This ritual has been repeated daily for generations, separating true endurance from mere continuity. It is in these unnoticed, non-standardised acts that heritage lives.

These are also oftentimes family-run enterprises that have absorbed disruptions, adapted repeatedly and remained embedded in the local economy across generations. It is this human aspect of brands that led me to write *Heritage Brands of Penang*, launched in April. My aim was not nostalgic reflection, but to document what was at risk of being lost and to understand why some brands endure while others—oftentimes just as established—quietly disappear. How is endurance maintained under pressure? How does inheritance become more than just a symbol of continuity, by reflecting an ongoing act of adjustment? How do brands remain recognisable without losing coherence, even as business conditions change?



[Some of Penang's oldest names have already disappeared without leaving records behind. What still opens today is not guaranteed survival, but is, in fact, being tested daily.]

FROM ENTREPÔT TO INDUSTRY

Penang is often described in a very different register today: as a node in the global semiconductor supply chain, it is embedded in one of the world's most strategically significant industries. Its centrality is often invoked in discussions of resilience, geopolitical rivalry and technological sovereignty. But how it acquired this status, in historical terms, is far from self-evident. Starting with the establishment of the free port in 1786, Penang's early economy was shaped by maritime trade, migration and the circulation of goods along shipping routes. Being an entrepôt, it was an intermediary, not a producer. Goods merely passed through and value was facilitated, rather than manufactured.

The population that sustained this system was equally fluid. Traders, labourers and merchants from the Middle East, India, China and the Malay World arrived with little formal capital, but they had the connections, resilience and willingness to operate amidst uncertainty. Despite limited literacy and technical skill, their drive to survive and trade wove together a dense tapestry of cultures defined by their own networks, customs and commercial instincts. Mutual tolerance and accommodation were not ideological values, but practical ones rooted in exchange. To live, one had to trade. To trade, one had to adapt.

For nearly two centuries, this system endured, until the loss of Penang's free port status in 1969. The removal of the system that once sustained Penang's economy forced a rapid reorientation towards export-oriented manufacturing, marking a structural rupture in its economy. What followed was not gradual evolution, but accelerated adaptation. Industrial estates were developed, foreign investment was courted and labour was retrained. By many measures, this transition to industrial prowess, often attributed to the leadership of the then-Chief Minister Lim Chong Eu, was successful. Penang became embedded in global electronics production, and over time, the semiconductor supply chain.

Yet the more I return to this narrative, the less complete it appears. Beneath the language of industrial policy, capital flows and multinational invest-



ment, lies a slower, more durable continuity. It is carried not only by institutions, but also people: specifically, family-run enterprises, like those seen on Lebuhr Campbell. In the focus on modernisation, this quieter dimension is easily overlooked. Yet here, the habits that sustain trust—incremental endurance, devotion to craft and a long view of value extending beyond immediate returns—remain vibrant and rooted in Penang’s trading culture. Rather than merely cataloguing longstanding businesses, *Heritage Brands* also became an analysis of human endurance, cultural negotiation and entrepreneurial imagination. These are stories underpinning the broader arc of Penang’s economic transformation.

business is no longer about surviving, but maintaining an established system, sometimes without always understanding the initial conditions that gave rise to it.

Consider these examples. At Minah Restaurant, a grandson, Danial, learns unwritten recipes through observation and repetition. At Ghee Hiang, consistency depends on a standard that partly escapes formal measurement, anchored instead in memory. At Yin Oi Tong, inherited practices coexist with modern frameworks of documentation and regulation. The difference between adjustment and deviation in each business is not recorded, but experienced in ways that cannot be fully communicated. It can only be approximated through practice and correction. A younger hand may follow the



By thinking of a brand as a set of expectations to be repeatedly met under evolving conditions, a heritage brand should be considered less in terms of its longevity, but in terms of inheritance, interpretation and legibility instead.”



INHERITANCE AS A TEST OF INTERPRETATION

If continuity is the visible outcome of a brand’s longevity, then succession is where it is tested. Across many of the businesses I encountered, survival was no longer the central issue. Rather, it was whether or not these enterprises could retain their core identity under changing sets of conditions, with different generations at the helm, often managing competing familial expectations from within.

There is a longstanding notion in Chinese culture, “*fu bu guo san dai*” (富不过三代), which holds that wealth rarely endures beyond three generations. It is frequently evoked as a warning that what is built through effort in one generation may be diluted by comfort in the next, and lost by the third. In Penang, this pattern is not unfamiliar. But the reason is less about squandered wealth and complacency, and more about *transmission challenges*. I would argue that the first generation builds out of necessity, by doing the thing they know best. Decision-making is immediate, practical and rarely documented. The second generation inherits not only the business, but also the discipline required to sustain it, often formalising what was once instinctive. By the third generation, running the

same steps, yet produce something slightly different. These variations often go unnoticed but, accumulated over time, they alter the final outcome. At Lingham’s Chili Sauce, scale introduces another complication. A coherent identity must be maintained across space, a difficult challenge where industrial systems replace instinct, and even minor deviations are magnified.

In each case, succession is not simply a matter of transferring ownership. It is a test of interpretation or judgment. The so-called “three-generation problem” is not inevitable, but represents an emergent structural issue when the underlying logic of the business is no longer visible to its inheritors. Repetition becomes routine, and change is introduced without clarity over what must be retained. Without adaptation, continuity alone reduces a brand to curious relic rather than living enterprise. Even continuity becomes fragile when what is inherited is not written down. If a brand cannot be clearly understood, then its strength cannot be faithfully transmitted. Failure occurs not because a business lacks resources, but because it loses clarity about its very identity. This fragility, however, rarely announces itself, but emerges instead through small, operational moments.



5

This is where heritage brands face their most difficult decisions. To preserve too rigidly is to risk irrelevance, but to innovate too freely is to risk dilution. Between both extremes lies the narrow path that every heritage brand must tread. Pivot and innovate they must, but never at the expense of the invisible threads holding their identity together. Once broken, a business may continue, but it is no longer the same brand. The most enduring names understand this problem instinctively. Change is introduced not as rupture, but as refinement. A new offering sits alongside a time-honoured staple. A digital presence extends rather than replaces the familiarity of the shopfront. Even as the tools evolve, touch remains recognisable. Because what customers return for is neither novelty nor tradition, but the quiet assurance that whatever changes there have been, the essence of a brand still holds.

But what, exactly, is being handed down? A recipe or standard? A product or principle? A name or discipline? The answer is rarely stated, but it determines whether a business continues as one brand, or morphs into something else entirely.

TOWARDS LEGIBILITY AMIDST CONSTRAINTS

In contemporary terms, branding is often associated with differentiation, for example, how a business positions, communicates and distinguishes itself. But for heritage brands, there is a different logic at play: branding is how a business becomes legible. *Succession* determines whether or not a business survives, but *interpretation* then decides if it remains *legible* as a brand.

For Moh Teng Pheow Nyonya Koay, Thien Cheong Popo Muruku Ikan and Presgrave & Matthews, their brands are not articulated through slogans or campaigns, but enacted through the everyday maintenance of consistency, trust and alignment between product and memory. They were formed through consistent work in building emotional connections and abiding core values. However, recognition as a brand can become a distinct constraint: can it change without becoming something else entirely? A brand built on novelty can reinvent itself, but one built upon continuity cannot. Change must be calibrated, and innovation must operate within often-implicit boundaries. A business may expand, modernise or scale-up, but only to the extent that it remains legible and coherent to those who already recognise it.

For the Penang market, this distinction matters. Its modern economy may be defined, in part, by innovation, through its integration into global systems of semiconductors, manufacturing and supply chains which reward speed, scale and efficiency. But heritage brands operate on a different logic, by rewarding consistency, memory and trust instead. The former delivers growth, while the latter delivers stability. As Penang marks its 240th anniversary, it is important to remember that its modern identity, often framed in terms of industrial capability and global relevance, rests upon a longer foundation built not by factories, but by families. Their pioneer businesses were not designed to scale-up globally, but to survive locally. Reputation had been accumulated slowly but can be lost quickly; their continuity has depended not on systems, but on interpersonal ties.

This foundation still lies below Penang's industrial façade. The question is whether the discipline of character that allowed so many enterprises to endure can be emulated today. Many familial business stories have never been formally recorded, and some will never be. *Heritage Brands* captures some of them while they can still be committed to paper for instruction. What is at stake is not just memory, but unwritten knowledge for a changing world. For brands to stay iconic, their legacies require constant innovation to retain community relevance and trust.

***Note:** *Heritage Brands of Penang* (George Town: Penang Institute, 2026) can be purchased here: <https://www.penangmonthly.com/shop/>.

CAPTIONS

1. (Cover spread) Shops along Lebuhr Campbell.
2. Behind an unassuming alleyway off Jalan Chulia sits Moh Teng Pheow, famed for authentic Nyonya Kuih.
3. Toh Soon Café has been serving George Town's definitive breakfast since 1950.
4. A collection of optical glasses by The World Optical on display during the *Heritage Brands of Penang* book launch.
5. The very first HABIB store at 111 Pitt Street (now known as Jalan Masjid Kapitan Keling).
6. Established in 1907 on Lebuhr Campbell, Hameediyah holds the official crown as the oldest Nasi Kandar restaurant in Malaysia.



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DATO' TONY YEOH is a senior fellow at Penang Institute, editor of *Founder's Grit: Inspiring Life Stories of Engineering and Technology Entrepreneurs in Penang* and author of *Heritage Brands of Penang*.

FEATURE

PHOENIX PRESS RISING

**PUBLISHING
AS A CREATIVE
INDUSTRY**

BY LIM WAN PHING



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is a freelance writer
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has a short story col-
lection, *Two Figures
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THE SECOND WORLD WAR left Malayan cities ravaged, but like the legendary, indestructible phoenix, Penang strove to revive itself. Amidst that chaos, one of its oldest printers, The Phoenix Press, was born. The company was acquired from Toh Teow Poon by Tan Chin Boon in the early 1950s, and was recently featured in Tony Yeoh's *Heritage Brands of Penang*. A closer look at its storied history tells us much about print culture innovation and longevity, even in the digital age.

OF OMNIBUSES AND STEAMSHIPS

Although only incorporated in 1948, The Phoenix Press was already in existence, and originally had a British founder. Apparently, a Convent Light Street magazine was printed by it in 1937, according to second-generation owner, Tan Leh Sah. "We're an English press at heart, contrary to popular belief that we're a Chinese press because of the phoenix," said Tan, whose father bought the business because he wanted to settle down in Penang after being posted to Trang, Thailand, with the Lee Rubber Company.

Tan's father learnt the printing business from scratch, making friends with other press owners and investing early in machinery with some financial help from his wife. "Dad was quite a visionary," said Tan. "He struggled in the first few years but he quickly adapted, modernised and spotted many opportunities." One of these was printing bus tickets, which were all imported from England in the 1950s. "They came in bundles of ten, then hundreds, and were tied with twine and shipped here in wooden crates," recalled Tan. "Dad thought, 'Why can't we print them locally?'"

He discovered a way to do this, and the Kulim Baling Road Transport Company became his first customer. Later, Phoenix supplied bus tickets for all northern Malayan operators, including companies like Lim Seng Seng, Hin Bus, Penang Yellow Bus, Central Province Wellesley Transport

Company and even Taiping's Red Omnibus. It then expanded to other forms of documentation. "At one point, we were also well-known for printing all the port customs forms, land office forms and lawyer forms," Tan noted, citing clients like Diethlem & Co., Sandilands, Buttery & Co., Patterson, Simon & Co. and more. They tried their hand at newspaper printing too, but this venture was short-lived because it required almost non-stop operations.

As a teenager, Tan recalled helping out the family business with her three siblings. She did the banking, delivered goods ("one dozen pencils, two reams of paper"), sold newspapers on Persiaran Gurney and even worked overtime to print Penang Turf Club betting tickets, whose races were held every weekend. Tan recollected, "My father came from Lam Aun, or Nan'an, in Quanzhou, Fujian Province. My mother was born in Taiping. His dream back then, as he told it to my mother, was to make enough to have a bicycle, a radio and an attap house." How times have changed!

"Father always emphasised prudence and my mother was very thrifty and frugal. That was how we managed to survive financial crises throughout the decades. We're not the largest printer in Penang, but we are the most complete. Everything is done in-house, from pre-press with the designers to photography, plating and finishing." When Tan's father passed away in 1996, she left her career as a lawyer to run the family business. She and her nephew oversee day-to-day operations in the Lebuhraya Gereja shop and its Perai factory, which employ about 10 and 200 staff, respectively.

INVESTING IN MACHINERY

Today, Bangunan Phoenix is easily missed as one drives along Lebuhraya Gereja, passing by the unassuming shopfront with its mosaic-tiled façade, aluminium roller shutters and hand-painted signs ("Rubber Stamp made within hours"). Unbeknownst to passers-by, inside lie two vintage Heidelberg printing machines. Meanwhile, the 170,000ft² Perai location, a fully integrated and automated printing plant, houses new-generation machines like the BOBST Novacut 106ER for die-cutting and folding and the Speedmaster XL-106 for high-speed printing.

"When we started out, we used compositor machines, where letters were arranged one-by-one by hand," explained Tan. "We had three to four employees doing just that. Then came the linotype machines that could cast and print line-by-line. In the 1970s, we had the IBM Composers, and now we're in the era of digital printing." Tan attributes Phoenix's success to her father's visionary outlook, especially when it came to investing in machinery. "One of the costliest machines we bought in the 1980s was a Dr Hell colour separator from Germany. It cost us RM500,000, which was a big sum at the time, and needed to live in an air-conditioned room. We didn't even have air-conditioning for the staff back then!"

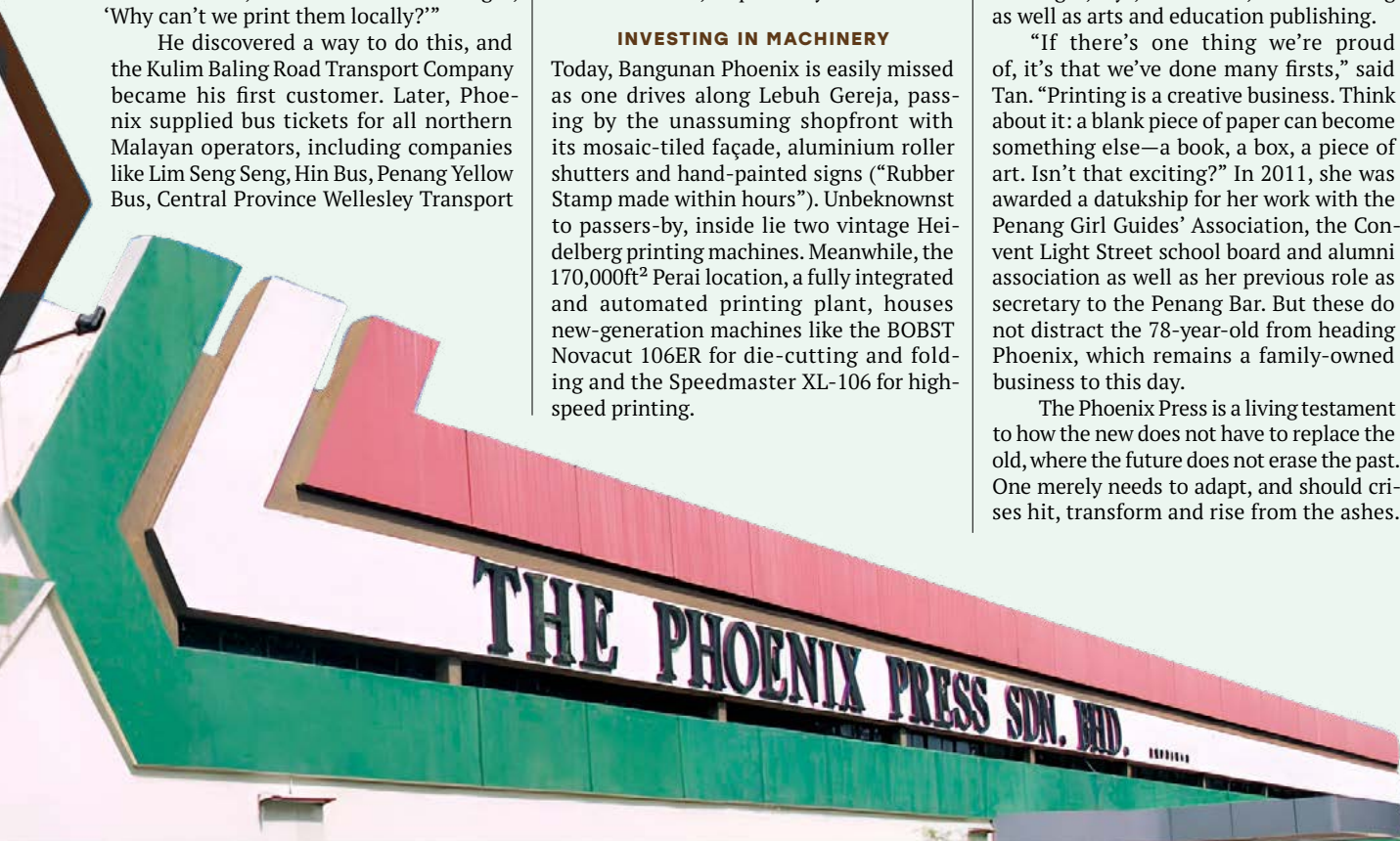
By then, Phoenix had bought over four other presses, including Georgetown Printers, and business continued to thrive with the development of the Free Trade Zone. The group established its Perai plant on a six-acre site, servicing the booming manufacturing sector for carton and packaging printing as well as cardboard manufacturing. Early clients included Bosch, Penang Electronics, Sony, Hewlett-Packard and the like.

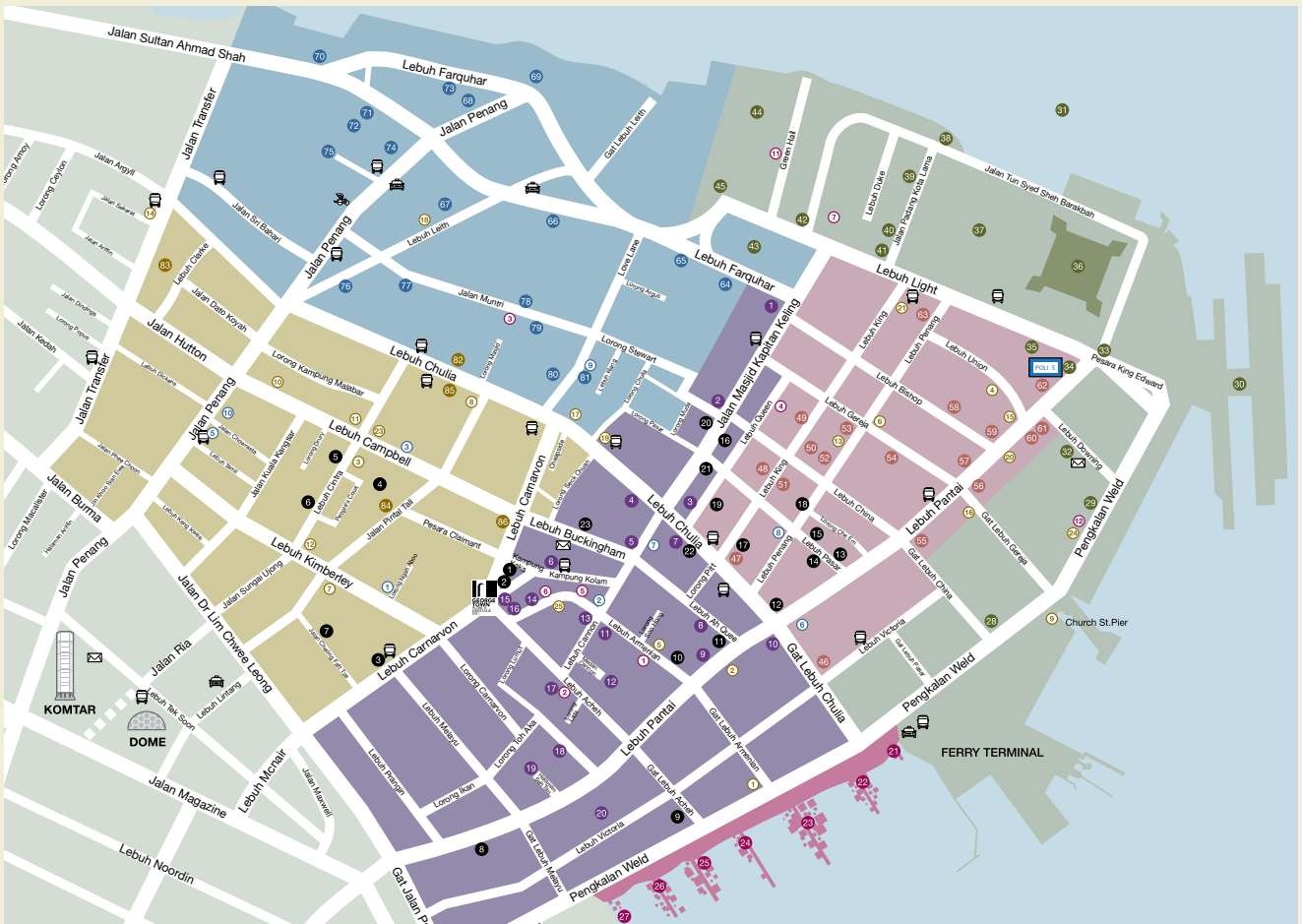
A BRIGHT FUTURE AHEAD

Although the business is rooted in its Malayan days, Tan is not one for nostalgia. There is work to be done and more machines to invest in. The days of steamships and British trading houses are over. Today, clients come from all parts of the globe—Europe, North America and Asia—and all sectors, including retail, food and beverages, toys, electronics, manufacturing as well as arts and education publishing.

"If there's one thing we're proud of, it's that we've done many firsts," said Tan. "Printing is a creative business. Think about it: a blank piece of paper can become something else—a book, a box, a piece of art. Isn't that exciting?" In 2011, she was awarded a datukship for her work with the Penang Girl Guides' Association, the Convent Light Street school board and alumni association as well as her previous role as secretary to the Penang Bar. But these do not distract the 78-year-old from heading Phoenix, which remains a family-owned business to this day.

The Phoenix Press is a living testament to how the new does not have to replace the old, where the future does not erase the past. One merely needs to adapt, and should crises hit, transform and rise from the ashes.





PENANG AS A HERITAGE LINGUISTIC SYSTEM

BY MIRIAM DEVAPRASANA



MIRIAM DEVAPRASANA is a dabbler in creative expressions and a budding researcher rooted in sensitivity, vulnerability, faith and human connection. Check out more of her writing on mdev16.wordpress.com.

Image: Historic City of George Town World Heritage Site
(Sourced from George Town World Heritage Incorporated).

DISCUSSIONS OF PENANG'S heritage often centre upon historic buildings, cultural festivals and legacy businesses, reflecting a way of thinking about heritage in terms of visibility and marketability. But how does *language* sustain diversity in heritage within the rhythms of everyday life? The 2003 UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage recognises language as a primary vehicle of intangible heritage within the domain of oral tradition and expression. In the George Town UNESCO World Heritage Site, this role is immediately apparent. Multilingualism is not simply a reflection of demographic diversity in the inner city, but actively shapes, and is shaped by, the city and its people.

LANGUAGING IN GEORGE TOWN

A closer look at language practices in the inner city during the post-Covid-19 period reveals how multilingualism is lived, negotiated and sustained amid ongoing urban change. It becomes clear that language is not simply present in the city, but is actively negotiated through urban life. Walking along Lebu Pantai provides an illustrative linguistic experience. Bahasa Melayu and Hokkien emerge near the Weld Quay food court, then English, Mandarin and Bahasa Melayu as you pass Whiteaways Arcade. Approaching the Little India arch, Tamil is heard more prominently, before English and Bahasa Melayu resurface towards Lebu Armenian and Lebu Acheh. By the time you reach Sia Boey, Hokkien has settled back in. Languages shift across short distances, responding to space, activity and social life. Their use is not uniform, but varies according to contexts, purposes, relationships and spatial conditions.

Even a single place holds multitudes. Visit Chowrasta Market in the daytime and you may find yourself moving between Hokkien, Cantonese, Bahasa Tanjong (George Town's unique creolised Malay language), Tamil and English, all depending on where you are standing and the speakers present (for example, vendors, customers and vloggers). It is precisely this complex fluidity that makes the inner city so distinctively multilingual. English also operates as a bridging language across ethnic groups, while heritage languages (so-called "vernaculars" or "mother tongues") are primarily sustained by intra-ethnic communication.

Social networks further reinforce these patterns. In familial, religious and workplace contexts, individuals embedded within dense community ties are likelier to maintain heritage language use in everyday interactions. Hokkien and Tamil are more present in informal, community-based settings such as religious spaces, markets and neighbourhoods, where repeated everyday exchange supports continuity. These tendencies are most visible in the inner city's Business District and its Enterprise and Leisure Zones, while patterns in other enclaves are less pronounced, likely reflecting stronger commercial and external pressures.

Urban space also plays a critical role in shaping language practices within the inner city. Different environments create changing conditions for interaction, and therefore varying linguistic outcomes. Places that encourage open and diverse social contact tend to support multilingualism more robustly, while highly standardised or specialised environments may narrow the range of languages in active use. Curiously, Bahasa Melayu occupies a variable position despite its formal institution as the national language. In particular

formal and institutional domains, such as some schools and workplaces, English functions as a shared medium. Bahasa Melayu is less consistently used in certain government-related contexts too, revealing a gap between language policy and everyday practice.

These observations neither emerged from a stable environment, nor do they currently exist in one. Across the inner city, various settings have steadily reshaped the conditions of everyday interaction. In spaces where vernacular languages once sculpted routine exchanges, newer commercial environments tend to favour more widely accessible languages like English, Mandarin and occasionally Bahasa Melayu. Open, permeable public spaces support interaction and linguistic diversity; enclosed, standardised ones tend to constrain both. Taken together, language practices emerge and evolve through ongoing negotiation, accommodation and lived experience in response to shifting urban conditions.

TAKING LANGUAGE SERIOUSLY

The shifting of streetscapes through gentrification have also transformed the resilience of heritage languages in the face of external pressures. Languages are not erased overnight, but the range of interactions—and therefore the speakers who keep heritage languages in everyday use—are quietly narrowed.

Efforts to sustain the visibility of George Town's heritage are important, but they are, by nature, event-driven and intermittent. Language heritage, being embedded in repeated, unremarkable interactions, generate moments that carry cultural and social practice, but are often the hardest form of heritage to protect. Recognising language as a vital part of Penang's heritage also means asking a harder question: are the conditions that support everyday multilingual life and heritage language use actually being sustained?

Here are some considerations across different levels of responsibility. At the level of *site management*, the linguistic environment should be treated as part of how heritage is assessed. At the level of *urban planning*, close attention should be paid to land use and tenancy mix. Overly specialised usage (for example, tourism or lifestyle consumption) tends to narrow the range of peoples and interactions within them. In contrast, mixed-use environments create the social density that keeps heritage languages in active use. At the level of *cultural institutions*, the presence of heritage languages in public-facing spaces should be taken seriously. Museums, galleries and audio-guided tours, for example, could also include widely spoken vernaculars like Hokkien and Tamil, posi-

tioned as equally central as Bahasa Melayu, English and Mandarin. Community-led programming, oral storytelling and inter-generational exchange deserve regular, substantive institutional support and funding to ensure their continued circulation.

Collaborations between government bodies, cultural organisations and non-governmental organisations could be strengthened by embedding heritage language maintenance in everyday institutions, including models such as community-based immersive education, multilingual public service provisions and structured partnerships between state agencies and civil society organisations. Such efforts could expand access to heritage languages beyond their immediate ethnic communities. They encourage broader linguistic participation and cross-cultural learning, while recognising and supporting the communities for whom these languages are a core part of cultural identity.

What might some examples look like? The "Speak Hokkien Campaign" is an example of on-site initiatives to reestablish and expand the use of Hokkien. On the digital front, the Ceritalah mobile application similarly bridges this gap, offering domestic and international tourists a way to learn and engage with local languages.

LANGUAGE AS A REPOSITORY OF LIVING HERITAGE

There is a question worth sitting with, as Penang continues to build an identity around its heritage status: what exactly is being conserved? If the languages animating this city are slowly edged out by the conditions that a certain metric of success creates, what remains is a city that looks like itself without quite being itself anymore. There is a need to shift our focus away from merely preserving form, to sustaining how the city is actually lived and experienced.

George Town's UNESCO status was granted in recognition of its cultural diversity embodied in living and built heritage. The word "living" is doing a great deal of work here. A city that speaks many languages is not simply one with an interesting history. It is still engaged in the act of *making meaning*: still arguing, joking, bargaining, praying and loving in the languages it inherited. This, too, deserves to be celebrated and protected.

***Note:** I acknowledge the Ministry of Higher Education's support through the Fundamental Research Grant Scheme (project code: FRGS/1/2019/SSI01/USM/02/2). These observations draw upon systematic fieldwork conducted as part of a 2021–22 study and subsequent informal site visits.

DIVERSITY IN EDUCATION

THE PROMINENCE OF PENANG'S HERITAGE PRIVATE SCHOOLS

BY
**CAROLYN
KHOR**

PENANG'S EDUCATION ECOSYSTEM is a highly interesting, diverse and colourful one. It is well known, no doubt, that Penang Free School was already established in 1816 as the first English-medium school in Southeast Asia. This article focuses on just three heritage private schools: Uplands, Dalat and Han Chiang. Collectively, their histories provide us with a glimpse of the educational fervour and commitment that Penang society has always possessed.





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THE INTERNATIONAL SCHOOL OF PENANG (UPLANDS)

Uplands, now known as the International School of Penang, was founded on 18 March 1955. Established by the Incorporated Society of Planters, it was first housed at the former Crag Hotel on Penang Hill (hence its name). Initially a boarding school for the children of British planters seeking safety and educational continuity during the turbulent Malayan Emergency, it only initially enrolled around 60 students.

As the plantation economy declined and the expatriate population shifted elsewhere, Uplands began admitting day students in 1976, and established a secondary school in 1977. Its relocation to Jalan Kelawai that year marked a transition from secluded boarding environment to a more accessible urban setting. By 1988, the school had consolidated its campus near Persiaran Gurney and adopted its current name, although students are still called “Uplanders” in memory of its origins.

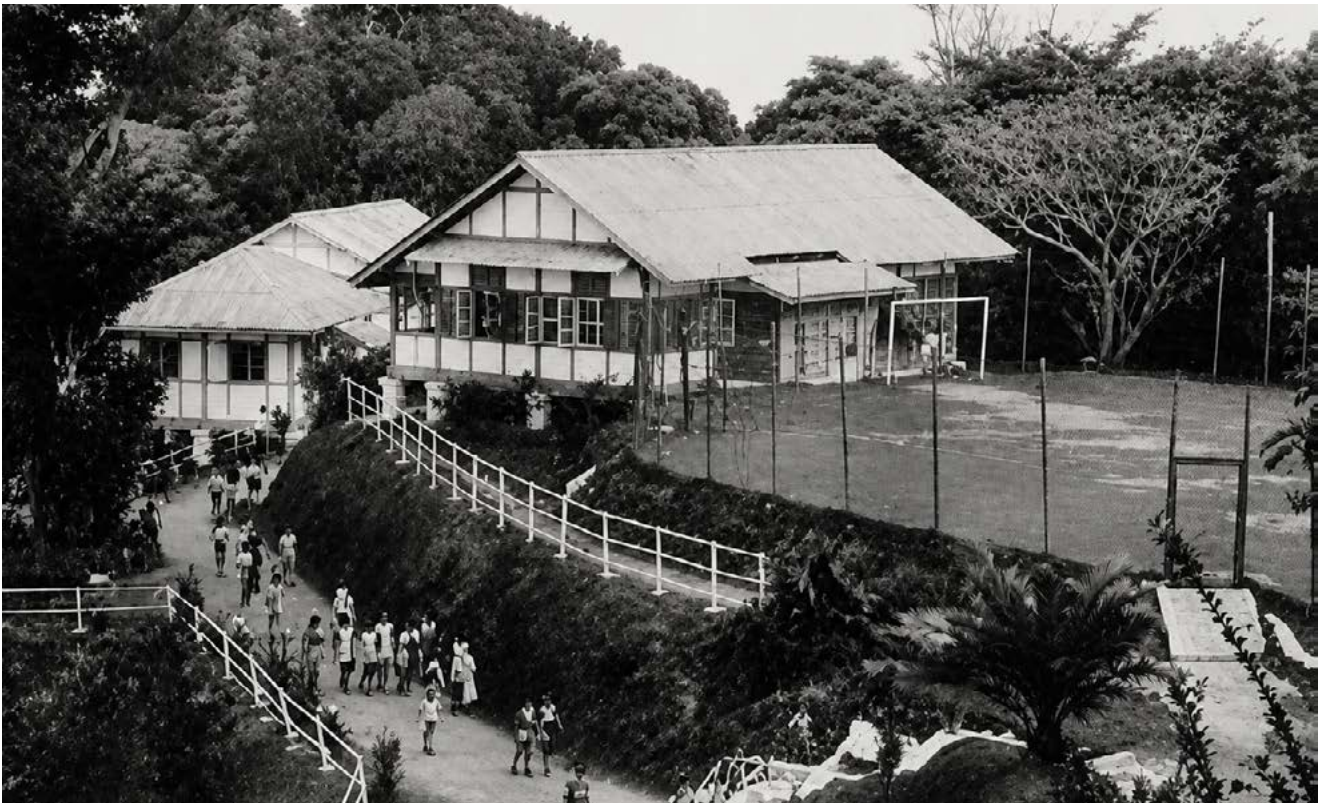
Following its Middle Years Programme accreditation in 2025, Uplands now offers the full International Baccalaureate continuum, from the primary years programme through to the diploma level, making it among a select group of schools in Malaysia providing a consistent international pathway. It is also authorised to offer the International General Certificate of Secondary Education (IGCSE), and is accredited by the Council of International Schools.

Head of School Marc Mesich noted that international education is no longer defined primarily by student nationality, but by the development of global competencies such as critical thinking, intercultural understanding and personal adaptability.

Uplands’ growing proportion of Malaysian students, Mesich observed, has created a more balanced environment where students benefit from a blend of global perspectives and local contexts; this mirrors broader changes in Malaysia, where an international education is becoming increasingly accessible to local families. Regardless, Malay is still taught as part of the curriculum (one hour weekly in primary, and three in secondary).

“Being an Uplander is not just about academic success, but about contributing to a supportive community and developing a global outlook,” said Mesich.

The school continues to evolve, exploring the use of artificial intelligence (AI) tools and experiential education, while maintaining its long heritage.



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DALAT INTERNATIONAL SCHOOL

Dalat arrived in Penang in 1971 as a result of displacement by the Vietnam War. Founded in 1929 in Da Lat, Vietnam, by the Christian and Missionary Alliance, the school provided a North American-style education for children of missionaries working across Indochina. For several decades, it served a community defined by religious mission and geography, until its disruption in 1965. On 16 April—Easter weekend—the US Embassy in Saigon notified staff that it could no longer guarantee the school's safety, giving Dalat 48 hours to pack up and leave. The librarian was permitted to choose 100 books for evacuation, while each student packed their own clothes, books, pillows and linens. Bicycles and pets were left behind. On Easter Sunday, a sunrise service was held, and the choir sang the cantata "The Cross Victorious", as planned. The following morning, US Army trucks arrived to take the entire student body to the airport, where four C-123 cargo planes carried them, along with eleven tonnes of belongings, to Bangkok.

Eight months later, the school resumed in Cameron Highlands, where it remained for six years. Each relocation was disorienting, yet the community held together. It was perhaps through this shared upheaval that Dalat's identity as a resilient, mission-driven institution was most durably shaped. In June 1971, Dalat relocated to Tanjung Bungah in Penang, occupying a former British military rest-and-recreation base. When it became an independent Christian school on 1 July 1999, Dalat established an inter-mission school board. In December 2001, the word "international" was appended to its name, reflecting a student body that had grown well beyond its founding community. A long-term lease was secured in 2016, allowing the beachside campus to develop into its current form. Today, the school has 735 students representing 23 countries, with its centennial approaching in 2029.

Its Biblical worldview remains at the core of its identity, said Joe Myohan Oh, the director of advancement. Boarding, once essential for missionary families, continues, but now for a broader group of international families. Dalat is accredited by four international bodies, including the Association of Christian Schools International and the Western Association of Schools and Colleges. Its graduates pursue higher education across the US, UK, Canada, Aus-



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tralia and parts of Asia, although Oh noted that post-secondary pathways have diversified in recent years, reflecting both global trends and a wider range of student backgrounds.

Malay is also offered across all grade levels. Oh explained: "The goal is not only language acquisition but also fostering cultural awareness, and helping students connect with the community in which they live."



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HAN CHIANG

Founded on 10 October 1919, Han Chiang began as the third Chinese independent school in Penang, established because the Teochew community had no school of its own. The Teochew Association had attempted to set one up, but lacked funds until philanthropist and businessman Lim Lean Teng provided the necessary donation. The school began beside the Han Chiang Temple on Chulia Street, which then exclusively served Teochew families.

Operations were interrupted during World War II, and when they resumed, rapid enrolment led Lim to donate a 33-acre site in 1950, enabling the establishment of Han Chiang High School. Its main late-Art Deco and early-Modern

building was fully operational by early-1952. In 1958, a life-size bronze statue of Lim was unveiled by Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman, and after Lim's death in 1963, the road leading to the school was renamed in his memory.

The Education Act 1961 pressured vernacular schools to convert into government or government-aided institutions. Han Chiang Primary School entered the national

cultural grounding, academic competence and international adaptability. "Our policy direction is not to prioritise one dimension over another, but to integrate all three," continued Hong. He described the institution as a tower of three schools with one philosophy. The Primary section provides a foundation within the national framework, and the High School builds upon this base with an independent curriculum (a dual-track of the Unified Examination Certificate and IGCSE at the upper-secondary level). At the top sits Han Chiang University College (status accorded in 2017), specialising in media and communication. A student can enter at age six and graduate at 22, without ever leaving the Han Chiang fold.

In 2009, Han Chiang High School was awarded a five-star rating by the Ministry of Education. The high school alone has approximately 2,000 students, with about one-third from abroad. Scholarships and fee subsidies ensure that cost does not exclude deserving students, a principle that has always been central to how Han Chiang understands its communal role.

The stories of these institutions offer only a small facet of Penang's diverse education ecosystem.



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system as a national-type Chinese school, and opened its doors to non-Teochew students in 1962. However, Han Chiang High School remained independent. For Chairman Hong Yeam Wah, the school "preserved its autonomy in curriculum design, language of instruction and educational philosophy". The cost was that it operated without government funding; however, Han Chiang's stance was popular, and it became one of the more prominent schools for Chinese education.

In 1978, Han Chiang introduced a journalism course, one of the first of its kind in Malaysian Chinese education. This grew into Han Chiang College (est. 1999) a not-for-profit institution set up to give students of modest means access to tertiary education. It would focus on

CAPTIONS

1. (Cover page) Staging the Primary Production by the Uplands primary school section.
2. Uplands offers a vibrant range of sports.
3. The former Crag Hotel on Penang Hill became the new Uplands primary boarding school in January 1955.
4. Dalat International's Harbor Hall.
5. Dalat students kayaking towards Pulau Tikus.
6. The gym at Dalat comes with a sea view.
7. International Festival at Uplands.

8. Han Chiang High School façade.
9. Bronze statue of Lim Lean Teng.
10. Han Chiang Primary School.



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



MANAGING THE TIMES BUSINESSES EVOLVE TO THRIVE

BY ONG SIOU WOON AND RACHEL YEOH

THE TERM “HERITAGE” is versatile. Cambridge Dictionary defines it as a feature belonging to the culture of a particular society; formed in the past and possessing historical importance. Its legal definition, however, varies from country to country. In India, the legal threshold of antiquity is for objects to be in existence for 100 years or more, and 75 years for manuscripts and documents. The UK sets 1700 as its “cut-off” date for historicity. In Malaysia, Australia and the US, the trigger for heritage assessment and/or listing is 50 years. All this differs from case to case. Heritage is what is accepted as such by members of the society in question.

In the case of Penang’s intangible commercial heritage, *how* do businesses, brands or trades evolve to become heritage-worthy? This is in essence not a legal question. Often, these must pass the test of time while maintaining unchanged core values from their founding and, most importantly, still thrive.

CAPTION

1. The communal area at Nadi Glamping Suites.

ENDNOTES

1. Pure Land Foundation. (2024, October 10). “Life Lessons: The secrets of business longevity.” See also a relevant Bank of Korea report, *Factors and Implications behind Longevity of Japanese Companies*.
2. BBC. (n.d.). “Bitesize: Butler’s life cycle model.”



ONG SIOU WOON

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



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.

QUANTIFYING LONGEVITY

A walk through the George Town World Heritage Site reveals businesses from a deep layer of commercial history. There is the Nanyang Bookstore, supplier for stationery and arts materials (est. 1931), Wah Heng Hang, a seed supplier (est. 1934) and even a third-generation Koay Teow Th’ng hawker stall. Now, in fact, the Penang Free Industrial Zone, which transformed the state’s economic fortunes, is already 54 years old.

In many cases, a level of local community appreciation is needed for certain intangible practices to be protected as heritage. France has taken extra effort to formally recognise certain trades through the Living Heritage Company award, in order to protect those considered essential to national identity. The Japanese government recognises companies that have been in business for over a century, which may then qualify for special local government tax breaks or preservation grants from some local governments. There are 5,586 companies aged over 200 years across 41 countries, of which 3,146 are located in Japan—indeed, more than 50,000 Japanese companies have been in operation for over 100 years—followed by Germany and Netherlands, with 837 and 222 companies, respectively.^[1] Notable examples of great longevity include Kongō Gumi (Japan), the world’s oldest company with 1,400 years of expertise in temple construction, and Banca Monte dei Paschi di Siena (Italy, est. 1472), the oldest continuously operating bank.

THE ART OF PIVOTING

Malaysia, unlike France and Japan, does not recognise longstanding businesses (we do not have such corporate longevity either), but we can look into possible ways for brands to survive the challenge of time.

The success of Japanese companies can be attributed to their emphases on core business, trust-based management, thorough craftsmanship, selection of successors beyond blood relations and conservative corporate management. However, these institutional virtues are not easily replicated elsewhere due to differences in culture and belief systems.

The Tourism Area Life Cycle (TALC) model has some utility in this context. Derived from the standard business product life cycle, it was formulated by Richard Butler in 1980 to explain how tourist destinations develop, mature and change over time. Each tourist destination's life cycle begins with the "exploration" phase and goes right up to a fifth phase: "stagnation". Here lies a crossroads: does a destination pivot towards "decline" or "rejuvenation"? Once it falls into decline, a phase of rediscovery is required to spark cultural and commercial rebirth.

Take for example AUTO-CITY (est. 2002), the first dedicated automotive-themed commercial park in Malaysia. It has evolved to fit the times. "If we didn't [pivot], we would have been left behind. We started with bringing in trendy new brands, readjusting our tenant mix to suit what the market was looking for. In the last couple of years, we decided to move towards turning our venue into an ecotourism destination," said Gini Teoh, the business development manager.

Ecotourism was something that Gini and her parents were passionate about, but it was difficult to implement since AUTO-CITY was located in an industrial zone. "We wanted to create something not just of value, but that carries meaning for the community here as well. It's not just tourism for the sake of tourism, but using tourism to create impactful change and improvement to the nature and community in the area." Their pivot has been well-celebrated, even though many were initially skeptical about its prospects.

The business has since launched Penang River Cruise on Juru River, where a two-hour journey on a wooden houseboat brings passengers through the nipah palm mangrove forest towards the Penang Strait. On this cruise, one can take in flora and fauna, learn how industrial waste was eradicated from the river, and try their hand at catching crabs and harvesting cockles with a dredge box. The management has also recently established a glamping site, Nadi Glamping Suites.

Outside of tourism, the TALC model also applies to other businesses. Take for example S.H. Chooi Fasteners, which has specialised in supplying components for assembly technology and factory automation for over five decades. At one point, the management had to ask itself, "are we still growing because we are evolving, or are we simply surviving on reputation and routine?"

As their business development manager, Wendy Tan, explained, the business eventually matured to a stage where growth no longer came naturally. "The industry became more competitive, more price-sensitive and increasingly globalised. Industrial components, especially, can easily become viewed as a commodity business. If you only compete on pricing, there will always be someone cheaper. That realisation was one of the biggest turning points for the company."

Instead of abandoning its roots, the business deepened them through partnerships, shifting from being a parts supplier into an integrated solution provider across multiple industrial sectors like railways, data centres and automotives. Internally, this rejuvenation required that newer generations of management blended the older generation's foundational grit and relationship-building with a contemporary focus on branding, speed and global standards.

"Even when products diversified, the heart of the business stayed the same: reliability, technical understanding and long-term trust with customers. People stay because they trust the people behind the company, not just the products," Wendy added.

REINVENTING FROM WITHIN

Both Gini and Wendy represent the next generation of leadership, driving family businesses forward by blending traditional foundations with modern strategies. This marks a transition from TALC's "consolidation" and "stagnation" stages to "rejuvenation": a tricky and sensitive season for companies if not done right. For Gini, family businesses carried an added emotional charge. Wendy highlighted how the biggest risks here are ego, communication and identity.

"In family businesses, the older generation often carries the emotional weight of sacrifice," said Wendy. "They built the company at a completely different time, often with fewer resources and far more uncertainty. Meanwhile, the younger generation enters with new ideas and different perspectives. Both may genuinely love the business, but express it very differently. I think people romanticise family businesses a lot, although there is no doubt emotional pressure comes with carrying something your family spent decades building."

Ultimately, the authority over transition involves conscious efforts from different generations to allow one to let go and another to step up. According to Gini, "As long as both generations are working towards the same goals and have mutual respect, I feel it usually works out for the better." Although Wendy deeply values the traditional values and old-school strengths that built S.H. Chooi, she believes that her generation understands something else that is equally important. "People no longer connect only with products. They connect with identity, values, responsiveness and experience."

One must be practical when looking at heritage brands and businesses. Many a time, we rely on their past laurels to dictate ideal futures, but heritage business cannot survive when frozen in nostalgia. At the same time, Wendy stressed caution: a business cannot survive if the next generation enters thinking everything old is irrelevant. "I do not want to transform S.H. Chooi into something unrecognisable. I think heritage businesses lose themselves when they chase reinvention purely to appear modern. What I hope to do instead is help the company evolve in a way that still feels deeply rooted in who we are, just interpreted through a newer lens. That is what turns business into 'heritage'. Not age alone, but the ability to survive different generations without losing its soul."

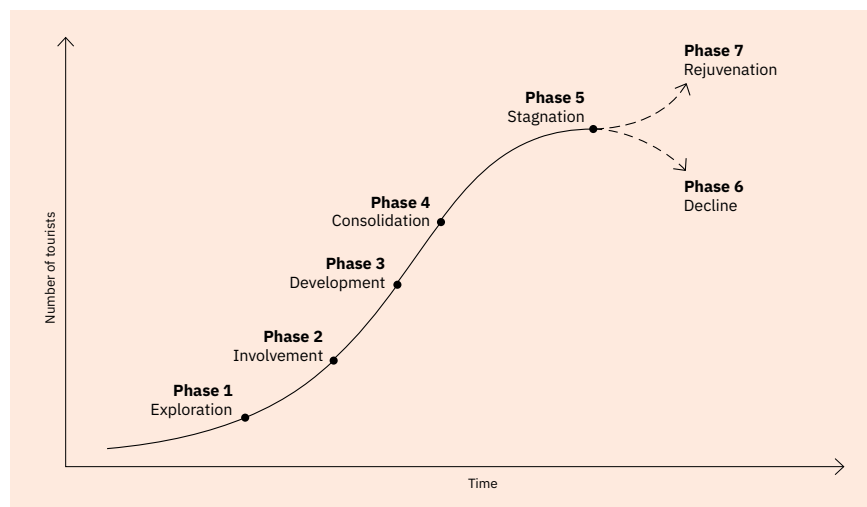


Figure 1: A schematic of Richard Butler's TALC model. [2]



A REPUTATION FOR STYLE SUSTAINED BY HERITAGE BRANDS

BY SHENNA THAM

AS A CULTURAL crossroads shaped by trade, migration and tradition, Penang has developed a rich legacy of style. From hand-dyed textiles and bespoke tailoring to the heights of fashion and fine jewellery, heritage brands continue to define how identity is worn and expressed. Four enduring names—Craft Batik, REX Custom Tailor, Pitchay Gunny Fashion House and HABIB Jewels—offer a glimpse into how Penang’s ever-evolving fashion landscape draws upon the past to excite the present. United not just by longevity and rootedness, but also their devotion to the values that first defined them, these brands continually reinterpret and sustain *style as heritage* in everyday business. In its various guises, fashion continually expresses an evolving Penang and Malaysian identity.

ELEVATING FABRICS

Craft Batik (est. 1973) began as a cottage industry before growing into one of northern Malaysia’s most prominent batik producers. Batik is a traditional form of wax-resist dyeing, used to create intricate designs on fabric. Craft Batik specialises in a range of techniques, including hand-drawn batik, block-printed batik and hand-painted batik (a combination of both techniques).

Its outlet at Teluk Bahang doubles as an educational and cultural space which introduces visitors to the batik-making process. Whereas hand-drawn batik features floral and faunal motifs, block-printed collections lean towards more abstract and geometric patterns.

At its core, Craft Batik is committed to preserving traditional batik techniques—an “exclusively Malaysian notion”, as the brand puts it—at every stage, from the intricate application of wax to the layered dyeing process. Each piece reflects dedication to generations’ worth of craftsmanship, while reinterpreting traditional motifs to make batik more accessible to younger audiences. By expanding into dresses, scarves and beachwear, alongside lifestyle and decorative products, the brand demonstrates batik’s versatility as both heritage craft and contemporary medium.

Meanwhile, REX Custom Tailor (est. 1966), one of Penang’s longstanding bespoke tailoring houses, is a family-owned business known for producing made-to-measure garments. Originally founded as REX Apparel by Phang Khim Hai, it was built with the simple vision of making well-fitted, affordable and accessible suits. In 2016, leadership passed to Chung Giin Shyang, who had over 30 years of tailoring experience. Having begun his own journey at 14, Chung honed his craft through tailoring competitions, consistently earning recognition for his technical skill and detail.

Today, REX offers a range of made-to-measure garments including suits, dress shirts, tuxedos and trousers, which marry individual tastes with practical elegance. Alongside bespoke services, it also provides alterations

and suit rentals. Under Chung's direction, the brand has preserved its traditional foundations while refining its offerings to suit contemporary preferences (for example, expanded fabric selections and updated tailoring methods). By prioritising precision and individuality, REX has maintained its position as a trusted name in tailored formalwear. Since service experience still matters significantly, REX's patience, attentiveness and personalised approach set it apart from competing tailors.

ADAPTION AMIDST DISRUPTION

As one of the oldest continuously operating menswear establishments on Jalan Penang, Pitchay Gunny Fashion House (est. 1900)—named for its founder, an Indian entrepreneur who settled in Penang—initially catered to the colonial-era demand for imported goods and grooming items. Back when British-made products were associated with status and refinement, the shop famously offered imported essentials that reflected the Anglophile tastes of early urban society: coats, smoking pipes, combs and shoes, to name a few goods.

World War I interrupted supply chains and enforced periods of closure, while the Japanese Occupation reshaped the retail landscape entirely. Having violently dismantled the existing colonial retail engine, global trade was replaced with state controls and a desperate black-market economy. In fact, "the shop was closed for a while when Japanese air raid sirens sounded," said Syed Ahamed, the current owner of Pitchay Gunny, recalling a story told by his father.

Luxury gave way to survival with the hyperinflation of the wartime "banana currency", while the severance of European imports forced a shift away from fine tailoring to garment-rationing and barter trade. This era effectively erased the commercial hierarchy, forcing local merchants to navigate a landscape of scarcity within which utility and military favour superseded prestige. Thus, the business adapted by selling locally available goods.

In the postwar years, the shop gradually aligned itself with changing fashion trends, particularly denim, during the rise of mass-market fashion in the 1970s. At its peak, the store drew customers from across Penang who sought well-fitted garments and contemporary styles. Syed Ahamed, who joined the business in the 1980s after initially training as a civil engineer, noted that while the rise of shopping malls transformed consumer habits, shops like Pitchay Gunny retain a distinct appeal. Long-time customers often return out of nostalgia, while newer visitors are drawn in during festive periods, all experiencing Pitchay Gunny's strong emphasis on personalised service.



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In its various guises, fashion continually expresses an evolving Penang and Malaysian identity."

CAPTIONS

1. Interior of Craft Batik showcasing traditional batik garments and textile displays.
2. Chung Giin Shyang working on a bespoke garment at REX Custom Tailor.
3. The first HABIB Jewels store on Jalan Masjid Kapitan Keling (formerly known as Pitt Street) in George Town.
4. Gold bracelet collection by HABIB Jewels.



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.



3



4

BEYOND THE "JEWELLER'S CORNER"

The modest origins of one of Malaysia's most recognised jewellery brands can be traced back to the "Jeweller's Corner" on Jalan Masjid Kapitan Keling. A year after Malaya's independence, Haji Habib Mohamed Abdul Latif was determined to build a better future for his family. Despite limited capital, he opened the small shop that would give rise to HABIB Jewels.

Before entering the jewellery trade, Habib had taken on various jobs, including working at a post office canteen and jewellery store. These early experiences shaped his understanding of jewellery: it was not merely a commodity, but deeply tied to emotions and personal milestones. Starting by restoring and reselling secondhand pieces sourced from pawnshops, he innovated accordingly while gradually building customer trust. Most notable was his venture into diamonds while most jewellers in Malaysia still focused primarily on gold. He also identified a gap in the market for culturally relevant yet refined jewellery, particularly among Malay customers. This led him to weave contemporary elements into the design of *kerongsang* (brooches) and other traditional accessories.

Under the leadership of his son, Meer Sadik Habib, who joined the company in the 1980s, the brand entered a new phase of growth. Innovations in retail, branding and marketing helped modernise the business, making it more accessible to a wider audience while strengthening its national presence.

Over time, HABIB expanded its collection to include both classic and contemporary designs, incorporating international influences while retaining its Malaysian identity amidst changing consumer behaviour (for example, by embracing e-commerce). Beyond retail, HABIB continues to engage in community and educational initiatives, reflecting Habib's belief that jewellery is not only about craftsmanship, but also relationships, trust and meaningful moments.

THE MIGHTY CHA





VARIATIONS OF THE CHINESE WRAPPED GLUTINOUS RICE DUMPLING

BY ONG JIN TEONG

KNOWN AS ZONGZI (粽子) in Mandarin, *Chang*—as the glutinous rice dumplings wrapped in leaves are called in Hokkien—differs from other Chinese dumplings such as *Jiaoxi*, *Baoxi* and *Tang Yuan*.^[1] *Chang*'s fascinating history dates back at least 2,000 years, when it was traditionally prepared for the Dragon Boat (*Duanwu*) Festival, on the fifth day of the fifth month of the lunar calendar. They often come leaf-wrapped in various shapes—tetrahedrons, elongated cylinders or cones—with significant variations between China's northern and southern provinces. In the north, fillings are traditionally sweet and meat is seldom used, while those in the south are savoury. In fact, China is leading an effort to establish an international standard through the Codex Alimentarius Commission.^[2]

Standardisation does not mean that there should only be one type of *Chang*, however. Indeed, in Malaysia and Singapore, and to a certain extent other parts of Southeast Asia, we enjoy many Hokkien, Teochew, Cantonese, Hainanese and Hakka variations, now commercially available throughout the year.



DIFFERENT FACES FROM MESOAMERICA TO ASIA

Chang has long served as portable nourishment for scholars, warriors, hunters and travellers. But similar foods are found all over the world, even in the Aztec and Maya civilisations. The reason why *Zongzi* is often referred to as “Chinese tamales” in the US is because of their similarity to tamales, which are rooted in Mesoamerican civilisations (and which, in fact, predate *Zongzi*). Pre-Columbian tamales were made from nixtamalised^[3] corn, and filled with meat, beans, chillies and fruits. Spanish colonists later introduced pork, beef and dairy products into the filling for increased variety. In fact, additives like slake lime and alkaline water were used to prepare both *Chang* and tamales. Despite their distinct origins and ingredients, they appear designed for durability and nutrition: useful when journeys were long, wars were frequent and festivities demanded refreshment.

Turning to *Zongzi*’s variations, the Hokkien braised pork *Bak Chang* is considered the most globalised, since there is a large Hokkien diaspora ranging from Southeast Asia to North America. But there are many variations within China itself. Jiaying *Chang*, from the south-eastern Chinese province of Zhejiang, is most sought-after during the Dragon Boat Festival.^[4] It is a type of southern *Chang*, containing savoury fillings such as marinated meat, sometimes also filled with sweet bean paste, lotus seed, longan or peanut. The same province’s Hangzhou variation has “male” and “female” *Chang* with different wrappings and fillings, associated with blind-date rituals. Meanwhile, Xi’an *Chang*, which has the longest history, is served chilled with osmanthus syrup. “Pillow *Zongzi*” from Nanning are famous for their large size and rich fillings, often weighing around 1kg!

In Penang and Malaysia, there are already plenty of variations. *Kiam* (salty) *Chang* contains meat (traditionally pork), dried prawns, chestnuts, salted egg yolk, lotus seeds and Chinese mushrooms, cooked with dark soya sauce and five-spice

powder. Teochew *Chang* is similar to the Hokkien version, but often features red bean or lotus paste. I have seen many references to sweet and savoury Teochew *Bak Chang* that include red bean paste wrapped in caul fat, but have not the opportunity to taste them. I have a recipe from my wife’s *jee chim* (second aunt), which has a touch of Teochew influence: it includes red beans. This recipe calls for the red beans, dried shelled chestnut and glutinous rice to be washed and soaked in water for four hours. The chestnut is then boiled for about 20 minutes. One portion of caramelised onions prepared with five-spice powder is mixed with glutinous rice, while another portion is cooked with thick dark soya sauce. The sauce will seep into the glutinous rice during boiling, resulting in a characteristic brown colour.



Cantonese *Chang* includes mung bean, which gives it a distinct texture and lighter flavour. The filling is similar to that of Hokkien *Chang* and might include Jinhua ham, abalone and dried scallop. Five-spice powder is commonly used to marinate the pork belly filling, while the rice is flavoured with garlic and a little salt.

In Penang, we are familiar with the *Ham Loke Choong*, which contains mung bean and a piece of fat marinated with five-spice powder. Pay more, and you might get streaky pork and a portion of salted egg yolk. The *Chang* is boiled until the fat becomes transparent and permeates the dumpling. Similarly, the Hakka variation uses black-eyed peas instead of green mung bean, cooked with pork, salted egg yolk and mushrooms.

The Hainanese variety differs because of its large size, where the glutinous rice is wrapped with banana leaves and shaped like a large pillow. The ingredients include marinated pork belly, dried shrimp, Chinese sausage, mushrooms, chestnuts, mung beans and black-eyed peas.

The Thais, meanwhile, have *Khao Tom Sam Liap* (or *Khanom Khao Tom*), which is sold in Bangkok, and contains spiced chicken-floss and salted duck egg yolk.^[5]

INTRODUCING PERANAKAN CHANG

The Chinese Peranakan community, in turn, has developed a unique Nyonya *Chang*, otherwise called *Pua Kiam Tee Chang* (“half salty and half sweet”). This is a variation of the savoury Hokkien *Bak Chang*, where the sweetness comes from chopped-up candied winter melon. Other ingredients include ground coriander, ground pepper, garlic and shallots. The meat is either minced or diced, instead of the larger cuts found in *Bak Chang*. Pandan leaf is used to line the bamboo-leaf wrapper. In the southern part of West Malaysia, raw glutinous rice is boiled after wrapping, or steamed until it is partially cooked, before being wrapped and boiled afterwards. In the north, the glutinous rice is steamed first and then mixed with coconut milk, later steamed again before being used to wrap a filling of *cekur* and pounded groundnuts, and then steamed once more. They also tend to be smaller—more *comel* (adorable)—than those from the south, especially the Singaporean variety which is much larger and coloured blue with *bunga telang* (butterfly pea flower).

The triangular-shaped *Ketupat Palas*, also known as *Malai Choong* (lit., “Malay *Chang*”) is made from glutinous rice using coconut milk, mixed with various fillings and then wrapped with *palas* palm leaves. The filling may include black-eyed peas, sweet corn and *pulut hitam* (black glutinous rice), unlike Malay *Ketupat*, which do not contain any filling. This variation is also gendered. The female weave is symmetrical: if viewed from the front and back, it looks as if the *Ketupat* is wearing a sarong! However, those sold commercially are the male variety.





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FROM TRADITION TO INNOVATION

Making *Chang* is labour-intensive, especially because wrapping needs a lot of practice to perfect: consequently, it is a skill that risks being lost in the commercialisation of festive snacks and dishes. It was once common practice for families to gather during Chinese festivals and prepare them together, thus fostering intergenerational bonding and allowing for the transmission of heirloom recipes.

When I was young, we used to hand-pick regular rice grains out of the glutinous rice before soaking them—contemporary supermarket glutinous rice is generally “cleaner”. This step is vital for making *Tee Chang*: skipping it ruins its delicate texture and creates unsightly dark spots in the translucent cakes, although this is less of a worry for savoury *Chang*, which are boiled for hours. *Kee* (Hokkien for lye water) is traditionally used as an additive. Food-grade lye water, which contains potassium carbonate and/or sodium carbonate, provides the necessary alkalinity that gives *Tee Chang* its springy texture.

Preparation is a tedious process, so there is a need to adopt new ideas, technologies and techniques: not only to speed up preparation, but also to hasten learning. There are now multi-food processors for preparing fillings and then boiling or pressure-cooking, which considerably reduce cooking time. Wrapping, meanwhile, can be a tedious task. Fortunately, plastic and wooden moulds are easily available for this task. For the *Rempah Udang* variation, the wrapping process involves shaping the rice-and-filling into a cylindrical shape. I find it much faster and easier to use plastic sushi moulds to uniformly compress the partially cooked glutinous rice, before wrapping it in banana leaves. When I was in London,

where bamboo leaves were not easily available, I resorted to using those special plastic bags often used to keep frozen food to wrap *Bak Chang* into tetrahedrons. Since food could be boiled directly in these otherwise impervious bags, I used a large needle to perforate them, allowing water to seep into the rice during boiling. The bag could be easily lined with bamboo leaf for flavour. In fact, the wrapping process can be bypassed altogether if the glutinous rice is partially cooked and spread out on a tray lined with bamboo or banana leaves. The filling can then be spread over the rice before being sandwiched by a second layer.

In these ways, culinary heritage is not merely kept alive, but also innovated upon to remain vibrant and practical.



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CAPTIONS

1. (Cover spread)
The real *Rempah Udang* is elegantly held together by a *lidi* (coconut skewer), not staples!
2. *Lo Mai Kai* is not a traditional *Chang*, but a variation of it. It is a Cantonese dim sum dish featuring sticky rice filled with chicken, mushrooms and Chinese sausage.
3. Cantonese-style rectangular-shaped *Chang* (front) filled with mung beans, fatty pork and dried shiitake mushrooms; Hokkien-style tetrahedral *Chang* (back) filled with peanuts, lotus seeds, fatty pork and dried shiitake mushrooms. Image credit: Alpha on Flickr
4. Penang's *Pua Kiam Tee Chang* (Nyonya *Chang*).
5. Pillow *Chang* filled with mung beans and pork. Image credit: Choo Yut Shing on Flickr.
6. *Ketupat Palas*, also known as *Malai Choong* among the Chinese community.
7. Preparing *Chang*.

ENDNOTES

1. *Jiaozi* is wrapped in thin, unleavened dough made of wheat flour. *Bao* (or *Pau*) refers to the soft, fluffy leavened dough used to wrap *Baoxi* filling. *Tang Yuan* is a chewy ball made from glutinous rice flour that may or may not contain filling.
2. Bastillepost. (2024, June 9). “China-led international standard helps traditional rice dish Zongzi go global.”
3. Nixtamalisation is the process of soaking and cooking corn in alkaline water to ease grinding and increase the nutritional value of grain.
4. *China Daily*. (2018). “Sweet and savory: Zongzi beyond your expectation.”
5. Hungry Onion. (2024, June 8). “Rice Dumplings: Thai ‘khao tom sam liap’ versus Malay ‘ketupat palas.’”



DR. ONG JIN TEONG

is the author of two award-winning books—*Nonya Heritage Kitchen: Origins, Utensils, Recipes* and *Penang Heritage Food: Yesterday's Recipes for Today's Cook*. Following his retirement as a Nanyang Technological University College of Engineering professor, he lectures, conducts classes, writes books and articles on Nyonya cooking and food heritage, and runs the occasional supper club.

SPEAKING OF



HTON PENANG SEIZING THE MOMENT AND BREAKING FROM INDUSTRIAL SILOS

BY **OOI KEE BENG**



**DATO' DR.
OOI KEE BENG**

picks on the past to reference the present, and picks on the present to situate the past.

AS USUAL, THIS column highlights an exciting personality from Penang, no doubt because of what they have achieved, but more importantly, to showcase their infectious passion for the state of Penang and their ability to inspire its next generation. I query Ch'ng Huck Theng, a conspicuous artist and businessman, among other roles, on his interests and how he envisions Penang's role in the 21st century.



Ooi Kee Beng (OKB): Can you tell us about your upbringing as a scion of the Ghee Hiang company? What early lessons did you learn about Penang and its small- and medium-sized enterprise (SME) culture?

Ch'ng Huck Theng (CHT): Everyone is of the opinion that since I am from the Ghee Hiang family, my childhood would have been a pretty rosy time. It was the other way round. My father was probably the “black sheep” of the family. He came back from the University of Tasmania and took up a job as a teacher at Chung Ling Private High School.

Later, he became the Cathay Cinema manager. That meant that I got to watch almost every movie shown, and this is probably why I still enjoy watching movies in cinemas.

He then ventured into a few businesses. These failed, but things went steady for him after a while. Life became better for us when he went into the frozen seafood import/export business in the 1980s.

When my sisters and I were growing up, Ghee Hiang was never in our dictionary and our teachers always thought that my father was a fishmonger in some wet market; we always put down our father’s occupation as “Selling Fish” when filling in school documents. Although my dad was not the favourite son in his family, I was the favourite grandson. Grandfather was very nice to most of his grandchildren: he would take us shopping almost every weekend.

We experienced what it was like growing up in a family of six, with Father as the sole breadwinner, working as a teacher while providing Mother with a regular allowance. Later, I remember feeling happy about Father becoming his own boss: failing at first, but soon becoming successful. I guess what I learnt in my early days, before secondary school, was a journey of survival, hard work, unity—that is probably why we four siblings are very close, even today—and hope, not for the best, but better, and having a practical mindset. You do not necessarily have leverage, even coming from a well-known family. I guess I am blessed to have been able to go through the lows—that taught me how to act correctly towards relatives, my sisters’ families, my children, nephews and nieces.

Then came the second part of my life, when I started collecting antiques at the age of 14. That was when I fell in love with Chinese figurines. Father had bought a set of Hok Lok Siew and a Guang Kong for display at our new home. Their facial expressions were intriguing. I started going around shops and friends’ houses to make comparisons. I was so into it that I went to Jingdezhen to do

research on Chinese famille rose figurines. I bought some very nice pieces from the then-government-run Jingdezhen Porcelain Factory, especially treasuring those that I had the opportunity to buy from the record room.

In 1997, I was getting married. But my house, especially my bedroom, was filled with these figurines. I had not much choice but to hold an exhibition. I sold 220 figurines in four days. It was during this time that I became good friends with very respected Penang figures like Dato’ Seri Lim Kean Siew, Asas Dunia, Tony Chan, etc. They taught me lots and had advice like, “You have to have a lot of good friends” or “You have to be knowledgeable to share information”. A few years later, I learned to incorporate aesthetics into information and friendship. This is why I now have a company, CHT Network, which deals with friends; MarketSource, a media company sharing information and news; and One East Museum & Art, which focuses on antique collections and my own artwork. This was what I learned from some of Penang’s respected figures in my 20s.

OKB: Of the positions you hold, which are you most proud of, and which do you find to be highly consequential for your future ambitions and projects?

CHT: When one googles “CHT”, it can get very confusing. You find my name in the seafood industry, also as an artist, sculptor, writer, collector ... I started as a manager in a ceramic factory in Chemor, then I was into frozen seafood in Parit Buntar, and Ghee Hiang pastries and sesame oil. On the other hand, you also see media, network and award businesses. Currently, I am chairman of the Association of Tourism Attractions Penang (ATAP), president of the Penang Antique Collectors Association, head of trade & economics at the Penang Chinese Town Hall, advisor to the Penang Art Society and director of the Penang Fujian Merchant Association. I am often asked how I make time for all this. The thing is, I do not see myself as having all these responsibilities; I have only one position, and that is being CHT.

To go back to your question, I am most proud of being myself. I make sure that my family is well taken care of, and not just financially. My children have to know how to fish for themselves: the fish cannot just come from me. Next is to make sure all my businesses have a purpose. Only after taking care of the fundamentals, can we move on to bigger things, like Ghee Hiang going into scientifically backed sesame oil health supplements and the expansion of sesame oil into the international market once our new plant

is ready. Meanwhile, CHT Network promotes face-to-face interactions, which is especially important now that AI is replacing most things. I continue researching and writing on antique Chinese famille rose figurines and porcelain. I may have a lot on my plate, but these are things I am passionate about.

I organised Beyond Contemporary Art Penang a few years ago, to explore a new ecosystem where business, art, tourism and education come together. The traditional way of surviving within a single industry is getting harder. Art is an important addition to many industries. Even big names like Rolls Royce, BMW and Cartier are collaborating with the arts. This provides a market for artists. Most importantly, this new ecosystem needs to be part of the education system to groom future supporters and engage the public to create awareness and excitement.

OKB: You are knowledgeable about SME culture in Penang, including its weaknesses and strengths. What would you like to see done to enhance the future and regionalisation of Penang's SMEs?

CHT: Like what YB Steven Sim (Minister of Entrepreneur Development and Cooperatives) has said, Penang was about survival when it started. That was Penang 1.0. Industrialisation with foreign companies investing and having factories producing components for semiconductor production was Penang 2.0. Moving towards Penang 3.0, we need our own brands to expand to new horizons, just like what Ghee Hiang is doing. It is not only the electronics industry which has to move beyond its comfort zone; all other industries have to rethink their future business strategies to stay relevant.

From what I see, the current world crisis is a blessing for Malaysia. Most regions are in crisis, including the US and Europe. The best bet for the next five to ten years is Southeast Asia. Malaysia is probably the best and safest option for foreign investors right now. It is still affordable, has no real language barriers or major natural disasters, and has low crime rates. It is time for politicians and the people to understand how lucky we are and seize the moment. What we need are smart, educated politicians, who act like businesspeople, to run the country as effectively as possible—like our parents would—and whose key performance indicators (KPIs) are about putting bread and butter on the tables of all Malaysians.

OKB: Regarding CHT Network, can you tell us how it came into being, and how you see this network aiding Penang's development regionally?

CHT: CHT Network was founded about 20 years ago, guided by the principles of sincerity, integrity and fairness. Most will understand the first two, but most people take fairness for granted. We want to win in business deals, but we must always make sure those collaborating with us also win. A one-sided business will never last. In life, we hope to have good and sustainable business associates and supporters.

OKB: Any advice for Gen Zs and the younger generations?

CHT: We must accept the fact that the world is changing, with AI and robotics taking over a lot of fields. For Gen Z, especially, they have to work out their future and craft a suitable direction. If not, more chaos awaits them. But the fundamental approach remains the same; treat people with love, protect your family before trying to save others, respect and treat others fairly. Business is all about supply, demand and product. This is a simple equation passed down for generations, and we need not complicate the balance. We just need to work on the variables. This advice applies as much to the rest of us.

OKB: Regarding art and entrepreneurship, what is needed for Penang's creative sector to thrive?

CHT: I was the youngest person to serve on the board of directors of Balai Seni Negara many years ago. I orchestrated the decision of the [Ministry of Investment, Trade and Industry] to accept art under its portfolio, so that Malaysian art could expand its market overseas. If we need Malaysian art to be accepted by foreign collectors, then we need to treat it like a business. The supply, demand and product equation has to be in place to bring Malaysian art to the world. Artists on their own cannot go far. This applies to Penang too. If Penang wants art to thrive, then the state must play the role of promoter and incentivise those in the art business, not just by giving money but also working on KPIs. The state needs a strong and effective committee to advise it and achieve results. Talk alone without effective action is cheap.

OKB: Regarding the rise of China, how can Penang's businesses make use of this trend?

CHT: China is a force that we all have to accept and work with. The awakening of this sleeping giant a few decades ago was all about supplying cheap labour, low production costs and mass production. Now that its economy has matured, it needs to expand and reach for a larger slice of the overseas market. We, as a small state, cannot go head-to-head with a giant. We must find ways to collaborate and find win-win solutions. We can still leverage their domestic market; many Chinese living in China still opine that foreign brands are more reliable. Hence, we can still work with Chinese importers and sellers to expand our market in China. On the other hand, we can help the Chinese sell products here, not merely as competition but as simply another choice for consumers. We just have to have the right product positioning for the right market.

Furthermore, we have to make Penang *the* place for Chinese to visit, stay, invest, seek medical attention and have an education. Tourism, the Malaysia My Second Home (MM2H) programme, medicine and education are important contributions to Penang's economy outside of the industrial sectors. Services and hospitality are always seen as players contributing to an island economy, just like in Hong Kong and Singapore. Now, we need to show foreigners that Penang is politically stable and that its services are of quality and given with a smile.

OKB: What other insights do you wish to share on where you see Penang going? What innovations in our political economy are needed?

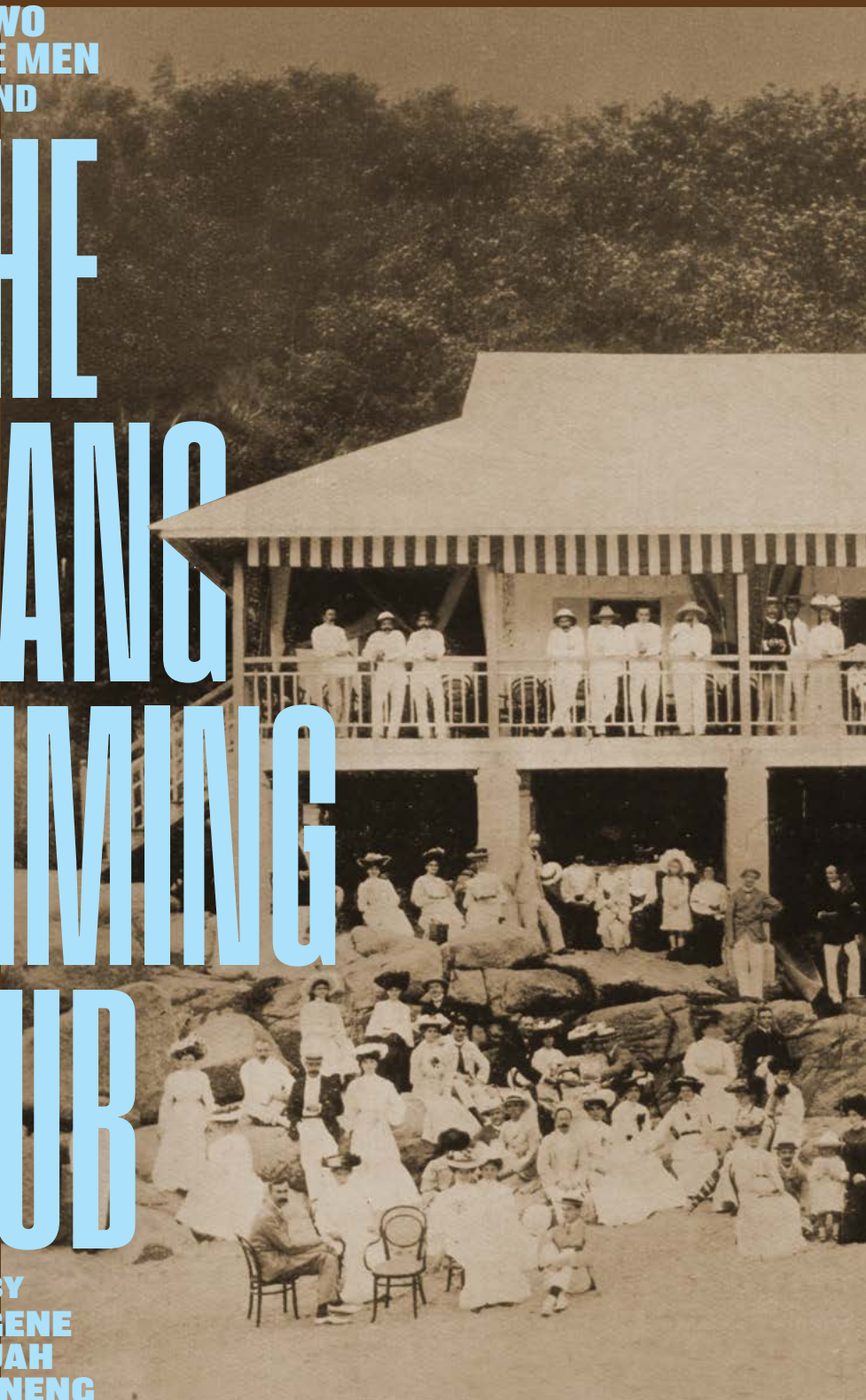
CHT: We celebrate Chinese New Year, Hari Raya Aidilfitri, Deepavali, Christmas, Wesak, Hari Raya Haji, Awal Muharram ... all these holidays. Malaysia is truly a unique country for the rest of the world to learn from. We can be the example of what living together is all about. What we need now is to have a better understanding of how to run the country together peacefully, working towards a better economy, safer society and harmonious environment. We need politicians who put the people first, and to replace those using race and religion to incite hatred for personal agendas. The world is in a bad enough situation as it is. If we cannot keep our own house together, we will move backwards and risk all that our forefathers fought for.

**A
QUESTION
OF DECENCY**

**TWO
NUDE MEN
AND**

THE PENANG SWIMMING CLUB

**BY
EUGENE
QUAH
TER-NENG**





THE STORY OF the Penang Swimming Club began on the rocks at Tanjong Bungah, at half-past nine on a Sunday morning, with a man in a bathing costume. On 10 April 1904, about 50 people had made their way along the north coast road to the new clubhouse, built on solid boulders with stretches of sandy beach on either side, and the magnificent mountains of Kedah a blue haze in the distance. Club president Arthur Robert Adams stood up in his swimming togs and called everyone to attention.^[1]

“In a light and witty speech”, the *Pinang Gazette* reported, “he said that the opening of the Club marked an epoch in the history of Penang, and supplied a long-felt want.” He was sorry that there were no ladies present but hoped to invite them at some future date. He pointed out that “swimming was one of the instincts of the brute man, and besides being merely an amusement, was a manly and healthy exercise.” Then Adams told his audience that they might look upon “the small strip of water separating them from the island opposite as the Hellespont, and emulate the example of Leander [from Greek myth] by swimming over to the rocks opposite, though they would find no ravishing maiden there to lure them on.”

He was referring to the “pretty and rocky island of” Pulau Tikus, sitting just offshore. Unlike in the tragic myth, Adams cheerfully assured them, members “would doubtless be saved from the fate” of an untimely drowning “by the aid of a friendly sampan, and brought back to the Club to console themselves at the bar”. The bar, he hoped, would be well patronised: “he noticed a number of most noble supporters there already.” Naturally, they drank to the club’s prosperity, and a number of eager swimmers rushed down into the water. A ball was thrown about. W Jones set up his camera and took photographs of members, clad in proper bathing costumes, “as they squatted on the beach and upon the rocks close by”. But getting there was no picnic: it had taken 12 years, two governors, a newspaper letter war with Singapore, and most scandalously, two nude men.

PRIVATE SOLUTIONS FOR A PUBLIC NEED

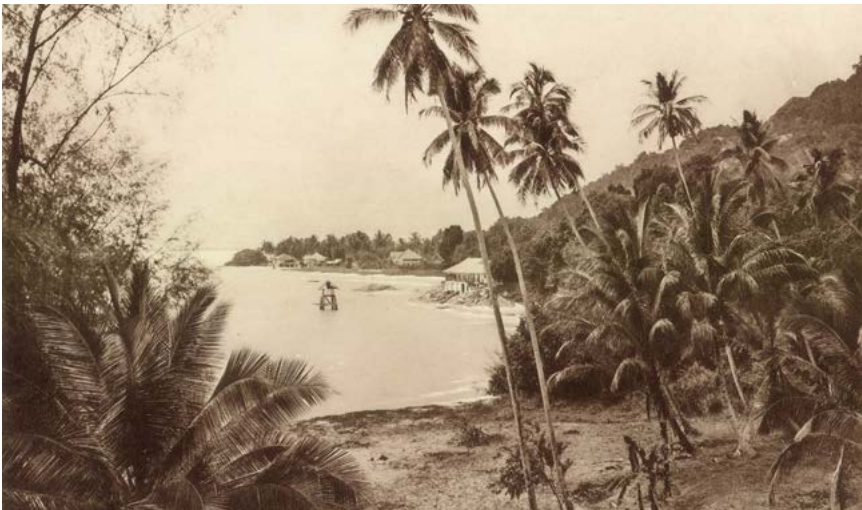
Adams had arrived in Penang in 1888, joined the law firm of Hogan and Adams, and quickly established himself as that indispensable civic figure—committee man, volunteer officer and municipal commissioner, known to everyone as “the Champion of Penang”. On 8 January 1892, at the Penang Municipal Commissioners’ meeting, he moved “that steps be taken as soon as possible to establish a public sea swimming bath in Penang”. The motion was carried unanimously.

Yet the 20 January editorial response was enthusiastic but shrewd. *The Straits Independent* supported the idea, but pointed out that “there is no reason why the general body of ratepayers should be called upon to pay for a swimming bath which, if we mistake not, would be used solely by Europeans”, which “would, of course, simply be preposterous”. The paper suggested that if the bath was intended mainly for Europeans, then its cost should be met through private subscription. However, if it should unavoidably become a communal facility, the paper proposed that “it would be a very simple matter to set aside certain hours or, for the matter of that, certain days, for the Natives”, with the tide naturally cleansing

Governor Sir Cecil Clementi Smith unceremoniously struck off the budget allocation from Singapore. This announcement came on 28 December 1892, bundled with the rejection of a recreation ground for native and Chinese children and a \$500 grant to the Penang Cricket Club. *The Straits Independent* responded, on New Year’s Eve, with an editorial of volcanic fury, calling the colonial government in Singapore “the apotheosis of humbug” and their officials “Little Tin Gods on Wheels”, “worked hither and thither from Downing Street”.

But Adams’s scheme had failed for a reason he would only state plainly years later. At the Club’s founding meeting on 21 August 1903, still some months before the inaugural swim, he finally shared that “[o]bjections were taken to the grant in that Chinese money was proposed to be spent solely for Europeans”.

In the interim, the options were few and unsatisfying for Europeans tormented by the relentless humidity. There was the “Swimming Bath at the Waterfall [Gardens]”, which had flourished in its first year, 1891, but quietly expired by its third, defeated by the distance from town. The European-owned Alexandra Hotel maintained an excellent but prohibitively expensive bath; and by 1896, it passed on to Cheah Chen

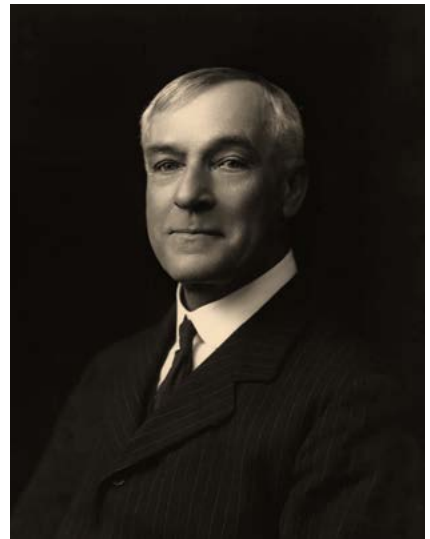


the water. *The Gazette* had a much different view: “If people are so particular that they dislike to swim in water where Chinese, Malays and Klings [sic, derogatory] have bathed before, they must go to the expense of a private swimming bath or content themselves with the usual quiet tub without the swim.”

By late-1892, Adams had secured a municipal grant of \$3,000 for a swimming bath near the Esplanade, which involved repurposing “the Moat around the Fort”. But the powers-that-be who wielded control over the Penang government’s purse strings were inconveniently resident at a faraway capital.

Eok, the man who had given Penang its clock tower. Up in the hills, an inconvenient pony-ride away, lay the Spout with its small bath and cooler air.

The matter simmered in the tropical heat for more than a decade, until a revival began in May 1903, when a *Gazette* correspondent, “FW”, wrote to ask why Penang had no swimming club. His letter opened with a rhetorical gambit: any newcomer to “the happy isle of Pulo Pinang”, he suggested, “would surely notice the absence of a swimming club” after adjusting to the heat. FW himself was no newcomer to the idea; he had “done a certain amount of rou-



3

tine work for the Singapore [Swimming] Club” and was “prepared to go more fully into detail” should the scheme materialise in Penang. He pointed out that if the Singapore club—which began with just 20 members and was “in a moribund condition for some time”—could now boast “close upon three hundred” members and was building a new \$16,000 clubhouse, then surely Penang could do the same. After all, Tanjung Bungah beach was “only twenty minutes’ ride from the Penang Club on a bicycle”, and offered the advantage of bathing “at all states of the tide”. Where, he gently implied, was Penang’s enterprise?

Letters poured in. A meeting was called at the Cricket Club on the Esplanade on Friday, 5 June 1903. The crucial news came from the chairman, the architect Allan Wilson: “the College [General] at Pulau Tikus [...] were willing to rent” a beachfront property at Tanjung Bungah. The provisional committee inspected the site, and a final deal was reached. They reported that the *padres* of the Missions Étrangères de Paris (Paris Foreign Mission) “acted very generously in granting permission to erect a club house, on certain conditions, at the monthly rental of \$6”. The “difficulty of obtaining land at Tanjung Bungah”, an obstacle which had thwarted previous attempts at forming a swimming club, was finally gone.

Not everyone was persuaded, however. A letter to the *Gazette* doubted “whether a Swimming Club would flourish for more than one season” at such a distance from town. But Humphrey Hallam-Hipwell, a 24-year-old bank clerk from Liverpool, defended the vision in a letter. This was no mere public bath, but “a place of resort where on Sunday mornings men might meet, have a dip and an hour’s laze and then come back in time for tiffin”. He was the same man later empowered to “receive member’s name[s]” when the provisional committee of the club was formed.



TWO UNINVITED ARRIVALS

When two nude men arrived on their bicycles on private (Asian-owned) property, the question of European conduct on beach-fronts became rather more urgent. On the afternoon of 10 August 1903, a Chinese gentleman was entertaining friends at his country house at Tanjong Bungah when these imperial dignitaries of the colony arrived, quite uninvited and spectacularly unclothed, upon his beach.

The two Europeans had come cycling along Penang's north coast, the sun still bright at half-past five, the Andaman shimmering through coconut palms. They correctly decided that the spot looked terribly inviting for a swim. They were, however, catastrophically wrong about everything else. They dismounted, walked onto private land, stripped naked about 100 yards from where the party was seated, and entered the water.

The owner, writing to the *Gazette* under the pseudonym "Disgusted", reported the scene with controlled fury. The two Europeans "deliberately undid their clothes" within plain sight, swam and then "came ashore and in Nature's garb played on the sand". He sent his *tukang ayer*—the household servant responsible for carrying and managing the domestic water supply before piped water's advent—with a polite request to leave. One of them roared, "*saya punya suka*" ("it's my own pleasure"), and carried on. There were ladies staying at the neighbouring house on a hillock, whose topography did no favours for the two nude men.

Although the duo "took great care not to return by the way they came", leaving by a more difficult route, "Disgusted's" friends followed them to the public road and identified them both. Two days later, the *Gazette* published the Europeans' reply. Writing as "Two Nude Men", a pseudonym that was also a confession, they explained that "the sea looked so tempting" and they had chosen "what we thought a secluded spot far

from the vulgar gaze". They claimed that it was dusk and rocks screened them. "We are not aware that a Chinaman could be so easily offended, or we would have taken care to avoid hurting his feelings."

It was, as a defence, fatally ill-judged. "Disgusted" replied on 17 August with a letter that cut to the bone. The sun had been bright at 5.30pm, which was certainly not dusk. And as for not knowing that "a Chinaman" could be offended, "[e]vidently they forgot that there are Chinamen and Chinamen, as there are Germans and Germans." He thought the miscreants were "indeed very rude men". He was not merely offended, but pulling rank. They were, he continued, "even worse than the half-naked *tukang ayer* who was sent to inform them of the fact that they had no bathing costumes on".

The same day, a second Chinese correspondent, "Decency", entered the fray, claiming to have been present at the gathering. He proceeded to take the "Two Nude Men" letter apart with methodical pleasure. The Europeans had claimed it was too dark for "Disgusted" to see whether they wore costumes, and that they "had a good look



round" and could see no females. "If that be so", wrote "Decency", "[w]hy should they have taken that trouble when they say that the evening was dark?"



Then he delivered his most remarkable passage. He thanked goodness "that the great majority of Europeans living here amongst us Orientals observe with great care the common rules of decency", but regretted that people like the "Two Nude Men", "instead of upholding the moral traditions of their fellow countrymen, seek, by their little minds, to bring into disgrace and disrepute such high-toned traditions". His final jab was precise and clinical. One of the offenders, "whose name is known to me, does not at present enjoy" the higher social standing of his more fortunate European countrymen.

Here, an anonymous European, "?", fired back a response dripping with sarcasm and condescension, asking whether Penang was "on the verge of Panchinomania",^[2] and suggested "iced baths and no garments" for the aggrieved Chinese gentlemen.

What "Disgusted" and "Decency" had given in those columns was a master-class in using Victorian morality against delinquent Edwardians. These apparently English-educated Chinese gentlemen, standing their ground, had found the two naked men wanting by the Empire's own standards, in both morals and swimming attire. The editor closed the debate: "This correspondence must now cease." Perhaps he could see which side was embarrassing themselves.



THE CLUB TAKES SHAPE

The timing of this misadventure was, among other things, spectacular proof that the club was 12 years overdue. A properly constituted facility—with a pavilion, dressing rooms, rules and a stretch of clearly defined private beach—was now a necessity. The constituting meeting of the Penang Swimming Club was held at the Cricket Club on a Friday evening, just 11 days after the nude bathing incident, and two days after the editor had shut down correspondence. Debentures were fully subscribed and 87 members signed up. The pavilion would go up at Tanjong Bungah, just beyond Mr McFarlane's bungalow.

Adams rose to speak. 12 years of struggle, he told the meeting, had brought them here. The question of ladies' bathing—"mixed bathing", as the Edwardians called it—was discussed with a mixture of progressive zeal and residual propriety. Mr Shropshire had seen mixed bathing "at Ostend and nobody had a word against it". Adams' motion that one day a week be set aside for ladies was carried unanimously. Then came the presidency. The chairman "did not think there was anyone more suitable than Mr Adams". The meeting erupted in cries of "too true!" Adams accepted the nomination with evident pleasure, and the committee that was elected suggested that the meeting took him seriously.

The *Gazette* congratulated the club the following morning. "We may now, we think, drop the prefix 'proposed' with reference to the Swimming Club." But whoever "Disgusted" truly was, he likely never visited the Club, which came to be known to locals as the "European Swimming Club". This was particularly after the Chinese Swimming Club was later established further east along the beach, closer to Tanjong Tokong. The moniker was entirely accurate; a book issued by the club to commemorate the new millennium admits that "up to the late sixties the Club operated behind a forbidding sign at its entrance. It read "Private—Members Only", but more precisely referred to *European* members only.

By the end of the 20th century, things had changed considerably. This volume recorded that "by the late seventies the membership profile swung toward an Asian predominance and with it, it was inevitable that the social tone and character of the Club would also begin to reflect these changes." It is today truly the *Penang* Swimming Club.



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CAPTIONS

1. "Ladies' Day at the Pinang Swimming Club." The weekly event was first announced in *The Straits Times* on 18 May 1904. The buttoned-up, black-suited gentleman below the middle pillar of the pavilion, dressed rather too formally for a beach party, appears to be Adams (Source: Arnold Wright, 1908, *Twentieth Century Impressions of British Malaya*).
2. *Club aan de kust bij Penan* (Penang Swimming Club on the coast of Penang). Ca. 1910 by Carl Josef Kleingrothe (Source: Leiden University Library, Carl Josef Kleingrothe).
3. Lt Col. Sir Arthur Robert Adams, 1861–1937 (Source: National Portrait Gallery, London, photograph by Walter Stoneman, 1921).
4. Photo showing the eastern side of the Club, taken in 1908 from what is today known as the Jalan Abbas, or Swimming Club, beach. The diving platform can also be seen in front of the pavilion (Source: Wright, *Twentieth century impressions*).
5. A fully clothed gentleman with a Rover bicycle, ca. 1904. *The Straits Echo* noted in 1905 that "Tanjong Bungah is usually the haven of the cyclist who goes for an afternoon spin" (Source: Online Bicycle Museum, <https://onlinebicyclemuseum.co.uk/1904-imperial-rover/>).
6. A typical scene at the coconut plantations dotting Tanjong Bungah, a popular location for swimming even before the Club was founded. This photo, ca. 1910, features the famous multi-branched coconut tree. The present road, Jalan Nyiur Chabang, was named after it (Source: Leiden University Library, Carl Josef Kleingrothe).
7. An early-20th-century scene of the village of Tanjong Bungah, on the north coast of Penang.
8. Dr Percival Locke's country house, "View Forth", at Tanjong Bungah, photographed around 1907. By 1904, there were 20 recorded homes and buildings at Tanjong Bungah, including the new Swimming

Club; half were owned by Chinese towkays. The earliest was Cheah Choo Yew's, the largest landowner there by 1896. Locke and Adams both served as municipal commissioners (Source: Wright, *Twentieth Century Impressions*).

ENDNOTES

1. Born in Swanage on 13 December 1861 and educated in Sherborne, Sir Arthur was a prominent lawyer, colonial administrator and military officer in Penang and the Straits Settlements. Admitted to the Bar in 1887, he served as municipal commissioner from 1891 and "on several occasions acted as Solicitor-General for the Colony". A highly respected figure in Penang society, Adams was renowned for his entertaining speeches and legal acumen. He served as the first president of the Club, and was elected to the position eight more times, the last in 1922.
2. A word apparently coined as a veiled insult, combining a contemptuous rendering of "Chinaman" with the suffix "-mania", implying that Chinese civil assertiveness was not merely impertinent but a form of collective derangement. The "pan-" prefix would have carried its own resonance for British readers in 1903, evoking the Pan-German League and the broader anxiety about subject peoples organising through racial solidarity.



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



Book a tour

EXPLORING ONE OF PENANG'S TALLEST PEAKS

HIKE AT A GLANCE

LENGTH

4.5 hours (until the
Penang Hill Top Station)

DIFFICULTY

Moderate

INTEREST LEVEL

High, rich in
flora and fauna

SIGNPOSTING

Signposted at junctions

LIKELIHOOD OF GETTING LOST

Low

NUMBER OF HIKERS

Few

TIGER



BY **REXY
PRAKASH
CHACKO**

HILL

THE HILLS AROUND Air Itam are often considered well-explored and have long been favoured by hikers. Yet hidden within their lush greenery lies a peak that has, until quite recently, escaped notice. About seven years ago, while poring over old maps, I chanced upon a high point close to the Tiger Hill Reservoir marked “2625”: its elevation measured in feet, corresponding to about 800m.

At the time, there was no clear trail to its summit. The irony was striking: one of the tallest peaks in Penang seemed entirely unknown. Only in the wake of the post-Covid-19 hiking boom did hikers begin exploring this area and establish a proper path. Today, the peak is a popular spot, fondly known among hikers as “Tiger Hill 803m”.





2

WE STARTED THE hike in Air Itam, at a wide path beside the Po Lin Buddhist Temple. This path immediately began climbing steeply leftward on the exposed slope. As we ascended, Air Itam and distant George Town unfolded below us. To our left, the Nirvana Penang West Lake Garden Memorial Park and the iconic Kek Lok Si Temple came into view. Further up, the path snaked into shadier bits, passing a huge Pulai tree (*Alstonia* sp.), and we reached another temple about 20 minutes from the start.

At this point, the path split in two, and we kept to the right, following the yellow signboards marked “Lean Fah Thong.” Small green lamp posts lined the path at regular intervals, and after about 15 minutes, we reached a second junction, where we turned right and travelled sharply uphill. About five minutes in, we reached the bright blue entrance archway of the Lean Fah Thong Taoist temple. An inscription dated this site to the reign of the Guangxu Emperor (r. 1875–1908), the second-last emperor of China. A note on the entrance archway clearly indicated that meat and



4

liquor were prohibited, and that only vegetarian offerings were allowed. We spent some time respectfully going about the premises before retracing our steps to the previous junction, and continued rightward.

Under the watchful gaze of a troop of dusky leaf monkeys (*Trachypithecus obscurus*), we followed the cement path as it passed a large circular pond: one of Perbadanan Bekalan Air Pulau Pinang’s (PBAPP, Penang Water Supply Corpora-



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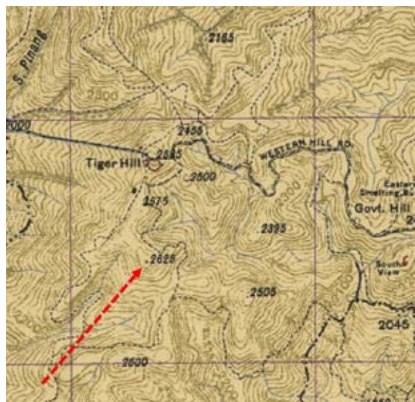
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tion) intakes for the Air Itam Dam. Unlike other streams which flow directly into the dam, this intake point is located away from its natural catchment, and channels water through a purpose-built pipe into the dam. About 10 minutes along this relatively flat path, we connected with another cement road. Across it, a heavily eroded trail climbed steeply uphill. This was the route we intended to take. Beyond this point, it was going to be entirely forested, so we took a quick break.

Stepping into the cool shade of the forest was a welcome relief as we pressed on up the ridge. Along the way, granite marker stones embossed with the letter “M” appeared, a reminder that this trail dated back to colonial times. About 15 minutes into the climb, we reached our first landmark: Rain Gauge 28, or RG 28. This bright blue gauge is maintained by the PBAPP to record rainfall data in the catchment, which is then used to predict water levels in the Air Itam Dam and sound the alarm during periods of low rainfall. We paused briefly to photograph the gauge before pressing onwards.



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As we climbed, something unusual caught my eye: a thin, pale stem rising from the forest floor, tipped with what appeared to be a fruit. It was, in fact, the seedpod of a mycoheterotrophic orchid (*Gastrodia tembatensis*), a peculiar plant which lacks leaves and cannot synthesise its own food through photosynthesis. Instead, the orchid depends entirely on a symbiotic fungus to decompose organic matter and channel nutrients. What made this encounter even more extraordinary was that *Gastrodia tembatensis*'s presence in Penang was only recorded in 2024, having eluded botanists for so long due to its inconspicuous, short-lived flowers.^[1] Interestingly, when this orchid forms a seed pod, its stalk elongates, lifting the pod up like a small balloon above the forest floor, in an ingenious adaptation to aid seed dispersal.

The trail went deeper into the forest, climbing through steep sections that tested our endurance. Along the margins, we noticed curious little mud towers, built by cicada nymphs to ventilate their underground burrows and prevent water from flooding the exit holes. After about an hour-and-a-half of steady walking from RG 28, we finally reached a 750m peak, where the old RG 29 stands. It was a fitting place to pause for lunch.

After our meal, we turned right and followed a narrow trail that wound its way along the ridge. Within five minutes, we reached another junction and chose the left path, which climbed gently uphill. This soon brought us to a towering Damar Minyak (*Agathis borneensis*), a conifer prized for



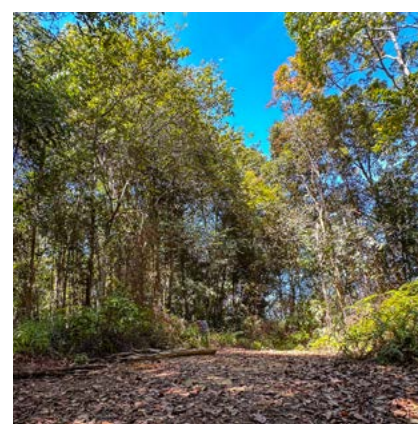
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its lightweight timber and resin, traditionally used for fuel, varnish and waterproofing.^[2] In front of this majestic tree, the trail split once more. Taking the newly established steep left fork, we ascended rapidly towards Tiger Hill's 803m peak.

A rectangular perimeter fence surrounded the very top, and despite my best efforts at finding out what it was for, it remains a niggling mystery. Stepping within the perimeter, we were greeted by a signboard announcing that we had reached the summit. After what felt like an endless climb, we had finally conquered the peak. We marked the moment with a few selfies and a simple meal before continuing along the ridge, which dipped gently before rising again to the gates of the century-old Tiger Hill Reservoir. Also managed by PBAPP, it supplies water to the Penang Hill summit area. Owing to its vital role, entry is restricted, so we began our descent to Summit Road. Another hour of walking brought us to the Penang Hill Top Station.

This hike was a true delight: not only did we stand atop one of Penang's highest peaks, but we also got to immerse ourselves in the island's rich diversity of flora and fauna, a reminder of the wild beauty that thrives at its heart.

***Note:** The author would like to extend special thanks to Lau Pei Ling for deciphering the inscription at Lean Fah Thong and Lau Chai Thiam for confirmation on the cicada mud towers.



13

CAPTIONS

- (Cover spread)
The view of Air Itam and George Town as seen from the first part of the hike.
- Along the path up to Lean Fah Thong.
- The trunk of the majestic Damar Minyak tree (*Agathis borneensis*). Inset is a photo of its cone.
- The bright blue entrance arch to Lean Fah Thong.
- An arrow pointing to the high point indicated by "2625" [feet] on a map produced by the Survey Department of the Federated Malay States in 1945.
- The huge Pulau tree (*Alstonia* sp.) along the trail.
- Mud towers built by cicada nymphs along the margins of the trail.
- The PBAPP intake for the Air Itam Dam along the hike.
- Old granite marker stones embossed with the letter "M" along the trail.
- The elongated pedicel and seedpod of the *Gastrodia tembatensis* orchid. Inset is a photo of its flower.

11. Lean Fah Thong, a Taoist temple over a century old.

12. The mysterious rectangular perimeter fence around the top of the Tiger Hill 803m peak.

13. The peak where the old RG 29 stands.

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9



10



12



A Watery Conundrum Improving Water Supply Amidst Climate Change

BY IAN MCINTYRE

WATER IS BECOMING an increasingly precious resource, yet Penang still lives in a state of functional illusion. Every day, we see clean water flowing from our taps, disguising the reality that Penang is a critically water-stressed state (see *Penang Monthly* November 2024 for an in-depth look at the political ecology of water). Consequently, its water authorities must act accordingly to shape consumer demands, by encouraging them to protect and use water resources wisely. After all, how we value water today determines whether we will have enough of it tomorrow. This is especially crucial amidst the disruptions to rainfall patterns caused by climate change and the complexity of managing water resources: a responsibility divided between the state and the federal authorities.



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

A RUDE AWAKENING

On 6 July 2022, close to half a million of Penang's water consumers woke up to the prospect of dry taps. Overnight, mud-tainted floodwaters from Kedah's hilly Baling area had surged into the Sungai Muda catchment. Perbadanan Bekalan Air Pulau Pinang (PBAPP, Penang Water Supply Corporation) halted operations at its water intake stations in Kepala Batas to prevent turbid waters from contaminating its main treatment plant in Sungai Dua (approximately 88km away). Unfortunately, some damage was incurred, forcing PBAPP to conduct clean-up works. It took up to 72 hours before normal supply was restored to the majority of its consumers in Seberang Perai and the island.

PBAPP's chief executive officer, Pathmanathan Krishnan Kutty Raman Nair, saw this watershed moment as a sobering lesson. "In this era of climate change, water has become a challenge", and in fact, has become a "nearly endangered commodity. The weather has become unpredictable, warmer and [more] intense than earlier decades, leaving us with longer drought." Penang's previously unscathed water supply has suffered disruptions, raising an awareness about water insecurity among northern consumers.

"[I]n the past 10 years, every state in the country has endured and suffered some form of water disruption, with the blame often accorded to climate change," said the former Suruhanjaya Perkhidmatan Air Negara (SPAN, National Water Services Commission) chairman, Charles Santiago. As Santiago explained, 81% of Malaysia's drinking water is supplied by rivers: consequently, this draws attention to their importance in sustaining everyday life. Another key consideration, Santiago added, is water conservation, particularly when it comes to domestic consumption. Malaysia loses up to RM2bil per annum to non-revenue water—that is, water treated but lost or unaccounted for—a figure higher than the annual fiscal budget of three to four states. This figure alone suggests the scale of a broader infrastructural problem.

WATER REALITIES IN THE NORTHERN PENINSULA

Meanwhile, water expectations among consumers differ from state to state: those in rural localities tend to be more patient when faced with major disruptions, whereas urban folks may go so far as to think of relocating to places where supply is constant.

How do these expectations differ from one community to the next? In Langkawi, Joe Foo, who runs the Chicken Joe chicken rice outlet, needs to cook meat by 10am daily to avoid mid-morning water disruptions. "It

can happen for stretches of seven consecutive days—the residents in Langkawi, a touristy island, have complained [...] but water is difficult to access here,” said Foo. In Perlis, the situation is better because the population base is smaller than Kedah or Penang, explained retiree Muhsin Bujhaid. However, it is not spared from extreme weather. “When it rains heavily, floods are the consequence, but when the dry spell [...] overcomes us, the drought and humidity is quite a bother. The water may come, but at times just as a trickle,” said Muhsin. In Alor Setar, Kedah, hotelier Mohamed Yunus Jaafar exclaimed that the hospitality industry is fortunate because the water supply has been constant. Lately, however, there have been concerns that the dry spell will require water rationing.

Such is the general pattern of impressions and expectations concerning water supply on Peninsular Malaysia’s northwest coast. Interstate differences matter significantly: there is a notable difference between how water authorities in Kedah and Penang manage their respective treated water entities and services. Penang has better water infrastructure compared to Kedah (a much larger state, which is also heavily dependent on Sungai Muda), but there is no room for complacency.

As noted by Chan Ngai Weng, president of Water Watch Penang and a prominent local expert advocating for sustainable water management, local water consumers are a demanding lot. “They generally expect a lot but are not willing to pay. Firstly, they want good-quality water flowing from their taps 24/7 and 365 days a year. They realise adequate quantity and good quality water will determine their health, and see both as fundamental human rights.”

Chan also explained how they expected PBAPP, as their water service provider, to offer the highest-quality water, yet still maintain low and affordable rates: “they are [...] generally not receptive of water tariffs increases.” He believed that water consumers in Kedah generally have lower expectations compared to Penangites, which speaks to how the relative affluence of Penang’s consumers affects water expectations.

**IMPROVING WATER INFRASTRUCTURE,
CHANGING PUBLIC EXPECTATIONS**

Overall, PBAPP states that Penang’s treated water is routinely sampled across hundreds of points state-wide, generally achieves very high compliance with Ministry of Health (MOH) standards, and is among the cleanest in Malaysia. According to a working paper by Jaseni Maidinsa, an industry veteran who chairs Pengurusan Aset Air Bhd, Penang’s treated tap water is expected to meet national drinking water standards under the National Drinking Water Quality Surveillance Programme. PBAPP must comply with these rigorous standards before treated water reaches homes and businesses.

“However, these standards may drop with climate change,” alerted Jaseni. His advice to his fellow industry counterparts is to protect raw water resources in catchment areas and their broader river basins. These “must be gazetted as protected areas”, where trespassers and illegal loggers are subject to “the long arm of the law”.

Jaseni’s opinions on meeting emergent water security demands include enforcing strict environmental safeguards to prohibit upstream pollution and high-impact activities like mining, whether for rare earth elements, sand or other resources. He also calls

“...water consumers in Kedah generally have lower expectations compared to Penangites, which speaks to how the relative affluence of Penang’s consumers affects water expectations.”

for a generational upgrade of infrastructure with firm deadlines to eliminate non-revenue water losses—specifically, by targeting the replacement of all legacy asbestos cement pipes by 2050 and water meters by 2040. Finally, he underscores the need for operational resilience, advocating for 15% reserve margins, 24-hour emergency response teams state-wide and the integration of desalination plants and public advocacy to future-proof Malaysia’s water ecosystem.

At the same time, the public’s water expectations must be fundamentally transformed: a challenge that water authorities nationwide are struggling with. For Jaseni, although Malaysians are now more aware of climate change, adaptation and mitigation are still not very high on their agenda. Similarly, according to Chan, “[m]ost Malaysians generally put finance/economy, education, healthcare and food first. Climate change comes after all these needs are met. So, our priorities are clearly not climate or water. I don’t think Malaysians are in a state of denial. They know climate disasters are occurring, but they are resistant to change.” Pathmanathan, meanwhile, has been involved in the task of revising water expectations among consumers, advocating for conservation and preservation measures, as well as exploring the possibility of investing in desalination plants.

***Note:** See also the *Dasar Air Negara 2026* (National Water Policy), published the Ministry of Energy Transition and Water Transformation, at https://www.petra.gov.my/uploads/content-downloads/file_20260417120801.pdf.

How does PBAPP evaluate treated water against key MOH parameters?	Micro-biological safety	No detectable <i>E. coli</i> /coliform contamination. Water must be pathogen-free.
	Physical quality	Low turbidity (for example, clear water, minimal suspended particles). No abnormal colour, odour or taste
	Chemical limits	Residual chlorine maintained within safe disinfection range. Aluminium and heavy metals below allowable thresholds. pH maintained within potable range.
	Distribution safety	Water must remain compliant with standards, from treatment plant to household taps.
Typical Malaysian potable benchmarks include	Turbidity	Below 5 NTU (nephelometric turbidity units)
	Free residual chlorine	More than 0.2ppm (parts per million) and less than 2.5ppm.
	E. coli	Zero detectable <i>E. coli</i> in potable samples
	Aluminium	Below 0.2ppm
If your tap water in Penang looks cloudy or smells unusual, this may indicate	Pipe flushing works are in progress.	
	Temporary sediment was left behind after maintenance.	
	Local building plumbing issues.	

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1

PENANG HILL FESTIVAL 2026 HIGHLIGHTING NATURAL AND CULTURAL HERITAGE

BY PENANG HILL CORPORATION

CAPTIONS

1. A major highlight of PHF is its much-loved signature event, "Music on the Hill—East meets West".
2. Field experts will lead special exploration sessions, including a Mushroom Exploration on 19 July, guided by Rosnida Tajuddin.
3. Visitors can expect to take part in a series of insightful sessions exploring Penang Hill's heritage, conservation and environmental stewardship.
4. Venture into the enchanting realm of the rainforest after dark, where the jungle comes alive with secrets waiting to be discovered.

ON 17–19 JULY, Penang Hill once again welcomes the world to the Penang Hill Festival (PHF). Organised by Penang Hill Corporation (PHC) since 2018, this seventh edition, "See the Nature, Feel the History", promises three immersive days of exploration, discovery and celebration.

Set amidst the Hill's cool, lush landscapes, PHF invites visitors to explore its rich biodiversity and harmonious blend of nature, heritage and culture. Having been designated as the Penang Hill Biosphere Reserve in 2021, the Hill stands as a testament to the importance of conservation, education and sustainable development. Its deep rainforest, diverse flora and fauna as well as historical landmarks collectively offer a fit setting for celebrating both natural beauty and human stories.

This year's PHF features 34 activities across 11 locations; there will be something for everyone. Visitors can look forward to guided discovery walks and expert talks by 28 speakers and guides, interactive hands-on workshops, captivating exhibitions, photography sessions and live performances. These are meticulously designed to deepen an understanding and appreciation of the Hill's ecological and cultural significance. Whether you are a nature enthusiast, history lover or simply looking for a refreshing weekend escape, the festival provides countless opportunities to connect intimately with Penang Hill.



“Music on the Hill—East meets West”, taking place on Sunday, 19 July, is a must-attend signature event, free for all to enjoy. Year after year, this musical showcase continues to be a crowd favourite and PHF’s defining highlight. Set against the charming backdrop of the historic Bellevue Hotel, this evening event offers a captivating fusion of traditional and contemporary music. Five homegrown performing groups will take the stage, each bringing their own distinctive flair and cultural influences. Among them are students from AIM Educare Learning Centre, including those with special needs, who will present an inspiring angklung performance. Joining them are Zer0 Orchestra Penang, Boria Omara, the Telugu Association of Malaysia and Superfrenz.

Visitors can also expect to take part in a series of insightful talks exploring Penang Hill’s heritage, conservation and environmental stewardship. On 18 July, “Penang Hill: Echoes Through Time” invites visitors to uncover historical stories and never-before-published findings. It features Dato’ Dr. Ooi Kee Beng, executive director of Penang Institute, independent researcher Eugene Quah Ter-Neng and Enzo Sim Hong Jun, author of *The Great Hill: A Short History of Penang Hill*. This session is moderated by Dr. Beh May Ting, head of Penang Institute’s History and Regional Studies Programme.

On 19 July, “Penang Hill in Focus: Conservation Challenges and Achievements” brings together Ar. IDr. Tan Bee Eu, founder of BETA Architects Plt, and Ar. Safuan Azman, director of Arkitek LLA Sdn Bhd, to discuss the balance between heritage preservation, architecture and the environment. It will be moderated by Allen Tan Heng Poe, nature lover and a friend of Penang Hill.

An exciting addition to the programme is the “From Hill to Plate” Dining Experience, an innovative farm-to-table journey presented by Nature Green Farm. This specially curated experience celebrates sustainable plant-based cuisine and highlights fresh, locally grown produce from Penang Hill. The menu will not only delight the palate but also tell a story of sustainability and responsible farming. It is a unique opportunity for savouring flavours deeply rooted in the Hill’s very environment.

Photography enthusiasts are in for a treat as well, with exclusive workshops hosted by Canon Marketing Malaysia. The Bird Photography Workshop on 18 July and the Flora and Fauna Photography Workshop on 19 July will take place at David Brown’s Restaurant & Tea Terrace, where

experienced photographers will share valuable tips and techniques. Seats are limited and participation fees apply, so early registration is strongly encouraged.

For families, groups of friends and curious visitors alike, PHF2026 introduces Stamp Rally, created in collaboration with Elsiewithlove and supported by Tourism Malaysia. This encourages participants to explore the hilltop by collecting stamps from four selected locations. More than just a fun activity, the Rally is designed to spark curiosity and foster a deeper connection with nature by transforming the Hill into a vibrant and memorable learning space.

As you journey through the wide-ranging programme, you will encounter not only Penang Hill’s natural wonders but also the stories, traditions and shared memories that define its identity.

***Note:** Gather your family and friends and join us from 17 to 19 July 2026. For event details, registrations and fees, visit www.penanghill.gov.my/phf2026.



DESIGNED BY PENANG CULTIVATING LOCAL CHAMPIONS FOR THE GLOBAL SEMICONDUCTOR VALUE CHAIN

BY
**KENNETH
ONG**

SUPPORTED BY THE
**PENANG
DEVELOPMENT
CORPORATION**

WORLD-RENOWNED TECHNOLOGY

COMPANIES are often synonymous with their countries of origin: AMD and Nvidia from the US, Samsung from South Korea and TSMC from Taiwan. Malaysia, too, aims for similar recognition, particularly in the critical semiconductor industry, whose global value is projected to reach USD1.1tr by 2030.^[1] More than just a silicon commodity, semiconductors have become a symbol of national pride, intellectual sovereignty and technological innovation.

Being the “new oil” of a digitised 21st century,^[2] the safeguarding of the local semiconductor supply chain has become a matter of national security for policymakers. Malaysia is undergoing an economic shift to elevate the semiconductor industry from backend assembly to high-value, front-end integrated circuit (IC) design and advanced packaging. Under the National Semiconductor Strategy, it is aggressively modernising its manufacturing base to attract strategic investment, with an ambitious goal of nurturing more than 100 local champions that can integrate with the higher-value global chain. Key to national success is Penang, which is leading a transition away from “made in Malaysia” manufacturing alone, and towards innovating high-value silicon products “designed by Malaysia”.

BUILDING PENANG'S IC DESIGN SECTOR ECOSYSTEM

Now home to over 50 IC design players,^[3] including multinational corporations and homegrown small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), Penang is actively redefining Malaysia's place on the global semiconductor leadership map. In particular, the state-driven Penang Silicon Design @5KM+ (PSD@5KM+) initiative is rapidly developing an IC design ecosystem as a cornerstone initiative in elevating Penang as a specialised global hub. A collaborative effort between the state government, InvestPenang, Penang Development Corporation (PDC) and the Penang Skills Development Centre (PSDC), it consists of three key projects: its centerpiece, the Penang IC Design and Digital Park, the Silicon Research and Incubation Space (SRIS) and the Penang Chip Design Academy (PCDA).

The Penang IC Design and Digital Park is a 1mil ft² industrial project developed by PDC, which will house a cluster of high-value activities in IC design, research and development as well as other high-value engineering operations. Slated for completion in 2029, the Park also aims to attract global and local IC design players to Penang. Beyond infrastructure development, PDC serves as the ecosystem's custodian, by maintaining industry-ready facilities and coordinating with Invest-Penang to curate a competitive ecosystem consisting of high-value tenants.

Innovation will be fostered by SRIS, a dedicated one-stop centre for startups and SMEs, with access to industry-standard tools such as the Electronic Design Automation programme, cutting-edge equipment and expert mentorship.^[4] One pivotal milestone was the opening of the Shared Lab for IC Design Validation & Characterisation in February 2026.^[5] This facility specialises in the critical post-silicon validation phase of the chip production cycle. By providing advanced equipment for rigorous testing, the Shared Lab helps prevent costly product recalls by guaranteeing that chips perform in real-world applications.^[6] As a crucial addition to the IC design ecosystem, it strategically leverages Penang's half-century heritage as a global assembly, testing and packaging hub.

Finally, the PCDA ensures that the ecosystem is supported by a steady talent pipeline. A PSDC-run upskilling programme ensures that Penang's advanced infrastructure is matched by a high-skilled, industry-ready workforce capable of driving the next era of semiconductor innovation. By aiming to train 1,000 IC design engineers through programmes led by industry veterans, the academy supports both fresh graduates and experienced engineers alike.



PENANG'S EMERGING LOCAL CHAMPIONS

Malaysia's first locally designed silicon product, the MARS1000—its first edge AI chip—was engineered entirely in Penang.^[7] Developed by Skyechip, an IC design startup founded in 2019 by industry veterans from Intel, MARS1000's launch in August 2025 marked the major first step in advancing the nation's global value chain. Built on a 7-nanometer (7nm) process, this Internet-of-Things (IoT) processor is optimised for cost-efficient AI workloads. It provides domestic and regional players with ready-made solutions for autonomous robotics, industrial automation, smart cities and smart agriculture. Although not intended to compete directly with high-end Nvidia edge AI processors, MARS1000's successful development proves that Penang possesses the high-end design capabilities required to move upstream in the global value chain.

SkyeChip's breakthrough is a testament to Penang's vast intellectual capital. It is currently a premier intellectual proprietor, holding over 100 patents across Malaysia, the US and China. As one of SRIS's inaugural occupants, alongside other local pioneers like FILPAL, Infinecs Lab and Silicon X, SkyeChip's impact extends beyond the MARS1000. Prior to its release, the company had already developed two critical technological building blocks in July 2025: High Bandwidth Memory 3E and Network-on-Chip. These solutions are essential for supporting high-performance AI applications in cloud computing, next-generation vehicles and smart devices.^[8]

In parallel with SkyeChip's success, Silicon X, another Penang-based company, achieved a major breakthrough by designing Malaysia's first field programmable gate array (FPGA) chip. Announced in November 2025, this FPGA is a versatile technology that can be reprogrammed for use across multiple industries, including automotive systems, data centres and AI/machine learning applications. It is currently undergoing a rigorous testing phase, facilitated by PSD@5KM+ validation infrastructure, with mass production scheduled for the first half of 2026.^[9]

SECURING MALAYSIA'S TECHNOLOGICAL SOVEREIGNTY

The transition away from global backend assembly to front-end laboratory marks a monumental shift, requiring more than just engineering talent. IC design requires sophisticated and technologically complex tools that traditional manufacturing lacks. It demands a specialised infrastructural foundation, which PDC aims to provide at the Park, thus ensuring that the local ecosystem has the industrial tools necessary to scale-up and sustain future innovation.

Beyond infrastructure alone, the PSD@5KM+ ecosystem is positioning Malaysia as a sovereign contributor, rather than passive participant, in the semiconductor value chain. The success of homegrown champions like Skyechip and Silicon X in owning intellectual properties makes the country—and Penang in particular—a magnet for high-value investment, while offering stability amidst geopolitical tensions and supply chain volatility. Through the synergy offered by state investment, PDC's operational excellence and InvestPenang's support, Penang is finally shedding its legacy assembly reputation to truly become the "Silicon Valley of the East": the grounds upon which the architecture of the future is built.

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URUT

A CARE PARTNERING JOURNEY

BY OKUI LALA

AUNTY'S SLIGHTLY COLD hand rested in my palm. When she stood up, I felt her grip tighten around mine. At that moment, I was holding Aunty's hand, leading her from the living room to the dining area to play a game. Sometimes, Aunty didn't feel like playing, so I used a gentle, coaxing tone to invite her to join. She responded like a grandmother indulging her grandchild, smiling and nodding softly. I thought then that she needed more movement to help with her blood circulation. As we walked, our hands naturally loosened and tightened with each step. (Excerpt from "4.12 p.m.—Hand in Hand")

URUT





It's 6.15 am

The excerpt from Ming, a care partner and social worker, comes from the Urut-urut (lit. “massage-massage” in Malay) project, which captures the daily routines of the care partners of people living with dementia (see *Penang Monthly*, March 2026). Other recordings by Ming include “3.11 p.m.—‘Uncle, come and have green bean soup!’” and a conversation about papaya trees, depicting the intimate and often invisible gestures that sustain daily care. Each one is marked by the moment the alarm rings, prompting care partners to note their tactile sensations, feelings and thoughts just immediately prior.

Urut-urut is a series of workshops developed in collaboration with Penang-based care partners of people living with dementia. These artistic research workshops explore care partnering and dementia through the senses, memory

and imagination using a range of artistic tools. In this process, team members act as co-authors, shaping the work collectively through shared reflection and experience by asking what care looks like, and how we can talk about it.

THE IDEA OF CARE

Care partnering names a way of being, where individual roles in care work are not fixed as “givers” or “receivers”. Instead, the term “care partner” itself foregrounds a relationship built upon understanding, partnership and a continuous process of finding connection.

Before encountering the care partners’ community in Butterworth, I had very little image of what a “care partner” truly was. I even confessed to Cecilia Chan, a gerontologist at the Bagan Specialist Centre (BSC) Eldercare Centre and also a dementia

activist, that the idea felt overwhelming. It was too real and close to home, especially with ageing family members and the rising cost of living. She was generous and invited me to embark on what became a journey of discovery, introducing me to a small but diverse group of care partners: family members, care professionals, friends, volunteers and neighbours who eventually became the heart of Urut-Urut.

CARING FOR TWO AND YOUR FUTURE SELF

I woke up to the sound of the television and realised it was Sunday. I looked at the clock—6:15 a.m. Auntie was already up. The first thing she did was turn on the TV. Hearing the sound meant she had successfully used the remote control to switch to her favorite channel. I stayed in bed and did some stretching exercises, thinking that it’s good to move a little every day to keep the muscles flexible. Maybe when I grow old, I won’t have so many mobility problems. (Excerpt from “6.15 a.m.—Stretching Exercise”)

This morning I was woken up by the alarm clock. Auntie didn’t turn on the TV today. She just sat quietly on the sofa in the living room, sitting there in the dark. It means, “Oh, today is a day without ‘autopilot’”. You have to tell her to make milk. So yeah, every day is different. (Excerpt from “Morning—Autopilot”)

During our workshops, Tan’s responses were always short, practical and grounded in what needed to be done. This makes sense once you know that she is the care partner for both her mother and aunt. Care, for her, is not an abstract idea, but involves daily logistics, physical labour and emotional endurance.

In the process of turning the recordings into videos, Tan realised how much had already changed in just a few short months. The situations and emotions captured in her earlier recordings had already shifted, making her reflect upon how the journey of being a care partner is constantly evolving. It prompted thoughts about the transition from being a care partner in the present, to one day becoming someone who needs care herself.

Her recordings reveal how care shifts between routine and unpredictability. One of the most emotionally charged videos during our public screening was Tan’s “Sunday Evening – Shower Oil”. It depicts the weekly routine of bathing her mother, beginning by applying shower oil over her body. In this moment of physical closeness, Tan’s reflections circle back to herself and her own evolving understanding of care. As she shared in her recordings: “I realised that this process feels like caring for a child. When I was little, my mom used to bathe me. Now I’m the one bathing her. It feels like life has come full circle.”





4

A VERY COMPLICATED FEELING

I must have said that at least ten times in those five minutes.

I was feeling a bit impatient—not just with her, but also with myself. Normally, she only gets confused like this in the late afternoon, not in the morning. But this happened at 11.55 a.m., and I could clearly see how much she has declined. I’ve known her as someone who used to be very logical and capable, but now I’m seeing her struggle with even simple shifts in tasks. She couldn’t adjust her thinking this time.

So I started questioning myself—maybe I shouldn’t have switched the activity. At the same time, I know she’s usually able to handle transitions like this. These are both familiar tasks for her. But today, she couldn’t cope. That alone showed me how much she has changed. It felt like a new stage, a new realisation.

It’s a bit like how you feel with a family member—when they’re not doing well or can’t manage something, you feel this mix of frustration and sadness. It’s hard to describe. I was frustrated with her, frustrated with myself, and also feeling sad. It was just [...] a very complicated feeling. (Excerpt from “11.55 a.m.—Puzzle”)

Among the six care partners in this project, Jess’s recordings are the longest. The excerpt above was recorded in Cantonese, and I remember wanting to talk with Jess afterwards. When listening to her thoughts and the complex emotions running through them, care suddenly felt less distant. She too moved through doubt and other emotions, turning them over again and again.

Perhaps that is what the recordings hold: not answers, but small openings into the ways of hearing another person think

through care in real time, and realising that our feelings of uncertainty, frustration and tenderness are not ours alone.

Just as a massage requires another person’s hands to ease the body’s tensions, the care partnering journey is also relational, something that we do together. Through these quotidian recordings—whether of waking up to the sound of the television or holding hands, from bathing a mother to struggling through complicated feelings—I began to imagine care differently. Not as something abstract, but as something lived, shared, negotiated and learned together.

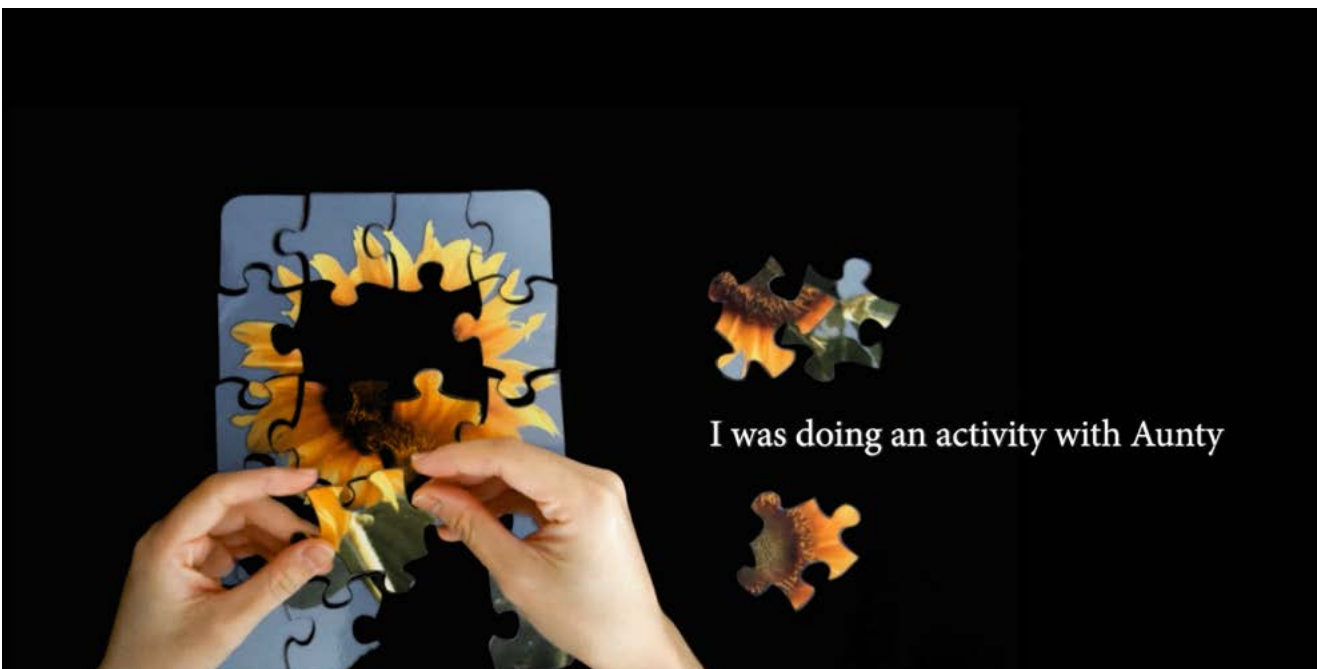
***Note:** The Urut-urut project videos are now publicly available on YouTube. (<https://www.youtube.com/@urut.urut2>). BSC Eldercare Centre has initiated a monthly dementia care partner support group for Malaysians, with further information available on Facebook (<https://www.facebook.com/BSC EldercareCentre/>). Images courtesy of Urut-urut and BSC.

CAPTIONS

1. (Cover page) Urut-urut’s care partners enacting a scene from the recording.
2. Still from “6.15 a.m.—Stretching Exercise”.
3. Public screening of an Urut-urut video during the Ageing Well Festival 2025 (Photo by BSC).
4. Urut-urut team members: Okui (far left), Alice, Dr Cecilia, Jess, Ming, Tan and John (Moon is not pictured).
5. Still from “11.55 a.m.—Puzzle”.



Chew Win Chen, better known as **OKUI LALA**, is a Malaysia-based artist and cultural worker who grew up in Penang. She explores identity, migration and labour, often through collaborative, conversation-centred processes that blur the line between art and everyday life.



5

MAI CERITA

BY NICOLE CHANG

A STUDENT
PROJECT
WITH HIGH
INTERCULTURAL
AMBITIONS

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN you bring together two distinct Malaysian puppetry traditions? In December 2025, I participated in “Mai Cerita, Hidupkan Pentas Warisan”, a pair of workshops organised by Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) students.

These on-campus events brought together Wayang Kulit (Malay shadow puppets) and Potehi (Chinese glove puppets) performances, not just as passive showcases, but as interactive sessions. “The Bayang Stories” and “Potehi: Stories in the Palm” involved participatory engagement, experienced through making and performing, thus demonstrating that Malaysia’s cultural ecosystem is not composed of isolated silos, but is instead an interconnected cultural landscape of shared multicultural identities.

Relying on the interplay of light and shadow, Wayang Kulit captivates audiences through the moving shadows of puppets cast upon a screen, where epic tales woven into local folklore are narrated. Meanwhile, Potehi employs hand-manipulated, vibrantly crafted fabric glove figures to perform puppetry gestures on stage. While Wayang Kulit hides the master puppeteer, or *tok dalang*, behind the screen, the puppeteer (or at least their hand) is still visible in Potehi performances. Regardless, both forms share a common dramaturgical foundation in oral storytelling, rhythm, humour, moral reflection and communal gathering. By presenting Wayang Kulit and Potehi side by side, Mai Cerita demonstrates their differences, but also resonances.

FROM WAYANG KULIT TO POTEHI

Mai Cerita was conceived as a final-year project by a group of School of Communication students, which brought together not just members of the student body, but also secondary school participants from Sekolah Menengah Kebangsaan Raja Tun Uda (SMKRTU) and Penang Free School. Given the diminishing interest in traditional performing arts among youths, this proactive initiative was indeed an urgent intervention. “To sustain cultural continuity,



younger generations must experience heritage, not just learn about it,” said Cheah Khe Xin, project director of Mai Cerita.

I started my immersion by attending “The Bayang Stories” workshop, held at Muzium & Galeri Tuanku Fauziah on 9 December, led by Mohd Jufry Yusoff from Wak Long Music & Art Centre and supported by USM’s cultural officer, Murshid Md Hussain. Mohd Jufry established the Centre in 2002 and is actively involved in traditional cultural performances (for example, Wayang Kulit, Gamelan and other folk music and dance performances). 47 participants were introduced to the world of the *tok dalang*, who narrates, manipulates and animates myth and moral tales through shadow and sound. The workshop concluded by inviting participants to craft their own puppets and tell new stories.

One participant from Penang Free School remarked: “Exposure to Wayang Kulit opens our eyes to the richness of our cultural heritage, something the younger generation should be proud of and treasure.” As their peer chimed in: “I look forward to more events like this. It widens my knowledge and cultural experience!”

On 15 December, Ombak Potehi 破浪布袋戲, led by Marcus Lim and Keith Song, conducted the “Potehi: Stories in the Palm” workshop. Ombak Potehi was one of the bodies established under the Ombak-Ombak ARTStudio in 2015 to promote art through performances, festivals, exhibitions and workshops.

Here, 42 participants were introduced to the basics of Potehi theatre, including the unique features of handcrafted glove puppets of varying designs, hand-warming exercises, puppet manipulation techniques, movement control and storytelling foundations. Traditionally associated with Hokkien communities, this palm-sized theatrical form is usually conducted in the community’s language. Participants were grouped together to practise hands-on puppet manipulation and movement control, before finally performing their own shows in their preferred languages. “I had never heard of Potehi or seen it before,” shared a student from SMKRTU. “This led us to discover Potehi.”

Participants happily left feedback on post-it notes, expressing satisfaction with their first-time experience, valuing their embodied and experiential learning. Through the curated activities held during both workshops, student participants shifted away from being merely observers towards becoming creators, narrators and performers in their own right.





4

REAL-WORLD CULTURAL WORK EXPERIENCE

Mai Cerita was envisioned as a celebration of the richness and layered diversity of Malaysia's performance heritage, demonstrating how intercultural performance traditions can coexist as interconnected pedagogies that inform and enrich one another. This approach constructively fosters mutual understanding as well as a deeper connection to and appreciation for traditional cultural expression among younger generations. Ultimately, sustaining cultural heritage among communities depends not only on preservation, but also its continued relevance in contemporary life.

This project was organised by Hikarya, an initiative led by USM students, who collaborated on design, branding, promotion, reporting and, most importantly, execution. In short, they took ownership of the key elements of a real-world creative industry. From classroom learning to practising cultural agency, the Hikarya team worked intensely between October 2025 and January 2026 to conceptualise, pitch, fund, plan and ultimately conduct the project. Their strategic aim was not merely to foster pride in Malaysia's multicultural traditions, but also emphasise its continued relevance to society. Guided by their supervising lecturers, Mai Cerita also aligned with the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals, particularly the fourth and eleventh (Quality Education and Sustainable Cities and Communities, respectively).

Suriati Saad, the undergraduate programme chairperson at the School of Communication, stated that this inaugural final-year project format was intentionally designed to mirror workplace realities. The goal was to expose students to the real industrial environment and, throughout the process, cultivate readiness to progress in their future careers. Although initiated as a graded academic requirement, in practice, it ended up as a full-fledged cultural production, where students collaborated across specialisations to support each other's roles while networking with external stakeholders, building relationships that could lead to internships or even job opportunities.

Khe Xin and public relations lead Zetty Humairah were impressed by the team's accomplishments throughout, whose responsibilities included developing social media campaigns on Instagram and Tik-Tok, creating booth displays, coordinating sponsorships, managing logistics, designing engagement activities and negotiating with artisans and cultural practitioners to schedule and curate learning sequences.

As Hikarya's team navigated these industrial demands under a tight deadline, they confronted the creative, logistical and financial challenges of assembling cultural initiatives. They observed that preserving heritage demands more than just passion, but also effective strategic project management. Culture, in other words, is hard work.



6



7

CAPTIONS

1. (Cover page)
The Wayang Kulit performance at the "The Bayang Stories" workshop.
2. Marcus and Keith demonstrating standard hand "postures".
3. Wayang Kulit puppets on display at the "The Bayang Stories".
4. Participants making their own puppets at the "The Bayang Stories" workshop.
5. Participants present their own Wayang Kulit tale using their own handmade puppets.

6. Booth displays from the Mai Cerita workshops.

7. Potehi fabric glove puppets on display at the "Potehi: Stories in the Palm" workshop.

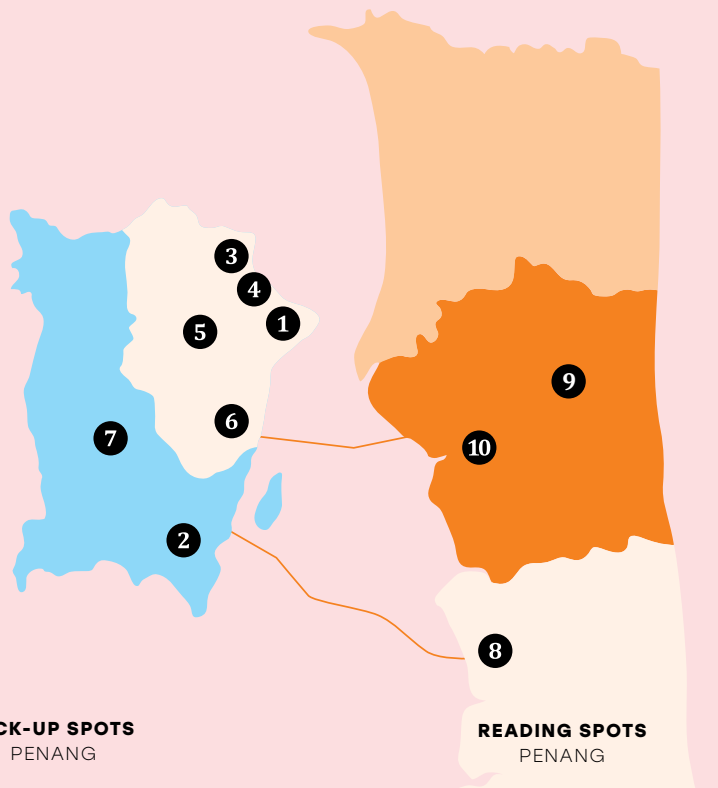


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5

HERE'S WHERE YOU CAN FIND PENANG MONTHLY



PICK-UP SPOTS KL/SELANGOR

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

PICK-UP SPOTS PENANG

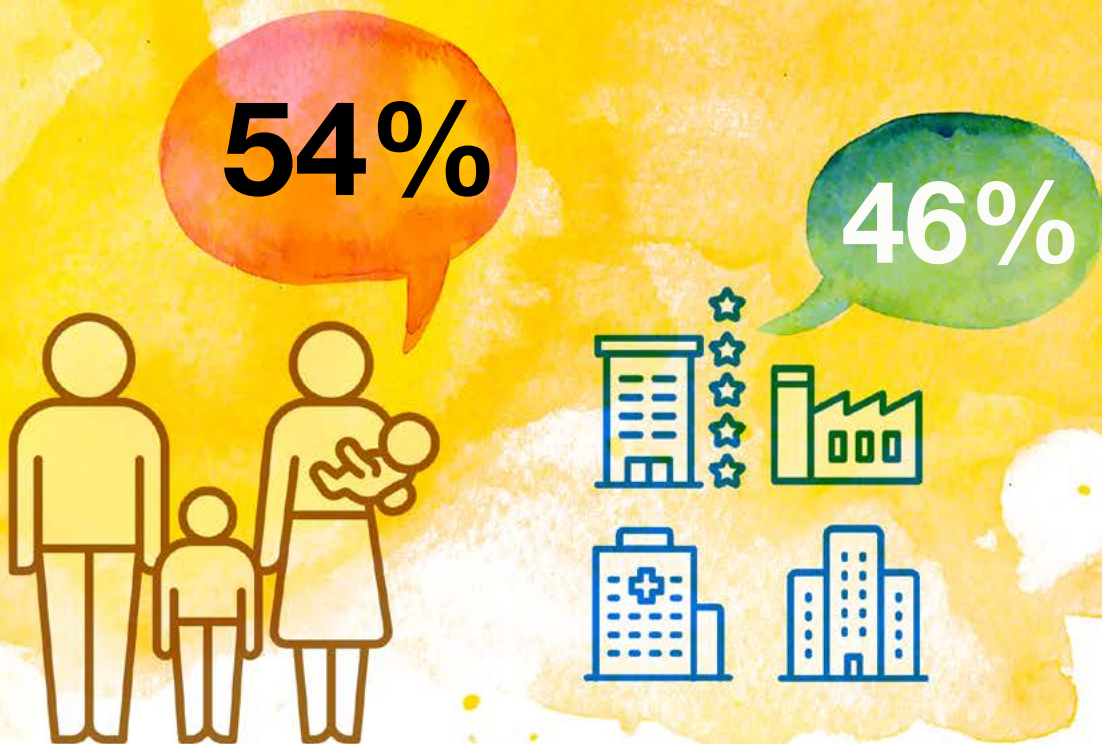
①	George Town
Areca Books Book Island @ COEX Infinity 8 Black Kettle BookXcess Gurney Paragon ChinaHouse Cheong Fatt Tze Mansion (Blue Mansion) Gerakbudaya Bookshop @ Hikayat Gurney Plaza (Information Counter) Hin Bus Depot Art Centre Huey & Wah Café Le Petit Four Patisserie More by Arang Coffee Penang Institute Penang Island City Council (Komtar Level 3) Pusat Harmoni (Harmonico)—Reception Ren I Tang Heritage Inn Sin Seh Kai Artisan Bakery Tourist Information Centre 32 Mansion	
②	Bayan Lepas
Arang Coffee InvestPenang Penang Development Corporation (PDC) Penang Skills Development Centre (PSDC) Urban Republic	

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

READING SPOTS PENANG

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

“WHO USES MORE WATER IN PENANG: COMPANIES OR HOUSEHOLDS?”



In 2024, **604,976 domestic consumers in Penang consumed about 54%** (470 MLD) of the state's total water consumption of 870 MLD in 2024. **100,522 non-domestic consumers accounted for the remaining 46%** (400 MLD).

In other words, households use more water than all the factories, hotels, offices, shopping malls, F&B outlets, hospitals and government premises in Penang.

Penang's per capita domestic consumption was **261 litres/capita/day (LCD) in 2024**. The national average (as published by the National Water Services Commission or SPAN) was 225 LCD in 2024. This shows that an average household in Penang used **16% more water than the national average**.

Please conserve water at home, just like you conserve electricity and fuel. For water saving tips, please visit www.pba.com.my.

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