PENANG MONTHLY

OCT 2025 | FREE COPY

FEATURE
THE MANY HANDS BEHIND A MUSLIM'S FINAL JOURNEY

FEATURE
KEEPING THE ART OF DEATH OFFERINGS ALIVE

FEATURE
WHAT A PET'S DEATH CAN TEACH CHILDREN (AND US) ABOUT LIFE

MARKING THE END OF LIFE

X PENANG MONTHLY

HELP US BRAILLE PENANG MONTHLY

Help us make *Penang Monthly* accessible to the blind and visually impaired community.

Your donation will help:

- Expand reading materials: Increase the availability of braille materials.
- Support St. Nicholas' Home: Contribute to the library at St. Nicholas' Home.
- Empower the visually impaired: Provide opportunities for personal learning, growth and enjoyment.

SCAN THIS CODE TO DONATE

Each Braille issue costs approx. RM100 to produce.

FOR MORE INFO https://snh.org.my/donations/braille-penang-monthly

PENANG MONTHLY

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

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

Dear Readers,

Since our founding, *Penang Monthly* has been committed to celebrating the stories, culture and people that make our city unique.

As a free publication funded by the state government, we take pride in delivering quality content that informs, entertains and connects our community.

However, to expand our reach, improve our offerings, and keep our magazine vibrant and independent, we need your support.

Whether you're a local business interested in advertising, an organisation looking to sponsor a special feature, or a reader who simply values what we do, your contribution ensures we can continue to grow and serve you better.

Here's how you can help:

- Advertise with us—Reach engaged, local readers who care about our city as well as visitors who want to know more about Penang.
- Donate or subscribe—Even small contributions help us invest in better content and resources.

For partnership inquiries & donations, contact
business@penangmonthly.com

Thank you for being part of our journey!

PENANG MONTHLY PENANG INSTITUTE

LIKE WHAT WE DO? SUPPORT US!

Penang Institute is a non-profit organisation, relying mainly on research grants and donations. To keep us up and running, and to continuously give you the latest scoop on economic and cultural trends every month, you can make a contribution to Penang Institute. Tax exemption receipts will be given for donations above RM1OO. Please contact business@penangmonthly.com for more information.

HANDY PHONE NUMBERS

POLICE & AMBULANCE
999

FIRE
994

RESCUE
991

PENANG ISLAND CITY COUNCIL (MBPP)
04-259 2020

MBPP HOTLINE
04-263 7637 / 04-263 7000

SEBERANG PERAI CITY COUNCIL (MBSP)
04-549 7555

MBSP 24H FREE TOLL
1-800-88-6777

POLICE HEADQUARTERS
04-222 1522

PENANG HILL RAILWAY
04-828 8880

PENANG BRIDGE HOTLINE
04-398 7419

BUTTERWORTH RAILWAY STATION
04-391 0050

INCOME TAX (LHDN)
04-255 2000 (George Town)
04-584 7000 (Bukit Mertajam)
04-578 3930 (Seberang Perai)

CUSTOMS' OFFICE
04-262 2300

IMMIGRATION OFFICE
04-262 2300
04-250 3414 (George Town)
04-397 3011 (Seberang Perai)

STATE SECRETARY OFFICE
04-262 1957

EMPLOYEES PROVIDENT FUND (EPF)
04-226 1000 (George Town)

SOCIAL SECURITY (SOCSO)
04-238 9888 (George Town)
04-388 7666 (Seberang Perai)

ROAD TRANSPORT DEPARTMENT (JPJ)
04-656 4131 (Batu Uban)
04-392 7777 (Seberang Perai)

NATIONAL REGISTRATION DEPARTMENT (JPN)
04-226 5161

DEPARTMENT OF LABOUR
04-262 5536 (George Town)
04-575 1957 (Seberang Perai)

MALAYSIAN RED CRESCENT SOCIETY NON-EMERGENCY AMBULANCE SERVICE
011-5767 0917/011-5767 0916

CONSUMER ASSOCIATION OF PENANG
04-829 9511

WOMEN'S CENTRE FOR CHANGE
04-228 0342

CHILDREN'S PROTECTION SOCIETY
04-829 4046

BEFRIENDERS
04-291 0100

SPCA
04-281 6559

PENANG PUBLIC LIBRARY CORPORATION
04-397 1058

DEATH RITUALS ACROSS MALAYSIA

NEXT MONTH ON *PENANG MONTHLY*

GTLF

EDITOR
Ooi Kee Beng

ASSISTANT EDITORS
Sheryl Teoh and Rachel Yeoh

COMMUNICATIONS
Iylia de Silva

BUSINESS MANAGEMENT
OGL Consultancy

GRAPHIC DESIGNERS
Kai Fam and Kevin Teh

LOGISTICS EXECUTIVE
Muhammad Amirul Naim

PRINTER
The Phoenix Press Sdn Bhd (1723K)
2509 Jalan Perusahaan Baru,
Prai Industrial Complex,
13600 Prai, Penang, Malaysia.

GENERAL ENQUIRIES & CONTRIBUTIONS
editor@penangmonthly.com or
contact +604 228 3306 (Extension 223 or 225)

BUSINESS ENQUIRIES
business@penangmonthly.com

PUBLISHER
PENANG INSTITUTE
making ideas work

10 Brown Road, 10350 Penang, Malaysia

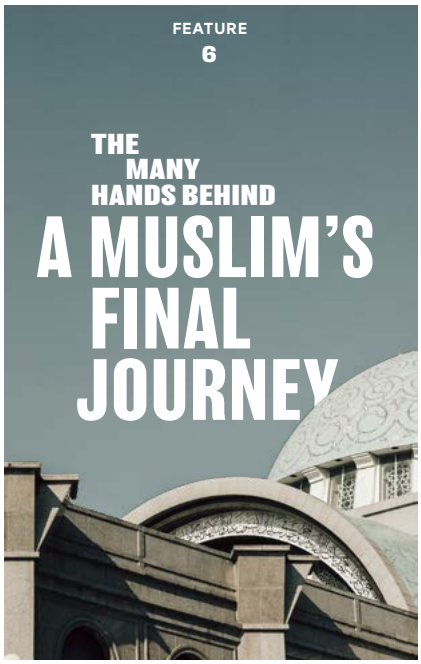
T +604 228 3306
F +604 226 7042
IG @PenangMonthly
FB fb.com/penangmonthly
W penangmonthly.com

ISSN 2232-0733 10

PP 14554/11/2012 (031123)
MCI (P) 116/12/2012

COVER STORY
10

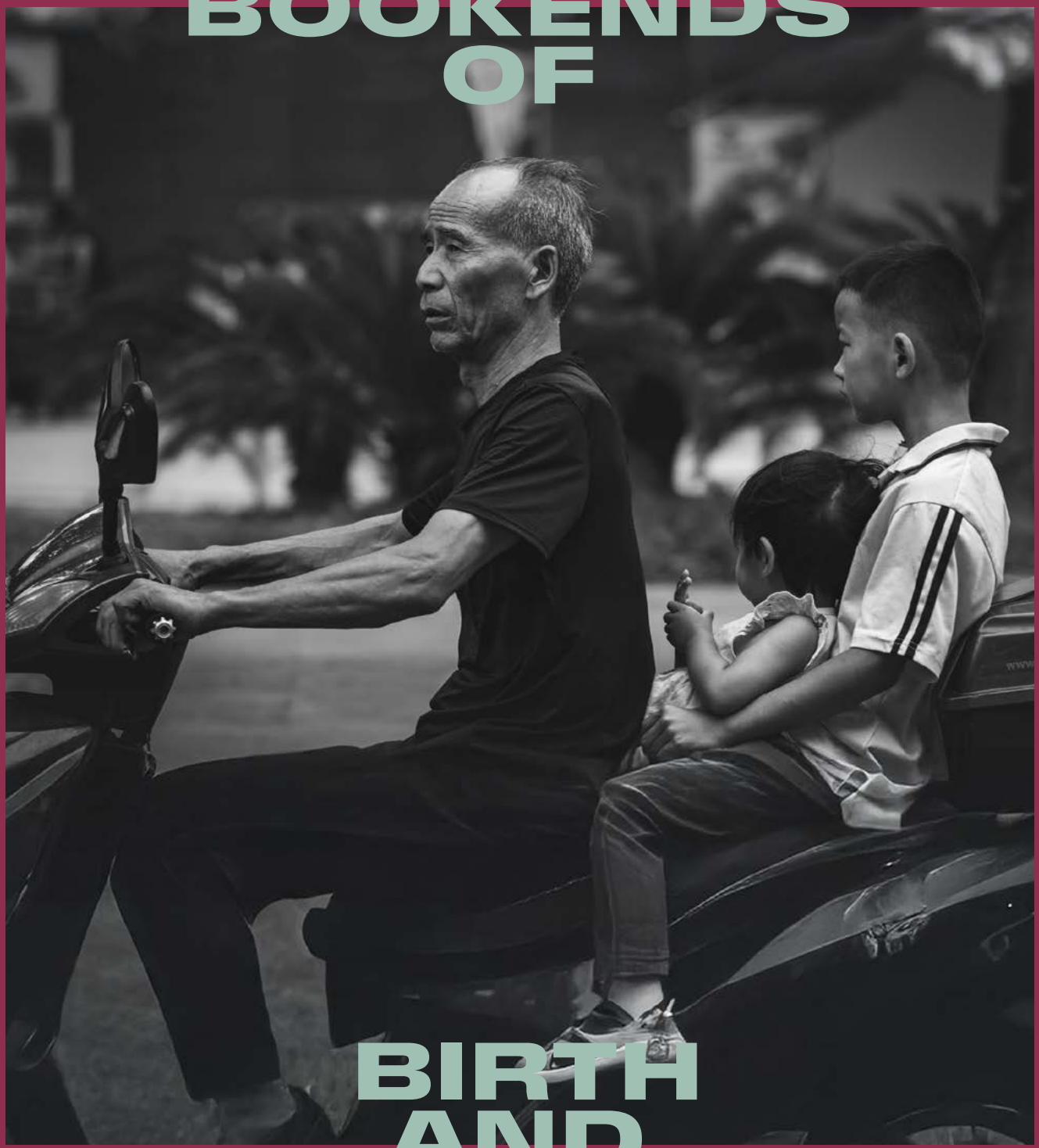
MARKING THE END OF LIFE: RITUALS ACROSS MALAYSIA



FEATURE
22

WHAT A PET'S DEATH CAN TEACH CHILDREN (AND US) ABOUT LIFE

BETWEEN THE BOOKENDS OF BIRTH AND DEATH



BY OOI KEE BENG

I AM PAST 70 years of age, so I shall pull rank on my readers—most of you anyway, and talk about Birth, Life and Death.

My parents are both dead. I was at their wake, funeral and burial. There is much one can learn from the emotions, rituals and social behaviours that such events involve.

Reflexively, we fear death, but when it does appear, we find that we do accept it, simply because there is no choice. Reality is always abrupt when it confronts you. Death is always abrupt, and it is final. Yet, it modifies reality for those left behind.

Chinese wakes can stretch over several days. I came to realise why this is so. Now, births and marriages are socially declared and celebrated, while deaths (and maybe divorces) are socially mourned and acknowledged. The collective participation these occasions call for is highly relevant.

The loss of a loved one is more easily accepted if members of the close collective—friends, neighbours, relatives—come together to acknowledge that loss, and to mourn. It is indeed of great help to the closest grieving individuals to experience the loss as a collective moment, as one that stretches beyond their personal memories and grief. A person's death is an ontological issue, of course, and collective grieving makes the forthcoming permanent absence of the deceased more real, and therefore easier to accept.

A collection of social games, of relationships—unique ones at that—pass away with the death of a person. Another thing I have learned about observing death is to distinguish the experience of dying from that of mourning. There is not much to learn about the former except to wonder about the last moments. The latter are the ones we sympathise with. As social beings, a part of them has died as well, in the sense that the one-to-one social moves they used to have with the deceased can no longer be made. They are ended.

Those who depend most on that mutual connection to the deceased suffer the most, one imagines.

MEANING AND LIFE

This brings me to talk about Life. Now, I am one of those who do not conceive of Life and Death as polar opposites, as mirrors of each other. Birth and Death are, but Life and Death are not; it is a false dichotomy. Life is simply the period between Birth and Death, the span of time when the individual transforms his energy into meaning.

Birth and Death are bookends, and the contents—the books, the stories, the narratives—are all found in the space between them.

How long that space is, and what books stand there... that depends on what and how much meaning the person created in his life.

In short, we are the meaning-makers. Meaning requires investment in time and interest, energy and resources. And that comes from the individual living being. It is in their use of attention, energy and time that we can judge how much something means to them. Their giving of meaning in that concrete way is what brings meaning into the world.

The quest for meaning in Life is best satiated by seeing Meaning as a verb, and not a noun. Meaning does not exist the way a physical object exists. It is "found" only in the sense that something—anything, physical object or not—inspires serious investment from an individual.

The thing is, as human beings, we cannot not mean!

For aged people though, it is clear that time and energy are running out. The energy they wake up with in the morning is all they have for the day. How they use that energy is their bringing of meaning into their day.

Not to be wasted. Carpe diem.

“Birth and Death are bookends, and the contents—the books, the stories, the narratives—are all found in the space between them.”

BY CAROLYN KHOR

THE MANY HANDS BEHIND

A MUSLIM'S FINAL JOURNEY

ON THE QUIET edges of society lies an indispensable yet overlooked profession—undertakers. While the dictionary definition of "undertaker" could technically include anyone involved in funeral tasks, in practice, it refers to a trained service provider, also known as a funeral director or a mortician, who oversees the whole funeral process. This includes the ceremonial and respectful handling of the deceased during cleaning, preparation and transportation, as well as performing post-burial rites and offering advice.

In the Muslim context, an undertaker is a professional who prepares and manages funeral rites according to Islamic law, such as performing or arranging the *ghusl* (ritual washing), *kafan* (shrouding), transport and burial of the deceased. Sometimes, these duties can also be relegated to others within the community network.

From the home or hospital where death is certified, the mosque where prayers are led, to the burial ground and the gravestone where names are carved into, each pair of hands carries the deceased a little further along their final journey.

What looks seamless from the outside is, in fact, careful choreography between faith, family, public authority and private operators.

THE JOURNEY BACK TO THE CREATOR

For Muslims, death is understood as a return to the Creator, and death rites are meant to honour both the deceased and the living, who gather to mourn. According to Chief Imam, Mohd Arif Aizat Abdul Razak of Masjid Hashim Yahya on Perak Road, the mosque is usually the first point of contact whenever someone passes away.

While not every mosque provides facilities for the management of the deceased, Masjid Hashim Yahya offers the *palong,* or dedicated spaces for washing, shrouding, and for families to gather and perform prayers for the body.

"Family members and visitors may also be present to pay their last respects at the mosque," he says.

The technical aspects, however, such as washing the body, shrouding and transport, are handled by appointed funeral operators engaged by the family. The mosque also has their own van, donated by Bank Simpanan Nasional years back.

"Funeral management packages are handled by several groups, and the cost is usually around RM1,250," says Arif.

For those who are struggling, the mosque may extend a small one-off contribution to ease immediate costs. "The mosque offers assistance to families who are less fortunate. For example, those with many children, widows or without close family support. We provide a token contribution of between RM300 to RM400 from the mosque to help with the payment for the funeral costs."

Night work, public holiday surcharges and cemetery overtime can sometimes push fees higher, according to Arif, who also believes that greater transparency would help, and suggests that the Penang Islamic Religious Council (MAIPP) put up guidelines for charges, so families know exactly what to expect beforehand. MAIPP is a state-level statutory body under the Penang state government.

Arif also encourages families to perform the Solat al-Jenazah (funeral prayers) themselves, ideally with a male relative leading the prayer. "If family members lack confidence, the imam or a mosque officer will step in to guide. But it is better when the children take part," he says; the rites are communal obligations, not a performance reserved for experts.

Next to the mosque is the burial ground that is owned by MAIPP. After the family decides where to bury the body, they would also inform the authorities. MAIPP will then arrange the burial plot and assign grave diggers to start digging. If the land belongs to the mosque, then separate arrangements will be made.

THE GRAVE DIGGERS

Timing is sensitive for Muslim deaths. When one occurs late in the evening, and there is no risk of deterioration, prayers and burial often take place the next morning to allow more people to attend.

"Otherwise, the process can be completed within the same day. The goal is dignity and due care, not haste," says Haszuan Harun, the grave digger for the burial ground at Jalan Perak.

Haszuan, also known as Wan, works under MAIPP. He and six other staff look after a seven-acre site that now receives roughly 10 burials a week, and 30 to 40 a month. As land is limited, the Jalan Perak cemetery uses a tiered system arranged in neat rows.

Wan explains that burial plots are dug 7ft deep, and can be reused after five years, once the previous body has decomposed. "Seven of us usually dig the grave together, taking about an hour," he says. The length of the grave depends on the size of the coffin.

Muslims are usually buried without a coffin, but wrapped in a shroud and placed directly in the earth—sometimes with wood or stone at the bottom—to facilitate a natural return to the earth, and in accordance with Islamic practices.

However, there are exceptions for legal or environmental reasons. Wan says that at Jalan Perak, coffins are sometimes used as the soil is soft.

He adds that each burial is aligned with the *qibla*, with the body laid on its right side and the face turned toward the Kaaba in Mecca. This echoes the Islamic practice of facing the Kaaba during daily prayers and supplications. In death, this orientation becomes a final act of unity and *ibadah* (devotion), symbolising the believer's return to Allah.

Wan's team coordinates closely with mosque staff and funeral operators so that prayers at the mosque and cemetery continue into the lowering of the deceased and the filling of the earth. On busy days, three or more graves may be prepared. On others, the grounds are still, with only the hum of traffic from the main road.

"Working in this field, we are always reminded of death. We will all die, sooner or later. This job brings humility and an awareness that life is short," he says.

BEHIND THE SCENES

Zahidi Azhar runs Zahidi Enterprise and is a funeral director. He says his job entails explaining options to family members, coordinating schedules with the mosque and cemetery, and anticipating details no one thinks about until things go wrong, like extra pallbearers, having shade at midday or preparing drinking water for the elderly.

He explains that the process of preparing a body for burial begins with washing the deceased at the *palong*, in accordance with the *Sunnah*, the traditions of Prophet Muhammad. "The body is first placed on a raised platform such as a board, bed or a special washing table, with the *aurat* properly concealed with cloth."

"The person responsible for the washing then sits the deceased upright, supporting the body with the right hand while using the left to gently press the stomach to expel any remaining impurities. Wearing gloves, they clean the private parts, and also ensure that the mouth, nostrils and ears are washed so that water reaches these areas. Once this is completed, *wuduk* (ablution) is performed for the deceased, just as someone alive would.

"The head and face are then washed with soap or other cleansing agents, while the hair is combed neatly. If any strand of hair falls out during the process, they are buried along with the deceased. Washing continues with the right side of the body, beginning from the neck, followed by the left side. In this way, the whole body is thoroughly cleansed."

According to Zahidi, this constitutes the first wash, but it is *Sunnah* to repeat the process up to three times, or even more if necessary. For the final wash, it is recommended to mix the water with a little camphor, unless the person had died while in a state of *ihram* (pilgrimage consecration). Perfumes or fragrances are also added to mask any odour, as Muslims do not employ the use of dry ice to keep the body preserved before burial.

A MARK OF REMEMBRANCE

Azhar Abd Hamid of Adeq Nisan Venture carves tombstones. He says it usually takes seven to 12 days to complete a pair of tombstones, with his company producing between 40 and 80 pairs a month, depending on demand.

"Each tombstone bears the name of the deceased, date of birth, date of death and age, all engraved by sandblasting onto the stone," he says. Materials used range from granite and cement, to river stone, with granite often pre-ordered. Prices start from RM400, and can go up to RM1,600 for a pair, depending on the material and design.

With the tombstone erected, the burial process is considered complete, leaving family and loved ones with a place to return to, to pray, reflect and remember.

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

1

2

5

3

4

6

7

8

REALISING THE MORBID OVERTONES OF BLUE AND GREEN IN CHINESE AND NYONYA CULTURE

BY ONG JIN TEONG

I HAVE EXPLAINED in my books and articles why blue colouring should not be used indiscriminately in Penang, e.g. for Pua Kiam Tee Chang, for the rice in Nasi Ulam, in Bee Tai Bak and even for Cendol. However, this practice of adding the blue hue has become more widespread in Penang, probably because *bunga telang* flower (also known as the butterfly pea flower) is now more commercially available. However, it was not traditionally used for happy occasions, and was only acceptable when serving specific kuehs during weddings and birthdays.

The traditional practices surrounding death, bereavement and the mourning that follows have evolved. Over the years, the mourning periods have been reduced. Black, white, blue and green are traditionally considered mourning colours. For distant relatives like younger cousins, nephews and nieces, blue was the lighter colour for mourning. Lighter still was the green worn by the in-laws of the deceased. Surviving relatives older than the deceased did not mourn, but refrained from wearing red or bright colours out of respect.

When mourning, wearing gold or diamonds is considered inauspicious. Instead, the Nyonyas wear pearls to symbolise tears, and jewellery made of silver and jade to represent solemnity and respect. In those days, the Nyonyas had blue and green kebayas and sarongs, and *manik* (beaded) shoes in blue and green; some of these would be thrown away at the end of the mourning.

HAPPY AND SAD COLOURS

In Penang, both Pulut Tai Tai and Pulut Inti are served in Nyonya weddings. The glutinous rice is soaked in a solution of *bunga telang* overnight to give the rice its bright blue colour before steaming. The Pulut Tai Tai is cut into small, rectangular pieces and served with the golden-coloured kaya on top. For happy occasions like weddings, the golden colour of the kaya overrides the blue of the glutinous rice. As for Pulut Inti, this is wrapped in a piece of banana leaf with the *inti* on top. Sometimes, it is carefully wrapped so the "gold" *inti*, made from grated coconut cooked in sugar and Gula Melaka, is partially exposed.

Although green is also associated with mourning, in Malay and Nyonya culture, pandan leaves serve as a natural food colouring widely used in kuehs such as Onde-onde and Kuih Dadar, which are traditionally served at Nyonya weddings. Green is considered an auspicious colour by the Malay community, due to its deep-rooted significance within the Islamic tradition.

In Penang, we often assume the Ang (red) Koo Kuih, a sweet glutinous rice cake prepared for a baby's first month celebrations, is always red. Traditionally, they also come in black, white and blue when served at funerals and wakes, Hungry Ghost Festivals, Cheng Beng and death anniversaries. There is also the white Kuih Bangkit, popular during Chinese New Year. The kueh is usually dotted red—two dots for animal-shaped kueh to represent its eyes. The red dots signify that the white signifies purity, not grief.

When my wife's *jee chim* showed us how to make Kuih Koci, her cousin warned us not to serve the kueh for happy occasions. The colour of Kuih Koci is white; green when pandan leaf paste is used, and near black when black glutinous rice is added. These colours are inauspicious, and that is why these are only served during sad occasions, like wakes and funerals.

Not many young Penangites have come across Bee Tai Bak as a Nyonya dessert; they may be familiar with it as a type of noodle served in a savoury soup. For this simple dessert, red and white Bee Tai Bak are served in syrup, and usually with ice. I have come across and often participated in Facebook discussions on the use of blue colouring for serving blue Bee Tai Bak dessert and even Cendol. Many do not understand that these colours are reserved for mourning. If only blue Bee Tai Bak is served as a dessert, it is clearly meant for sad occasions. However, serving it the traditional way with red and white Bee Tai Bak, or even mixed with blue, can be done during happy occasions.

In recent years, I have noticed many food bloggers colouring Pua Kiam Tee Chang blue, although it is not a traditional practice in Penang. However, it may be more of a common practice in Singapore and Melaka. They often use blue to add colour to kuehs made with glutinous rice, e.g. Apong Berkuah, Nyonya Chang and Pulut Panggang.

It is a traditional practice in the east coast states to colour their Nasi Kerabu blue, most probably due to Thai influence. Again, it is not the practice to colour the rice in Nasi Ulam blue in Penang. The natural colour of the Nasi Ulam is a light-yellow due to the finely sliced *kunyit*. This is why I find it sad when some Chinese and Peranakan associations in Penang serve blue-coloured Nasi Ulam at several of its official functions. It gives the mistaken impression that blue rice in Nasi Ulam is the norm among Penang Nyonyas and Babas.

Blue and white porcelain was traditionally used during mourning rituals by the Nyonyas and Babas. These colours were considered substitutes for black and white. These blue and white crockeries were also often used for ancestral offerings. Some families employ white and blue porcelain sets, which are specially designated for serving offerings; this reflects respect for the deceased.

Understanding Nyonya traditions is essential for all Nyonya chefs, as food is deeply connected to culture, symbolism and rituals. While it is popular to adapt traditional dishes to suit the evolving tastes and preferences of the younger generation, these modifications must respect and conform to established customs and practices, ensuring the preservation of cultural heritage.

CAPTIONS

1. Kuih Bangkit
2. Onde-onde
3. Pulut Tai Tai
4. Kuih Koci
5. Ang Koo Kuih
6. Kuih Lapis
7. Pulut Inti
8. Nasi Ulam

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's College of Engineering professor, he lectures, conducts classes, writes books and articles on Nyonya cooking and food heritage, and runs the occasional supper club.

“Different beliefs, different rites, different means of laying the body to rest—and yet, all of them stem from the same conviction: that death must be marked, mourned and honoured.

This is not an exhaustive account of how all the different ethnicities in Malaysia mark death; even within the same faith or culture, practices shift with religion, family customs or circumstances. The stories here provide only glimpses into how some communities here approach the end of life.

MARKING THE END OF LIFE

RITUALS ACROSS MALAYSIA

BY
SHERYL TEOH

AND
TEIOH NUAN NING

WHEN SOMEONE DIES in Malaysia, news spreads quickly within the community. Within hours, the house is already filled with funerary service providers and mourners: plastic chairs set out, boxes of mineral water in a corner, snacks laid out for guests to nibble on. Death may arrive suddenly, but it is never endured in isolation.

What follows depends on your race, religion and family background. For Malay Muslims, burial is expeditious and no-nonsense—a quiet return to the soil and the Creator. For Chinese Taoist and Buddhist families, the funeral stretches across days, filled with incense, offerings and ritual prayers. For Hindus, fire carries the soul from one transitive state to another. Meanwhile, the rituals and customs of the Orang Asli, the indigenous tribes in Malaysia, are diverse and many, each a window into the worldview and culture of these tribes.

Different beliefs, different rites, different means of laying the body to rest—and yet, all of them stem from the same conviction: that death must be marked, mourned and honoured.

A SWIFT RETURN

In a Malay community, news of a death is greeted with the recitation "*inna lillahi wa inna ilayhi raji'un*" (indeed, we belong to Allah, and to Him we shall return). The rhythm begins almost immediately, with funerary rites carried out either by relatives of the deceased or by mosque authorities. It begins with the ritual washing of the body, also known as *mandi jenazah*, usually once with water, then with water steeped with acacia leaves, and finally with water mixed with camphor. Women are washed still wearing their clothes, their dignity intact. When *mandi jenazah* is not possible, *tayammum* is conducted instead, an act of purification through rubbing the body with sand.

After being cleansed, the body is wrapped in a *kafan*, a simple white shroud sprinkled with camphor, powdered sandalwood and non-alcoholic perfume. Like the Prophet, men receive three sheets of fabric, while women are allowed up to five to protect their modesty. Everyone is dressed in the same white cloth, un-ornamented, indistinct. Death strips everyone equal.

The Solat al-Jenazah is performed in congregation to seek pardon for the deceased, led either by a male family member or an imam. The prayer is brief and followed by a short speech, usually by a family representative, this time asking for forgiveness on behalf of the deceased from friends and family—sins against God may be forgiven by Him, but debts and wrongs against other people must be resolved individually.

Like most Malay occasions, the hustle and bustle of funerary affairs are carried out through *gotong-royong* (community cooperation). Neighbours, relatives and friends prepare food, receive guests and assist the grieving family. Men help with digging the grave and carrying the coffin, while women gather at home to recite the Yasin or Qur'an, and provide emotional support to the family.

Within 24 hours of passing, the body is already laid to rest in the grave facing the direction of Mecca. This haste is symbolic; the soul's transition to the afterlife should not be unduly delayed. Muslims believe that upon burial, the soul enters Barzakh, an intermediate spiritual realm, where it waits until the Day of Judgment, when it will be physically resurrected and, depending on past deeds, sent to either heaven or hell. Because of this, Muslims refrain from excessive tampering with the body, and embalming, cosmetics and cremation are strictly forbidden.

Once the *roh* (soul) has left the body, worldly ties are cut. However, relatives and friends may still pray for the deceased; and on the third, seventh and 40th day after the funeral, they gather again to recite the Tahlil in remembrance.

This swiftness in returning the body to the earth stems from a fundamental Islamic belief: that death is a natural part of life's cycle, and life is merely preparation for an eternity in the afterlife.

NEGOTIATING WITH THE AFTERLIFE

A Taoist-Buddhist Chinese funeral moves at a different tempo. Traditionally, these are loud, elaborate and extravagant affairs; love, respect and filial piety are measured by what can be perceived: the amount of tears shed, how loudly grief is declared, how many paper ingots are burned to ease the deceased in their afterlife, how intricate and painstaking the rituals are.

Rituals do not change the reality of death, but they give the living something to hold on to, some sense of purpose, something to do. They make grief bearable, transforming absence into memory, helplessness into action and love into gestures.

Death is seen as bad luck, and this permeates Chinese superstitions and beliefs. The number 4 is taboo, because when spoken in Chinese, it sounds like the word for "die". You are also not to utter the word "die" during auspicious times, such as Chinese New Year, for fear of inviting bad luck. Similarly, white or black clothing is associated with mourning, and should be avoided during joyful celebrations.

Once death occurs, a white banner is hung over the household door to announce the loss. An obituary notice is sent to relatives and friends, its funeral date chosen from the *tōng shèng* (通勝)—the Chinese fortune calendar—to ensure an auspicious departure.

Traditional Chinese society is deeply stratified; mourners are dressed according to their relational proximity to the deceased: immediate family members are dressed in plain white, with armbands and other accessories to indicate rank; others can come in white or muted shades of black, blue and green. The festive hues of red and yellow are frowned upon (except in the death of a centenarian); joy and festivity have no place in mourning. In some families, the mourning period may extend for as long as three years—a visible testament to the depth of the surviving family's filial duty.

During the wake, the coffin may be placed at home, if space allows, or in a funerary parlour, which would also prepare the deceased for burial or cremation (depending on the family or the deceased's wishes), as well as arranging and conducting funeral services for the bereaved family. In front of the coffin are food offerings: bowls of rice, roast pork, chicken or duck, vegetarian dishes, fruit, tea, flowers and sometimes even a pack of cigarettes—things the dead might enjoy. Effigies of clothes, mansions, cars and, in recent decades, even electronic gadgets and credit cards are burned to ensure the deceased's comfort and wellbeing in the afterlife. The economy of the afterlife mirrors the economy of the living.

Taoist-Buddhist Chinese see funerals as a process of negotiation. If done right, the deceased soul's passage to the afterlife may be eased and smoothened; done incorrectly, the soul may be lost, or arrive there penniless and starving. It is believed that this wretched fate can be avoided with strict adherence to elaborate rituals.

One of these is the ritual of Breaking Hell's Gate (破地狱), during which Taoist priests free the deceased's soul from purgatory and release it to its final resting place. Ceramic tiles, which correspond to the courts of the underworld, are arranged in a circle. Sand carvings of a snake and a turtle are used to represent the two generals of hell, and a symbolic Hell's Gate. A Taoist priest circles them while chanting, robes swaying, cymbals and drums clashing in time to his steps. Deities are invited into the ceremony to assist. One by one, the tiles are broken, until the way for the spirit is cleared.

Chinese death rituals do not end upon burial or cremation. One of the most critical rituals occurs in the seven weeks after death, also known as the seven-sevens or 做七. It is believed that the deceased enters an intermediate state between their previous and forthcoming lives, which can span up to 49 days, during which families engage in prayers to provide solace to the departed soul as it awaits rebirth. The dead are also customarily honoured on specific holidays, such as Cheng Beng, the Winter Solstice or on the anniversary of their passing.

Chinese funerals can be noisy, expansive *and* expensive—a dizzying tapestry of sounds, scents and gestures—but underneath it is an act of care, devotion, obligation and filial piety that does not die when the body does. Even in death, the bond endures: the living feeds the dead, keeps vigil and honours their memory.

LIBERATION THROUGH FIRE

Fire purifies, it burns away earthly attachments, including the body, to release the soul for reincarnation. Agni, the deity who personifies fire, acts as a divine messenger, a witness to crucial life events, and a guide for the soul's journey through the cycle of life and death. At birth, marriage and finally death, he is present, marking each threshold.

Upon a Hindu's death, the body is bathed in turmeric water and adorned in beautiful clothes; the women in sarees and the men in kurtas. The body is placed on a

mat, facing south, eyes closed, and the thumbs and toes are brought together. Tulasi, or holy basil, believed to have purifying properties, is placed under the head; an oil lamp, *kamatchi vilakku*, is lit to dispel darkness and illuminate the soul's path to the afterlife.

At the house, a flurry of activities ensues. Family, neighbours and temple people help buy ingredients, cook food, arrange prayers and sit with the family. Just being there is important; some stay for up to a month.

The body is prepared for cremation in the Vaaikkarisi ceremony, where it is cleaned with holy water, then placed in a coffin and garlanded with flowers. Someone close to the deceased rubs oil on the body's head and cleanses it with herbal powder. Women may offer a small amount of rice to the body, placing it in the deceased's mouth to symbolise the soul's safe departure. Finally, coins are placed on the forehead to act as payment for their journey into the afterlife. Typically, the cremation takes place not more than 24 hours after death.

In a ceremony called Asthi Visarjan, the ashes of the deceased are collected and scattered over a moving body of water, symbolising the return of the body to nature.

Throughout these preparations, grief is laid bare. Wailing and crying is natural, the unabashed display of bereavement seen as a sign of love. The mourners do not join celebrations, listen to music or watch television. In some families, women avoid wearing jewellery or bright clothes. This mourning period typically lasts 10 to 13 days, after which, grief becomes more structured through rituals, daily prayers and lighting lamps. These customs help families manage their grief in a way that feels purposeful; they remind the mourning family that grief is shared.

On the first anniversary of a death (*tithi*), families gather again in a ritual known as *shraddha* to pray, offer rice balls (*pinda*) to the departed soul, share memories and feed the poor. Lamps are lit daily at home altars; the grieving family finds solace in the thought that their loved one has found peace in the great beyond.

DEATH IN THE FOREST

In the forests of Pahang, when a Bateq tribesman dies, the entire settlement moves. To remain is to dwell among the spirit, and that would be disrespectful. So, possessions are packed, baskets carried and the tribe finds new shelter in the jungle.

This isn't as laborious and colossal a task as you might think for the Bateqs. A nomadic tribe native to the east coast of Peninsular Malaysia, the Bateqs are already used to relocating every few months for the forest to replenish its resources.

The burial practices of the Bateq are sometimes referred to as "tree burials" as they involve the construction of tall huts to elevate the body into the tree canopy. The deceased is wrapped in a sarong and tree bark with only the face left exposed, and laid to rest with their personal items as well as food for spirits. Since the Bateqs believe that harvested resources belong to nature, and hence should be shared among the community, not many items are considered personal belongings, except for a man's blowpipe and a woman's comb. These usually accompany the body.

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

TEIOH NUAN NING is an undergraduate student of literature and art history who writes about people and culture. In her free time, she enjoys music and theatre.

The location of the burial site is kept secret. Years later, some may return to inspect the remains for final burial. If skeletal remains have not fallen to the ground, the person lived virtuously; if scattered or lost, perhaps taken by animals, the deceased is deemed to have lived a life of sin. Eventually, the bones are gathered and given a final burial, and the deceased's spirit—or *hala*—is believed to have fully returned to the ancestors and the forest.

Further east, in Sabah, the Kadazan of Penampang traditionally observe *momisok*, which takes place on the seventh day after death. In this ritual, the spirit of the deceased (*koduduo* or "your second") is invoked by a *bobohzian* (ritual specialist) to eat a final meal at home and retrieve any forgotten belongings before departing to the afterlife (*pogun do hozob*). Lights are switched off to avoid scaring off the *koduduo,* and rice wine and other food offerings are placed on the dining table.

Today, Catholicism has softened this practice into a syncretic tradition which combines Christian influences with animistic ancestral beliefs. Instead of food offerings, many families now place a crucifix and rosary next to a photograph of the deceased on the table. The form and the meaning endures: the Kadazans want to ensure that the *koduduo* is properly sent off.

WHAT LINGERS AFTER DEATH

In all these practices, one sees less about what death is than about what life means. Among Muslims, humility before God; among traditional Chinese families, obligations across generations; for the Hindus, release from the body's attachments; and among the Orang Asli, the deep bond of the spirit with nature.

Rituals do not change the reality of death, but they give the living something to hold on to, some sense of purpose, something to do. They make grief bearable, transforming absence into memory, helplessness into action and love into gestures. Within these rituals is the hope that someone too will someday give their deaths significance, treat their expired bodies with respect and honour their memory.

Death is the same everywhere—what differs is how the living endure it. And in the austerity of these rituals, life, though brief, is given dignity.

Note:
The authors would like to thank Natasha Amir for her help in conducting interviews and collecting responses for this article.

REFERENCES

1. Interview with Roziati Rosli conducted by Natasha Amir.
2. https://www.jstor.org/stable/41502939
3. https://www.empathy.com/funeral/funerary-and-mourning-practices-in-hindu-tradition
4. Interview with Chandrika Devi a/p Mohanachandran.
5. https://sst.org.sg/HEB/Template3/post-death-rituals
6. https://www.asianindianfuneralservice.com/blog/blog/a-comprehensive-guide-to-hindu-funeral-traditions
7. https://cultureandheritage.org/2024/02/antyeshti-samskara-the-hindu-funeral-rites.html
8. https://www.architectural-review.com/places/exploring-eye-the-batek-tribe-of-malaysia-and-their-architecture
9. https://www.themalaysianinsight.com/v/161953
10. https://mysinchew.sinchew.com.my/news/20250623/mysinchew/6639643
11. https://www.malaymail.com/news/life/2016/03/16/taman-negara-batek-tribe-rooted-in-simple-existence/1080727
12. https://borneojournal.um.edu.my/index.php/BRJ/article/view/16711/9877

TEOCHEW GONG TEK FUNERAL RITUALS

STAGING THE YULANPEN SUTRA

BY TAN SOOI BENG AND TAN YNG LING

THE *GONG TEK* (which translates as merit) ritual is commonly conducted by Teochew communities during their funeral ceremonies. It is believed that the performance of the story from the Yulanpen Sutra or Mulian Saves His Mother from Hell during the *gong tek* ritual helps the soul of the dead to journey safely and quickly towards rebirth, or to Western Paradise, the auspicious and heavenly world where Amitabha Buddha resides.

"The rites nurture moral values of filial piety and respect for one's parents, elders and ancestors. Drama and music help to invoke emotions so that family members can actively say farewell to their departed loved ones," says the 77-year-old Ang Lee Loi, the leader of a group of female *gong tek* ritualists or *zhai gu* (vegetarian sisters) from the Choo Hoon Kok Association, Bukit Mertajam, Penang.

"The story of Mulian Saves His Mother from Hell is a popular one about filial piety that originated in India as the Yulanpen or Ullambana Sutra, a Mahayana Buddhist scripture. This scripture relates the story of Maudgalyayana (transliterated as Mulian among the Chinese, a close disciple of Buddha), who used his powers to search for his deceased mother after he attained enlightenment. However, as a result of her negative karma, his mother had been reborn into the realm of the hungry ghosts, or *preta* (in Sanskrit), where she had been suffering from hunger and thirst. Maudgalyayana gave his mother a bowl of rice, but it turned into burning coal instead. He asked Buddha for help," Ang explains.

"Buddha suggested that in order to save his mother and the hungry souls from hell, he should offer food to the monks at the monasteries on the 15th day of the 7th lunar month. The monks said prayers for Maudgalyayana's mother, and she was saved from the world of the hungry ghosts. It is generally accepted that the Hungry Ghost (Phor Tor) or Yulanpen Festival, held during the seventh lunar month, commemorates Maudgalyayana's intervention in saving his mother. Since then, the hungry ghosts are let out to wander during the Phor Tor Festival every year," Ang continues. Offerings of food, joss money, joss sticks, clothes and other fine things as well as opera performances are made to appease these spirits.

2

In Malaysia, Singapore and Thailand, Mulian Saves His Mother from Hell is performed by Chinese opera troupes in various religious dialects during the Hungry Ghost Festival as well as funeral ceremonies to educate devotees about filial piety.

THE SEQUENCES IN THE *GONG TEK* FUNERAL CEREMONY: TOWARDS A GOOD AFTERLIFE

On the night before the ceremony is held, prayers are chanted by the *zhai gu* to inform the ancestor spirits, deities and Buddha that a *gong tek* ritual will commence the next day. A white horse (made of paper) is sent to invite them to the ceremony. A ritual is held to open the eyes of the effigy (that is covered with paper) that represents the dead.

3

THE MULIAN STORY IN THE *GONG TEK* RITES

Xue Pen (Blood Pond) is enacted if the deceased is a woman. One of the *zhai gu* plays the character of Mulian and sings the story of Mulian Saves His Mother from Hell. Because of her sins, Mulian's mother was punished and placed in a pond of blood. The blood in the pond is represented by small, red bowls filled with red water that are placed around a rattan plate holding joss sticks and paper money. The family members drink the red water from the red bowls, symbolising the cleansing of the soul from the blood and the breaking of ties with the departed as the female soul prepares to journey to the next world.

To the accompaniment of stringed instruments, the Mulian character sings the Xue Pen song. Ang adds that this song "relates the difficulties faced by a mother during the months of pregnancy, childbirth and anxiety when she hears her child cry. She continues to make sacrifices to raise and educate the child for the next 20 years." The Mulian character highlights the unconditional love and sacrifices of a mother for her child, and that this should be counted as her merit for salvation. The family members are reminded to return this love, and to take care of their parents even after death.

For the departed male, the *bao fu en* (returning father's merits) is performed instead. A paper pagoda is destroyed depicting the breaking of the soul from hell. A paper effigy of the deceased and a ladder is attached to the pagoda for the deceased male to climb to the other world. Family members also throw coins into the pagoda to repay the father's kindness.

Bu Nyiok Teh (Boiling Tea) is for those who passed away from an illness, and is led by the *zhai gu*. The family of the deceased will have to ask the God of Earth for special tea leaves from the immortal world, which can remove all illnesses from the deceased.

5

The daughters and daughters-in-law who have been taking care of the deceased boil the tea leaves before putting them into a medicine container. The tea is then served as an offering to the soul of the dead, who had suffered illness. This is so that the latter will not suffer further and can journey to the other world peacefully. Accompanied by string instruments, the *zhai gu*'s song recalls the suffering, sacrifice and services of the deceased.

Po Xia Guang (Passing the Gate) is the climax of the *gong tek* ceremony. It is staged for both male and female souls. Five, seven, nine or eleven *zhai gu* run from five directions representing the penetration of the different gates of hell. To the rhythms

4

6

of drums and gongs, the *zhai gu* dash from the east, west, north, south and centre of the stage area carrying flags, helping the deceased find their way to the next world. It is believed that the loud music will scare away spirits that might be blocking the journey.

Guey Gio (Crossing the Bridge) begins with the musical piece "Nai He Qiao" (Bridge of Separation), where the loud percussive ensemble is played to show anxiety and tension as the "Official in Hell" shouts and blocks the exit of the deceased. The official has his face painted as in Chinese opera, acts as a fierce character and walks with large strides.

7

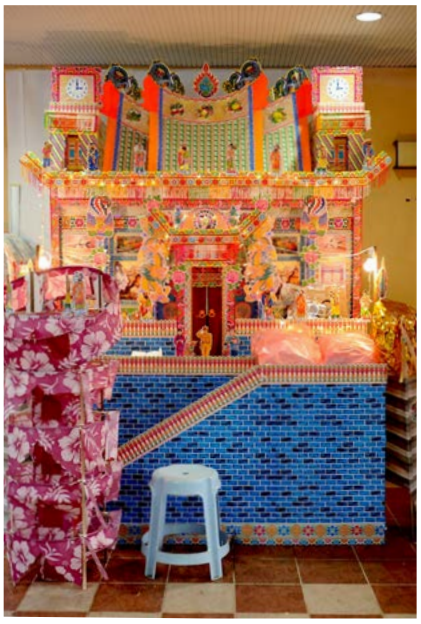
After the Mulian character reports the name of the deceased to the Official in Hell through vocal chants, the deceased is allowed to leave. The music becomes increasingly sad with the string instruments taking the lead. "Qi Zhou Qiao" (Bridge of Seven Directions) is sung when the family members of the deceased cross the bridge nine times and throw coins, giving the departed money for the journey ahead. Crossing the bridge signifies that the soul of the deceased is now free from hell and can travel to the world of the afterlife.

The "Wang Xiang Tai" (Stage of Missing) song that follows conveys the sadness of the departure of the deceased. Mulian cries as she sings about the good deeds of the deceased as the soul travels to the world of the afterlife. This also serves as a last goodbye and the final separation of the family from the deceased.

In the last song, "Yin Ling Hui Jia Xiang" (Leading the Soul Back to the Village), Mulian reports that the family can invite the soul of the departed back to the house on the seventh day after death. That is when the deceased is allowed to appear in the family members' dreams.

At the end of the *gong tek* ritual, prayers are chanted again to send the ancestor spirits, deities and Buddha back to their world, as well as to transfer merits to the deceased. Offerings of paper houses, cars, clothes, gold, money and other materials are burnt for the use of the departed in the afterlife.

Ang concludes by remarking, "In Buddhism, the positive energy generated through chanting, good deeds and ritual performance by the living for the deceased helps to alleviate their suffering and improve their circumstances in the afterlife."



8

9

CAPTIONS

1. (Cover spread) Burning of paper gifts for the use of the deceased on its journey to the next world, 2018.

2. Ang Lee Loi at the Choo Hoon Kok Association, Bukit Mertajam, 2018.

3. Small, red bowls of red water with joss sticks and paper money for the Xue Pen ritual. The red water is drunk by family members, symbolising the cleansing of the soul of the deceased woman, 2018.

4. Prayers by the *zhai gu* on the night before the *gong tek* ceremony starts. A paper horse is sent to invite the deities to the ceremony, 2018.

5. The Mulian character in opera costume, 2018.

6. The "Official from Hell" reads the name of the deceased from Mulian, 2018.

7. The *zhai gu* run from different directions to pass through the gates of hell, 2013.

8. Offerings of paper houses, money, carriage and other items are displayed for the departed soul, 2018.

9. The *zhai gu* and family of the deceased ask for tea leaves with special powers for healing from the God of Earth, 2018.

REFERENCES

1. Tan Sooi Beng, 1980. The Phor Tor Festival in Penang: Deities, Ghosts and Chinese Ethnicity, vol 51, Working Papers, Centre for Southeast Asian Studies, Monash University.

2. Tan Yng Ling. 2018. Upacara Ritual *gong tek* Masyarakat Teochew Cina

3. di Malaysia: Muzik, Teks dan Gerakan [The *gong tek* Ritual Ceremony of the Chinese Teochew Community in Malaysia: Music, Texts and Movement], MAThesis (Music), School of the Arts, Universiti Sains Malaysia.

PROF. DR. TAN SOOI BENG
is a scholar, performer, educator, researcher and activist who has dedicated her life to revitalising community music and creating the Malaysian sound.

TAN YNG LING
is a music lecturer at the Tuanku Bainun Institute of Teacher Education and a keen researcher on the Chinese performing arts and rituals.

> **Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me!"**
>
> **—John Newton**

WHEN GOODBYE IS NOT THE END

BY HAZEL LIM

IF YOU'VE ATTENDED a Christian wake or funeral, you may have heard this hymn[1] being sung—yes, it does not only happen in the movies. In fact, with the many songs sung during a funeral, you might be thinking, "These Christians really sing a lot! I came to grieve, but I might leave humming."

This particular hymn, "Amazing Grace", was written in 1779 by John Newton, who spent the first 20 years of his life faced with hardships after his mother passed away when he was six. Later in life, Newton faced many near-death experiences, and this, he documents in this hymn.

Through many dangers, toils and snares
I have already come;
'tis grace has brought me safe thus far,
and grace will lead me home.
Yes, when this flesh and heart shall fail,
and mortal life shall cease;
I shall possess, within the veil,
a life of joy and peace.

It vividly recounts the struggles that marked Newton's life: the agony of whipping and flogging he experienced when he tried to escape the Navy, the horror of being abducted, fierce storms threatening to drown him at sea, a crushing stroke that brought his seafaring days to an abrupt end, and the remorse over his involvement in the slave trade.

FOOTNOTES

1. A hymn is a song of praise to God and a reminder of Christian truths and beliefs.
2. The concept of "born again" is used to mark "becoming a Christian".
3. This is also a song inmates sing on death row in Singapore: https://thirst.sg/hold-my-hand-cry-of-our-fathers-elijah-7000/

HAZEL LIM is a full-time mother with a passion for parenting and children, while part-timing at a management consulting company specialising in anti-corruption and integrity. She finds joy in arts and crafts as a way to relax and express her creativity.

But what do his trials have to do with the afterlife?

Much of the theology and doctrine of Christianity is based on eternal life that starts when one becomes a Christian,[2] and continues more gloriously after death; he writes with that vision in mind. He was looking forward to relief from life's trials and tribulations—his mortal life shall cease, and after passing on, he will go to heaven, where he will obtain a life of joy and peace.

Christians believe that heaven *is* the destination after death. Thanks to Hollywood and Disney portrayals, thoughts of what heaven is like will summon images of clouds in the sky or a very beautiful place with harps and angels. To believers, it is a place where there will be no more tears, no more pain, no more suffering and no more sorrow. No more sickness, no deformities, no visual impairments and definitely no need for *minyak angin* for minor aches. It is a place to spend eternity with their Maker. This is why Christians believe that death is not *truly* the end, especially if there is new life in heaven. Hence, the way they perform funeral rites is usually targeted towards comforting those who are "left behind".

INFLUENCE OF HYMNS

Christian funerals function to celebrate one's life. While family members and friends may mourn and grieve, it is temporal as believers are confident they will meet their loved ones in the faith again in heaven when their time comes.

Christian funeral services are usually conducted by a pastor or priest who will begin with prayer, followed by the singing of hymns and Christian songs with guitar or keyboard accompaniment, and then Scripture readings. These songs—there are many to choose from—are rich in theology and personal testimony. Those chosen to be sung during the wake service may be the deceased's favourite songs or hymns as a celebration of God's grace in their life—like I said earlier, Christians sing a lot. However, these songs help because in times of sorrow, and when those who are grieving are lost for words, they help to express their deep emotions. Singing together also often unites the grieving in a shared act of worship. It can also be a powerful source of encouragement to one another to press on.

Introduced by Portuguese colonists in the 16th century, and later on by missionaries, Christianity caught on among the Chinese and Indians in Peninsular Malaysia and the tribes people in East Malaysia, making it the third-largest religion in Malaysia at 9.1% of the population, according to the 2020 census. This also means that many of these hymns usually sung in English have also been translated to local languages.

One such hymn famously sung during funerals is "Because He Lives" by William and Gloria Gather. It has been translated into the Malay language by East Malaysians and is also sung in Mandarin.

Because He lives, I can face tomorrow
因祂活着, 我能面对明天
Yin ta huozhe, wo neng mian dui mingtian
S'bab Dia hidup, ada hari esok

Because He lives, all fear is gone
因祂活着, 不再惧怕
Yin ta huozhe, bu zai ju pa
S'bab Dia hidup, ku tak gentar

And because I know, I know He holds the future
我深知道, 祂掌管明天
Wo shen zhidao, ta zhang guan mingtian
Kar'na ku tau, Dia pegang hari esok

And life is worth the living just because He lives
生命充满了希望只因祂活着
Sheng ming chong man le
xiwang zhi yin ta huozhe
Hidup jadi bererti s'bab Dia hidup

Not all hymns originate from the Western world. Sarawakian pastor, singer and songwriter with seven albums under his belt, Lim Gee Tiong, has also written a hymn that is often sung by Hokkien speaking congregations in Malaysia, Singapore[3] and Indonesia during Christian funerals, entitled "Hold My Hand".

本我的手, 我的主啊
Khan gua eh chiu, gua eh zhu ah
Hold my hand, O my Lord

请祢不要离开我
Chia li mai li khui gua
Do not ever leave me

这条路, 我搁要行
Chit tiau lor gua koh ai kia
This journey of Yours,
I want to carry on

我需要祢来作伴
Gua su yau li lai cho phua
I need You to be by my side

牵我的手, 我的主啊
Khan gua eh chiu, gua eh zhu ah
Hold my hand, O my Lord

请祢不要离开我
Chia li mai li khui gua
Do not ever leave me

有时我会惊, 有时不知按怎行
Uh si gua eh kia, uh si em chai an chua kia
Sometimes I am afraid, uncertain of how to carry on

有时干那听不着祢的声
Uh si ka na thia beh tiow li eh xia
And sometimes it seems I cannot even hear Your voice

牵我的手, 请祢甲我作伴
Khan gua eh chiu, chia li ka gua cho phua
Hold my hand, please be by my side

互我的脚步又稳又定
Ho gua eh kah po yu un yu tia
Strengthen my every step that I may stand firm

行到祢的门前, 听到祢的声
Kia kao li eh meng zheng, thia tiow li eh xia
Till I come before Your door, and hear Your voice

甲我讲入来我的子
Ka gua kong jip lai gua eh kia
Saying "Welcome home, my child"

AN EARTHLY GOODBYE

Friends, family and church members often gather not only to mourn, but also to support one another. After a time of prayer for the family, the loved one is usually laid to rest, either through burial or cremation. The family is free to visit the burial site at any time as there is no designated day or ritual required to honour the departed.

Personally, I have gone through the pain of losing my firstborn son shortly after his birth. I believe that while my son suffered through health complications here on Earth, he is no longer suffering in heaven. The hope that I hold onto is that I will meet him again one day. The pain and ache I face are real, but it is temporary. His brief life on Earth has made a lasting impact on me. His death has given me a new perspective on the eternal life ahead in heaven and how I will choose to live the remainder of my life.

And on that day when my strength is failing
The end draws near, and my time has come
Still, my soul will sing Your praise unending
Ten thousand years and then forevermore.

The lyric above is from a song titled "10,000 Reasons" by Matt Redman, sung at my son's funeral. In times of loss, Christian funerals remind their believers that it is not a "final goodbye", but a sacred moment to remember, to grieve and to celebrate the promise that one day, loved ones will meet again on streets paved with gold.

CAPTIONS

1. Family participating in the funeral service of their pet dog.
2. My Pet Funeral prepares simple memorabilia of a pet that has passed for the family to bring home and remember them by.
3. Koay conducting the funeral service.

1

WHAT A PET'S DEATH CAN TEACH CHILDREN (AND US) ABOUT LIFE

BY SAMANTHA KHOO

WHEN WE LOSE someone we love, no one really teaches us how to grieve. Grief doesn't always require public expression; more often, it is an intensely private sorrow felt by the bereaved.

Everyone grieves differently, and the intensity and duration of grief depend on many factors: personality, age, health, spirituality, the closeness of the relationship and whether the loss was sudden or gradual, and how traumatic it was.[1]

Most research around grief is related to human death; however, the death of a pet can trigger the same depth of grief. For many families, a pet's passing feels no less heartbreaking than losing another human who is close to them. Yet, those who mourn a pet feel an unspoken shame, as though they should not feel *that* sad. They may hear dismissive remarks like, "Just bury it. It was only a dog."

Registered counsellor with The Safe Harbour, Benice Malini, explains, "Losing a pet brings up the same feelings of loss as losing a human. Over time, having a pet with you 24/7 creates an emotional bond, and once they are gone, the interaction you used to have suddenly ends."

For those who view their pets as family, hosting a funeral service for them has now become a common practice. It celebrates the pet's life while helping owners gain closure about the death of their pet.

Koay Teng Chin is the founder of My Pet Funeral, and his personal story plays a significant role in his work. After losing his father in a car accident, Koay was caught up in the logistics of it all: police reports, funeral arrangements and managing the closure of his father's business. When he finally had time to grieve, he regretted not verbalising and expressing his love to his father while he was alive.

"Phrases like 'I love you' and 'sorry' are rarely uttered in most traditional Chinese

A personal blogger since her teenage years, **SAMANTHA KHOO** has always enjoyed stringing words together. Her dream is to live off-grid in a cottage with all the coffee, ink and paper she can have.

families, let alone amongst males," Koay says. He initiated the guided farewell ritual through his business, My Pet Funeral, in hopes that through expressing their feelings for their pets, people can cultivate the ability to recognise and express their feelings for their loved ones as well.

THE IMPORTANCE OF A PROPER GOODBYE

When Esther Lau's family dog, Cassie, passed away from cancer, they sought a funeral service. "Cassie was a huge part of our family's life, and we wanted to give her a proper farewell," Esther says. "The ceremony was a memorable and tearful one. Many people came, and I was heartened to see how Cassie's life had touched so many others," she recalls.

During the farewell ceremony, the pet's family and friends are invited to pay their final respects by brushing her fur and putting flowers on her.

2

Koay, the funeral director, guides families through four steps: gratitude, love, forgiveness and blessing. "First, we thank our pets for the companionship and the good memories. Then, we express our love, letting our pet know what we loved about them, and saying 'I love you'. Thirdly, we apologise and ask for their forgiveness for our shortcomings during their time with us. Finally, we say a blessing and lay down some flowers to symbolise our love for them as they cross the rainbow bridge," he says.

If younger children are part of the group, they are invited to participate in ways that are meaningful to them. The goodbye ritual is conducted using more age-appropriate language. Additionally, a colouring sheet becomes their farewell gift for the pet, placed with other mementos in the pet's coffin. "Mr. Koay gave my kids some paper to colour, and each of them had their own time to say goodbye," Esther, a mother of four, adds. She says this helped give closure to her children, who had a strong bond with their dog. "The farewell ceremony helped my kids understand that death is inevitable, so they have to cherish each other. They even vowed that they would excel in life to make Cassie proud," Esther adds.

3

Some families have found that their grief shapes a different kind of lesson: one of openness and resilience.

Sophie Suwannakru, a mother of two, emphasises the importance of family support and attentive listening during the weeks or months that follow the death of a pet. When their dog passed away in an accident, Sophie and her husband felt it was important to openly talk about their feelings with their children. Children feel a wide range of emotions, from sadness to anger and possibly guilt[2], when a pet passes away, and it's important that parents or caregivers do not hide their feelings either. This shows children it is normal to feel and display sadness, which helps them process it over time. "Grieving our dog's death together as a family actually became a meaningful bonding experience for us," says Sophie. It turned the painful experience into a way of teaching the children healthy coping skills they would be able to draw on when facing other losses in life. It also cultivated in her children the ability to appreciate every moment they have. "Because of this loss, my children now want to spend more time with Ah Kong (grandpa) and Ah Mah (grandma)," Sophie says.

Resources for Children

Storybooks can give children the language to process their emotions while grieving:

- *The Rainbow Bridge: A Visit to Pet Paradise* by Adrian Raeside
- *The Invisible Leash: An Invisible String Story About the Loss of a Pet* by Patrice Karst
- *I'll Always Love You* by Hans Wilhelm

MOVING ON AFTER A PET'S DEATH

It is not advisable to rush into getting a new pet to cope with the loss. Should they bring a new pet in, it should be an addition to the family, not a replacement for the deceased pet, as it may imply to the children that their grief is unnecessary and unimportant; or worse, that everything is replaceable.[3]

Instead, Benice says it is helpful to linger in the memories and hold space in our hearts for the deceased pet. To help in remembering the pet, she suggests printing old pictures of the deceased pet or keeping paw print moulds as a form of memorabilia.

"Animals are very generous by nature, and so we can imagine our pets would want us to live well without them. Be well and happy, and visualise that they are now in a better place without pain and suffering," she says. In learning to grieve our pets, we also learn how to grieve our loved ones: with honesty, tenderness and the courage to remember.

FOOTNOTES

1. https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC2691160/pdf/wpa020067.pdf
2. https://www.uclahealth.org/news/article/6-tips-handling-pet-loss-with-children
3. https://vmc.vet.osu.edu/sites/default/files/documents/helping_children_cope_printable_2024.pdf

THE LIVING LEGACY OF

PENANG'S CHINESE CEMETERIES

BY PAN YI CHIEH

MALAYSIAN CHINESE HAVE a unique term for public Chinese cemeteries—Yi Shan (义山). The term, used in Malaysia alongside other more widely used terms such as 冢 (zhǒng) and 墓 (mù; tomb), reflects a core belief of early Chinese immigrants to the country: "Yi" signifies selfless public service, while "Shan" represents the traditional practice of building graves on hilly terrain for good feng shui. These cemeteries are the philanthropic legacies of early Chinese immigrants, who established them as communal burial grounds.

Penang is home to many such public cemeteries, usually built by Chinese associations. Mount Erskine, for example, has one of the largest and oldest collections of these cemeteries, including the Kwangtung & Tengchow Association and the Hokkien United Cemeteries, catering to the different dialect groups here. With the earliest ones dating back to the early 19th century, these sites are the result of the rapid growth of the early Chinese community, and more significantly, indicates the settling down of Chinese immigrants in Penang.

THE PEOPLE LIVING NEAR CEMETERIES

Traditionally, Chinese cemeteries are necessarily detached from people's daily lives. While its grounds are seen as consecrated, people often maintain a respectful distance, visiting only during religious days such as the Tomb Sweeping Festival (Cheng Beng) to clean graves and express remembrance.

That being said, there are communities who have lived all their lives among or near cemeteries in Mount Erskine, including in Hong Seng Estate and Pepper Estate. These residents have unique perspectives born from their proximity to the burial grounds.

Uncle H, for example, has been living in Hong Seng Estate for three decades now, having moved there following marriage to his wife, a third-generation resident. An adherent of Taoism and Chinese folk religion, Uncle H used to volunteer at a temple when he was young; he now works as a caretaker for a temple nearby. While his house is not directly connected to the graves, he passes by the tombs on the way in and out of his home.

Uncle H believes that respect is key to living near a cemetery. "They were here before us. As long as we remain respectful, we can all live in peace. Every time I pass by the graves, I make it a point to offer a simple bow to my surroundings as a sign of respect."

Many residents living near cemeteries, especially the older generations, are doing or have done cemetery-related work, such as weed-clearing and masonry work. These are usually a source of additional income for the residents. Uncle H's parents-in-law who lived in Hong Seng Estate, for example, worked in tomb masonry until their 60s; they also ventured out of the cemeteries surrounding Mount Erskine for work.

Come Cheng Beng, this type of work is especially in demand. It is not uncommon for grave cleaners who have moved out of the state to come back to Penang during the season to provide such services.

Mr. C, who is in his 60s and lives near cemeteries, has been in the weed-clearing business for decades, on top of also doing tomb masonry and maintenance. Adopted as a child into a poor family, he was forced to become self-sufficient when his adoptive father passed away early. As a young boy in Standard Six, Mr. C learned masonry skills from his neighbours to make money—at that time, he earned RM1.50 to RM2 for each service rendered.

Not all residents who live near cemeteries work as cleaners, of course, but those who do are an integral part of the cemetery's ecosystem. Their labour-intensive work of cleaning and maintaining graves eases family members' burden when paying respect to their loved ones. This symbiotic relationship forms an important part of the cemetery's "ecology", where the cleaners' livelihood is directly tied to the respectful upkeep of the burial grounds.

LEARNING FROM CHINESE CEMETERIES

In recent decades, due to modernisation and land scarcity, people have begun to embrace alternative burial options, with cremation being one of the most popular options here. Old Chinese associations, such as the Kwangtung & Tengchow Association Penang, have since expanded their crematoriums to meet community needs.

Recently, there has also been growing interest in learning about the lives and stories of early Chinese immigrants through researching public cemeteries. Pek Wee Chuen, Associate Professor from the Department of Southeast Asian Studies at the New Era University College, leads this effort, providing tours through Penang's cemeteries and helping people understand the history behind the tombs.

"Cemeteries are rich sources of local knowledge, containing essential information about individuals, families and the community's migration history. It is wonderful that cemeteries are now recognised as a vital part of a city's collective heritage, and not just as places to avoid," says Pek.

The Kwangtung & Tengchow Association in Penang is also actively promoting the culture and history of their 18 member associations, encompassing a diversity of dialect groups including the Cantonese, Teochew, Hakka and Hainanese, among others. Through holding a series of talks and activities by experts, Lio Chee Yeong, its President, hopes to bring awareness among member associations as well as the public to promote and deepen the Chinese's understanding of their own culture and history.

Michelle, who attended the talk organised by the association, shares that she grew up on Gerbang Erskine, a small road in Mount Erskine near a private cemetery. As a girl, the experience of passing by the grand cemetery always sparked in her a mix of wonder and fear. These memories stayed with her even after the area was developed into high-rise residential buildings.

However, four years ago, after becoming a tour guide, she became more interested in exploring Penang's history and culture. She started revisiting her uncommon childhood experiences of living next to the cemetery, exploring its history, environment and the emotions it evokes.

These collective journeys of self-exploration show that any place, even cemeteries, can be a precious site for learning and an important source of local knowledge.

"Traditionally, Chinese cemeteries are necessarily detached from people's daily lives. While its grounds are seen as consecrated, people often maintain a respectful distance…

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

KEEPING THE ART OF DEATH OFFERINGS ALIVE

WHEN PEOPLE DIE, they take nothing with them to the afterlife. Or do they? In the Chinese Taoist and Buddhist beliefs, the deceased do.

BY LIM WAN PHING

In their underworld guarded by the King of Hell, the dead can be lavished with material possessions, like a house, money, gold ingots, cars, servants and luxury goods. It's so they may be comfortable and wealthy enough to overcome the 10 Courts of Judgement, also known as the 10 Courts of Hell, before being reincarnated into a higher form of being and admitted into the Western Paradise.

Hence, the burning of paper offerings at Chinese funerals and death milestones at 49 days (this is when they supposedly pass the seventh court), 100 days (the eighth court), one year and three years (the 10th court)—to "transfer" money and other symbolic goods from the living to the dead. The belief here is that the spirit world mirrors the human world in its appetites, customs and needs.

A mix of Confucianism (filial piety, ancestral veneration), Buddhism (reincarnation, sutra chanting), Taoism (harmony with the Dao universal force) and tribal folk religion (animism, worship of household and temple deities) is the overarching brand of "Chinese religion" practised by the Chinese diaspora in Malaysia and Singapore.

CONSTRUCTING A HOME IN HELL

"The paper mansions we make are 4ft, 6ft or 8ft wide," says Khoo Lai Mooi, an effigy maker at Ah Bin & Sons Paper Shop on Jalan Magazine. "The standard for funerals is 6ft, while the 8ft ones are used during the 49-day ritual," explains the 70-year-old, whose father in-law, Ooi Ah Bin, started the business in 1946, just after World War II.

"The height is up to you, but a standard set comes with a pair of servants, a trishaw, a car and gold mountains to signify savings for descendants," says Khoo. She explains that everything is made from scratch, except paraphernalia like jewellery, shoes, branded

2

3

clothing, TV sets and mobile phones—those are imported wholesale from China.

"First, you have to build the skeleton frame using bamboo that's stripped and split according to size," she points to a homemade steel ruler on the floor her worker uses to gauge for thickness.

With the bamboos soft and pliable, they are bent into circles for the gold mountain (*kim sua*), silver mountain (*gin sua*), and triangles as the base for a male servant (*lor chai*), female servant (*char bor kan*), and the main effigy (*hun bin*), which represents the deceased's soul.

"Then, they are tied with cloth papers and glued together," she adds. The cloth papers are akin to Japanese shoji papers, and the home-made glue is made from stirring flour with water on low heat until it achieves a sticky consistency "like muar chee". Once the frame is built, she pastes the patterned papers around them—"From there on, it's very much a job of assembling the different parts."

These paper mansions are not sold on its own, but always as part of a funeral package since they only work with undertakers. Such packages are part of the complete Taoist funeral rites, which include the Chinese opera, the "Crossing the Bridge" ceremony where chants and offerings are given to ensure the safe passage of the deceased's soul to the afterlife, and a roast pig. The price tag of such packages can amount to RM30,000.

A DYING TRADE AWAITING REVIVAL

Ah Bin & Sons is one of several traditional effigy makers remaining on Penang Island. Another is Ah Ban Paper Oblation Shop located along Lebuh Carnarvon, a road historically known as "Coffin Street" for being the heart of the funeral industry on the island. There is also Kin Hoe Praying Articles & Trading on Lebuh Acheh, who specialises in paraphernalia only, like treasure chests, jewellery, clothes and shoes.

Sometimes known as paper oblation artists—oblation meaning a thing presented or offered to a god—these businesses are

4

5

mostly family-run. Practitioners are aged 60 and above, and it's a dying trade waiting to be inherited by the new generation.

Khoo's husband, 76-year-old Ooi Beng Oo says, "You have to be interested in the first place, and the work requires a lot of patience." Their daughter is helping in the store, but their son is not interested in picking it up. Ooi learnt the art from his father, who, at 13, learnt it from a master from China, and has since passed down his skills to the next generation.

Samm Koh Eng Keat is another younger person to follow in his father, Koh Ah Ba's footsteps. At the 358 Custom Effigies Workshop on Gat Lebuh Macallum, the 40-year-old explains that he didn't have the heart to see his dad working alone.

Outside their shop, a row of headless Tai Su Ya effigies are lined up, 10ft high and waiting to be assembled. Also known as the King of Hell, or Da Shi Ye (大士爺), once completed, it will be picked up by a lorry and delivered to its Hungry Ghost Festival customers.

"The heads are made of papier-mâché, while the fists are cardboard," Koh explains as he uses a glue gun to assemble the King of Hell's trousers. "It's like assembling Lego," he laughs. "The prints are pre-designed, then printed on laserjet or inkjet, though magazine paper quality is the best. It takes one week to make an effigy, as the prints need time to dry."

A MIX OF OLD AND NEW

The designs for these mansions and effigies are templates passed down the generations, but today, artisans are free to modify or add their own creative flair. Khoo says, "Our female servants are designed in the traditional black and white uniform, like the *majie*. Others make them in different colours or in fancier clothes, and it's really up to them."

Koh agrees, saying that artisans can evolve their creations and bring a new spirit to the designs. Learning from a master in Taiwan, he uses synthetic materials like fur and even the back of shiny CDs to jazz up his Tai Su Ya effigies.

6

With over 50 orders pouring in in the lead up to Hungry Ghost month, August is Koh's busiest month. Outside of the festival, he specialises in making life-sized luxury cars, and accepts orders from bereavement company, Nirvana.

At Ah Bin & Sons, there are no off-days for Ooi, Khoo, their daughter and one worker. "It takes four days at the quickest to make a mansion, and several weeks if time permits," says Khoo. "But whatever the case, if there is an order, we must deliver. This is the trade and livelihood we've inherited, and so we continue."

CAPTIONS

1. (Cover page) A paper mansion on display at a Taoist funeral in Penang.
2. Samm Koh with a Tai Su Ya effigy.
3. Shops like Kin Hoe on Lebuh Acheh sell only paraphernalia like clothes and jewellery to be placed inside mansions.
4. The mansions are constructed using bamboo tied together with shoji paper.
5. Female and male servant effigies to attend to the deceased in the afterlife.
6. Headless effigies waiting to be assembled at 358 Custom Effigies Workshop.
7. At the end of these funeral rituals, paper mansions are burned down together with servants, bags of gold ingots and hell money to be transported to the afterlife.

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

7

Life in the Tropics

The Penang Lifestyle

Millennium Tower

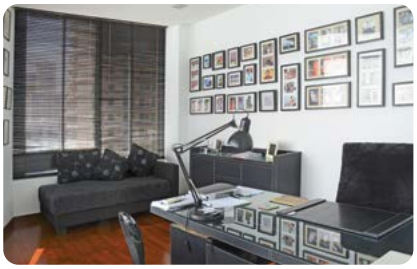
As featured in Tatler Magazine

Uniquely Chic Ocean View Condos in Penang

Embrace unrivalled Andaman Sea views with a maximalist design, an exquisite place to call home.








5 Bedrooms | 6 Bathrooms | 6,380 sqft | 3 Car Garages

5 Large Balconies with Panoramic Views

Private Elevator Access

5-Min Walk to Shopping Malls | 8-Min Drive to International School | 35-Min Drive to Airport | 5-Min Drive to Hospitals

Set in an example of a prime location along the iconic Gurney Drive, this residence is just steps away from Gurney Bay Gardens and walking steps to the best shopping malls on the island.

With generous space and flexibility, it is a home you can uniquely design to reflect your style and create your perfect sanctuary.

Buying in the Right Location is Everything
& this designers home captures it perfectly.

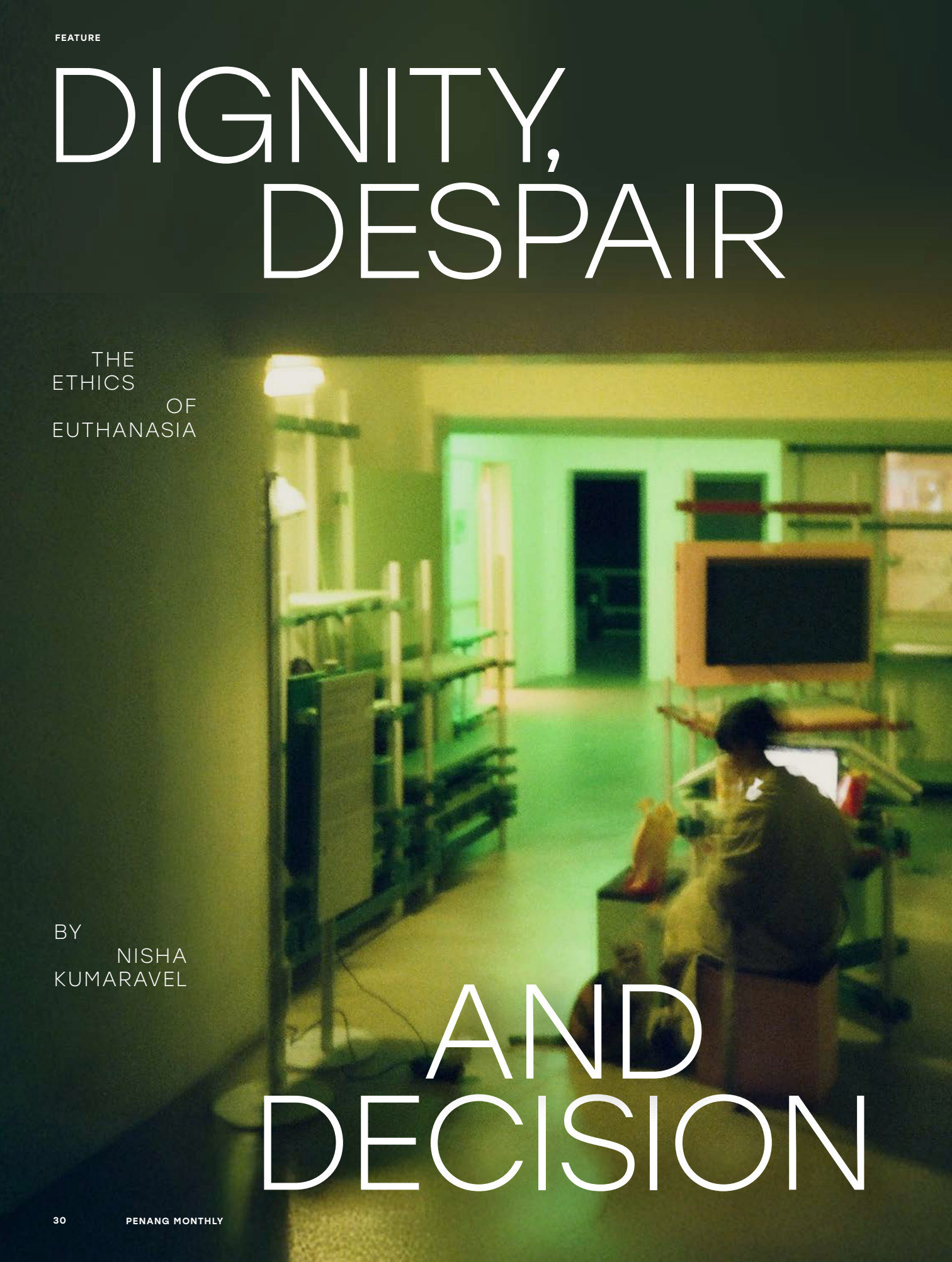
Interested to Learn More?

INTEREALTOR
ACES IN REAL ESTATE
WWW.INTEREALTOR.COM

Contact - Mr Sam Kam
+6012 408 0861
samkam@interealtor.com

DIGNITY, DESPAIR AND DECISION

THE ETHICS OF EUTHANASIA



BY NISHA KUMARAVEL

AT THE HEART of euthanasia lies questions that are both intimate and unsettling: how should we confront the limits of suffering, the fragility of life and the desire for dignity in the face of death? The word itself, drawn from the Greek *eu* (good) and *thanatos* (death), promises a "good death". Yet, this promise is fraught with complexity. As Josef Kure observes, euthanasia has always been entwined with moral ambiguity, often blurred with "assisted death", "mercy killing" or even suicide, each carrying profoundly different ethical and legal implications. In contemporary bioethics, euthanasia is commonly defined as a deliberate intervention undertaken with the intention of ending life to relieve intractable suffering, a definition that may mask the deep human anguish at its centre.

For mental health professionals, the question is never merely theoretical. It touches the core of human dignity and the responsibility of a healthcare provider. Ethical principles act as a compass when navigating this moral terrain. The American Psychological Association (APA) highlights (i) beneficence and non-maleficence, our duty to promote wellbeing and prevent harm, and (ii) the respect for people's rights and dignity, which safeguards autonomy and privacy. In Malaysia, the Code of Ethics for Counsellors mirrors these commitments, emphasising the balance between respecting choice and mitigating harm when facing decisions that confront life and death.

While these frameworks guide therapists, the question of euthanasia extends well beyond clinical practice. It surfaces in public debates, in families struggling with end-of-life decisions, in patients living with chronic pain and even in young people overwhelmed by isolation. Simply ignoring the topic does not make it disappear. The task is not to judge or offer definitive answers, but to listen with empathy, provide clarity, and ensure that conversations about life and death are conducted responsibly.

THE SILENT STRUGGLES OF AGEING AND ISOLATION

Euthanasia debates cannot be separated from Asia's shifting demographics. Japan and South Korea sit among the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's (OECD) highest-suicide-rate countries, where ageing, social isolation and intense societal pressures intersect. In 2022, Japan's suicide rate was 17.5 per 100,000 people, according to official figures from the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare. South Korea continues to record the highest suicide rate in the OECD, with 23.2 per 100,000 in 2022. Older adults in both countries frequently cite chronic illness, loneliness and financial insecurity as contributing factors in late-life suicide.

Malaysia is not immune to these pressures. The Department of Statistics Malaysia projects that people aged 65 and above will make up about 14.5% of the population by 2040. With ageing comes higher prevalence of dementia, degenerative diseases and chronic pain. In this context, euthanasia enters the public conversation not only as a medical or legal question, but also one tied to dignity, autonomy and the adequacy of social safety nets. Without stronger palliative care, mental health services and elder support, some may perceive euthanasia as the *only* option left for them.

EUTHANASIA IN THE MALAYSIAN CONTEXT

In Malaysia, euthanasia remains illegal under both statutory and Islamic law. The Penal Code criminalises any act of assisting another person to die, classifying it as culpable homicide not amounting to murder (Sections 299-304, Penal Code). Therefore, both active euthanasia (deliberately enabling a patient's death) and passive euthanasia (allowing death by withholding or withdrawing treatment) are prohibited, with medical professionals bound by ethical codes to preserve life.

Yet, conversations around euthanasia are slowly emerging in public discourse. In May 2023, the Malaysian Parliament passed a landmark bill decriminalising attempted suicide, removing imprisonment as a penalty. While this does not legalise euthanasia, it reflects a growing recognition of the complexities of mental health struggles and the importance of compassionate, rather than punitive, responses. Healthcare professionals in Malaysia remain largely cautious. Surveys of doctors and nurses indicate strong resistance to legalisation, citing concerns about potential misuse and the challenge of balancing medical duty with patient requests.

Kamarulzaman, Jafri and Nuing emphasise that the debate is not purely medical or legal, but is closely linked to cultural, religious and societal values. Malaysia's diverse ethnic and religious population, including Muslims, Buddhists, Christians, Hindus, indigenous communities; and those who are non-religious, including agnostics and atheists, hold a wide spectrum of perspectives on life, death and personal autonomy. Introducing euthanasia laws in this context could conflict with deeply held beliefs about the sanctity of life and the moral implications of ending it. Malaysia's current legal framework does not adequately reflect the nuances of end-of-life decisions, as the Penal Code's blanket prohibition overlooks the nation's cultural and religious diversity. There is a pressing need for thoughtful, culturally sensitive dialogue that recognises this complexity, both within society and in any potential future legislation.

COUNSELLING ENCOUNTERS: WHEN LIFE FEELS TOO HEAVY

In practice, counsellors sometimes encounter individuals expressing a wish to die, particularly when therapy feels slow or insufficient. For clients enduring chronic pain, each day can feel exhausting, eroding their sense of dignity. For example, a middle-aged client with terminal cancer described feeling "more dead than alive" after enduring repeated medical treatments, not questioning the meaning of life itself, but whether continuing to endure pain was justifiable. Similarly, an elderly widower spoke of the "pointlessness" of living without family support alongside declining mobility.

These accounts suggest that a desire for death often stems from a profound need for relief, connection or acknowledgment, rather than a genuine intent to end life. In these counselling encounters, the role of the practitioner is to acknowledge and validate the reality of suffering, while ensuring that death is never presented as the *only* solution. In such cases, ethical principles are all the more important in shaping the counselling response.

Beneficence calls on counsellors to actively promote wellbeing, which may include strengthening support networks, advocating for effective palliative care or addressing social isolation. Non-maleficence reminds practitioners to avoid harm by ensuring that decisions are not made impulsively or while clients are under distress. Respect for people's rights and dignity further emphasises the importance of listening without judgment, upholding autonomy and attending sensitively to each client's personal context. Together, these principles provide a framework for offering support with empathy, while protecting vulnerable individuals from irreversible decisions made in moments of suffering.

INTERNATIONAL PRACTICES AND SAFEGUARDS

In countries such as the Netherlands, Belgium, Canada, Spain and certain states in the US, euthanasia is permitted under strictly regulated frameworks. These laws are designed to protect both the wellbeing and autonomy of patients, while preventing abuse. To qualify, individuals must be enduring severe physical and/or psychological suffering that cannot be relieved by any available treatment. Their wish to end life must be voluntary and consistent over time, ensuring it reflects a deeply considered decision, rather than a fleeting moment of despair.

There must be no reasonable expectation of recovery or meaningful improvement in the patient's condition. Multiple

medical professionals typically evaluate the patient to confirm eligibility and mental capacity. Psychological assessments are often included to ensure individuals fully comprehend their situation and understand the consequences of their decision. Even with these safeguards, concerns remain.

Critics warn of a "slippery slope" where eligibility could gradually expand beyond terminal illness. Belgium, for instance, has sparked debate by permitting minors access to euthanasia. Vulnerable groups such as the elderly, disabled or socially isolated may still face subtle pressures or coercion. Religious, moral, cognitive and emotional factors also contribute to widespread non-acceptance of euthanasia. However, supporters emphasise that in situations of extreme suffering, where palliative care cannot provide relief, euthanasia can be an act of compassion, offering a controlled and dignified end.

THE POWER AND PITFALLS OF MEDIA PORTRAYALS OF EUTHANASIA

Euthanasia has become a topic of increasing interest in popular culture, from novels and films to social media projects. While these portrayals can raise awareness of suffering and autonomy, they also carry risks. As empathy can be weaponised, public audiences can misinterpret complex realities, and media attention may romanticise death over resilience or systemic support.

JOSEPH AWUAH-DARKO (OKUNTAKINTE) AND THE LAST SUPPER PROJECT

Several years ago, Ghanaian-British artist Joseph Awuah-Darko, known as Okuntakinte, announced plans to pursue euthanasia in the Netherlands due to his treatment-resistant bipolar disorder. He launched "The Last Supper Project" inviting strangers to share meals with him before his planned death. The project received coverage from major international media outlets (including the *BBC* and *The New York Times)* and attracted a large following on Instagram (almost half a million followers), sparking global discussion about mental health, despair and human connection. While some media praised the project for highlighting the importance of vulnerability and community, critics and allegations emerged online. YouTube and Reddit threads labelled the project as "grifting" or "weaponising empathy", while allegations emerged of Awuah-Darko having scammed artists and not paying them their dues—all warning that presenting euthanasia in a public, performative way risks normalising or romanticising the act for vulnerable viewers. Ultimately, while the project emphasised connection and may have contributed to Awuah-Darko reconsidering his plans, it also illustrates the complex dynamics of social media attention in shaping perceptions of euthanasia.

ME BEFORE YOU

Jojo Moyes' 2012 novel and its 2016 film adaptation, *Me Before You*, depict the story of Will Traynor, a quadriplegic man who chooses assisted suicide in Switzerland despite forming a romantic relationship with his caregiver. The portrayal of euthanasia in the narrative sparked significant backlash from disability rights advocates. Activists argued that the story perpetuates the harmful stereotype that life with a disability is not worth living. Protests were held at film premieres, and campaigns such as #MeBeforeEuthanasia emerged to voice opposition. Director Thea Sharrock defended the film's conclusion, stating it aimed to provoke thought about the right to choose and live boldly. However, critics contended that the film failed to represent the diverse experiences of disabled individuals and omitted key aspects from the book that could have provided a more nuanced perspective.

These examples reveal that media depictions of euthanasia wield immense influence in shaping perceptions, but they can also mislead, sensationalise or normalise suffering, reminding us that storytelling carries responsibility as heavy as the subject it portrays.

MOVING FORWARD IN MALAYSIA

Ethical, cultural and religious perspectives of Malaysians intersect in ways that make simple answers impossible. The principle of non-maleficence warns against rushing to endorse it, yet beneficence demands we recognise real suffering and the gaps in our healthcare and social systems. Ignoring the debate leaves the most vulnerable to endure alone.

Practical steps can make a difference, such as better palliative care, wider access to mental health support and tackling social isolation, especially among the elderly. Conversations must be inclusive with medical professionals, policymakers and civil society weighing in, balancing respect for autonomy with the value of life. Counsellors, too, have a critical role in creating safe spaces where despair can be voiced without fear of judgment or punishment.

Euthanasia is polarising. In Malaysia, the law and culture remain firmly opposed, yet ageing, chronic illnesses and growing isolation ensure that these conversations will not disappear. The role of professionals is not to decide who should live or die, but to ensure the conversation is grounded in empathy, ethics and human dignity. Avoiding the issue offers no protection. Engaging with it responsibly is the only way to support those who need it most.

REFERENCES

1. Alias, F., & Jahn Kassim, P. N. (2021). Legal aspects of end-of-life care in Malaysia.
2. Alias, F., Muhammad, M., & Jahn Kassim, P. (2015). The legality of euthanasia from the Malaysian and Islamic perspectives: An overview.
3. American Psychological Association. (2017). Ethical principles of psychologists and code of conduct.
4. Chambaere K, Vander Stichele R, Mortier F, Cohen J, Deliens L. (2015). Recent trends in euthanasia and other end-of-life practices in Belgium.
5. CodeBlue. (2023). Parliament decriminalises attempted suicide.
6. Dale, P. (2024). 'Bipolar, colour and me' – an artist's spreadsheet of emotion.
7. De Volkskrant. (2025). This Influencer Told an Incredible Story about his Impending Death by Euthanasia. But How Does This Affect his Followers?
8. House of Lords Select Committee on Medical Ethics. (1994). Medical Ethics: Select Committee Report.
9. Isaacs, V., Lukman, Z. M., & Norshahira, O. (2024). Healthcare professionals' perspectives on euthanasia legalization in Malaysia.
10. Kamalruzaman, M. S., Jafri, N. I., & Nuing, D. B. (2022). Euthanasia and advanced medical directives in the perspective of ethical, moral, religious and legal issues in Malaysia and under common law.
11. Kure, J. (2011). Good Death Within Its Historical Context and as a Contemporary Challenge: A Philosophical Clarification of the Concept of "Euthanasia."
12. Lembaga Kaunselor Malaysia. (2011). Code of ethics for counsellors.
13. Nasruddin, M. I. T. M., & Ismail, N. (2022). The impact of euthanasia on the healthcare system: A comparative study between Malaysia and the Netherlands.
14. Nippon.com. (2023). Suicide numbers in Japan rise in 2022.
15. OECD. (2023). Suicide rates.
16. Proctor, R. A. (2024). Ghanaian Curator Joseph Awuah-Darko Sued for Non-Payment of $266,527.
17. Quinn, B. (2016). Disability rights campaigners protest Me Before You.
18. Robinson, J. (2016). Could Me Before You have avoided alienating disabled community?
19. Segal, D. (2025). He announced his intention to die. The dinner invitations rolled in.
20. The Guardian. (2014). Belgium passes law extending euthanasia to children of all ages.
21. The Korea Herald. (2025). South Koreans live longer, but suicide rate remains high.
22. TIME. (2024). Absolutely insufficient': How data restrictions and funding constraints hamper South Korea's suicide prevention efforts.
23. UNDP Malaysia. (2024). Navigating the future of care for older persons in Malaysia by 2040: From community support to technological integration.
24. World Health Organization. (2025). Suicide.

NISHA KUMARAVEL is a licensed counselor, communications specialist and project coordinator, advocating for labour and farmer's rights, as well as agricultural and political reform.

TENBY SCHOOLS PENANG

iSP International Schools Partnership

Book a tour

Where confidence **grows**

EXPLORING BUKIT BATU ITAM

PENANG NATIONAL PARK'S HIGHEST PEAK

BY
REXY PRAKASH CHACKO

HIKE AT A GLANCE

LENGTH
7 hours

DIFFICULTY
Difficult

INTEREST LEVEL
High

SIGNPOSTING
Well signposted

LIKELIHOOD OF GETTING LOST
Low

NUMBER OF HIKERS
Many along the first part to Pantai Kerachut, but few towards Bukit Batu Itam.

PENANG NATIONAL PARK (PNP), located in the northwest of the island, is a nature lover's paradise. Established in 2003, it spans 2,563ha of terrestrial and marine ecosystems, rich in biodiversity, it forms an integral part of the UNESCO Penang Hill Biosphere Reserve (PHBR). For hikers, PNP offers exciting nature trails that crisscross its length and breadth.

While most visitors opt for the trails leading to Pantai Kerachut and Teluk Kampi, one path excites hikers seeking a challenge—the Bukit Batu Itam trail. Rising to 460m above sea level, Bukit Batu Itam (which translates to Black Rock Hill) is the tallest peak within PNP. Its name comes from the large, dark, granite rock face on its eastern slope, clearly visible from Teluk Bahang Dam.

2

3

After completing several short hikes throughout the year, I am ready for something that would test my endurance—and the Bukit Batu Itam trail is the right fit.

Knowing well that this would be a long hike, we start in the morning at the PNP entrance in Teluk Bahang. After paying the entrance fee, we begin our hike through the main trail, passing through the screw pine-lined seafront, and crossing a hanging wooden bridge.

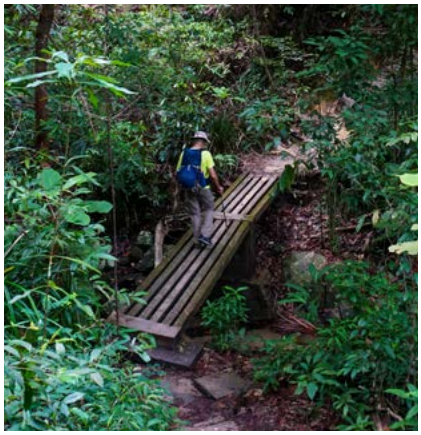
Here, the trail branches in two directions: one path leads to Teluk Duyung (Monkey Beach), and the other to Pantai Kerachut. We follow the Pantai Kerachut trail, which quickly starts ascending. Informative signboards dot the path, and one in particular catches my attention: it details the history of the trail as a "pulling route" for timber. In the 1940s, well before the area was protected, Acehnese migrants who settled in this part of Penang used to extract timber and drag them out with the aid of buffaloes through this trail.

Further along the trail, there is more evidence of this "extractive" past—a tunnel-like section called Bukit Belah, which is dug out to facilitate the smooth movement of logs. Fortunately, the impact of this extraction is becoming less visible as the forest recovers, and its current protected status ensures that no more destruction can take place.

4

It takes us 40 minutes to reach the col right above Bukit Belah, where the path splits in two. Straight ahead leads down to Pantai Kerachut, while the left fork leads to Bukit Batu Itam.

We take the left fork, and the trail begins climbing steeply. Though slightly overgrown in parts, handrails lining the path reassure us we are headed in the right direction. After 25 minutes, we reach the first peak in this challenge: the 264m Bukit Pasir Pandak. Tired from over an hour of



5

walking, we pause at a small rest shed before continuing.

Beyond this point, the trail descends briefly before rising again along the south-facing ridge. As we pass through a disturbed area of the trail dominated by ferns, we are treated to a stunning view of Teluk Bahang, flanked by the ridgelines of Bukit Laksamana and Western Hill in the background.

After soaking in the view, we press on. The trail gradually ascends until we reach the Seraya campsite—about an hour later. Here, the trail forks once again: the right fork descends to Teluk Kampi, while the other continues along the ridgeline toward Bukit Batu Itam.

We choose the latter and soon face the most difficult part of the hike—a steep ridgeline ascent. Thankfully, ropes are provided to aid the climb, and we pull ourselves up to the ridge top. Here, we find strewn all over the ground what appears to be red flowers. On closer inspection, we realise these are not flowers, but wing-like petals attached to the seeds of a *Gluta* tree. The *Gluta* utilises an ingenious wind dispersal technique, where the wing-like petals ensure that the seeds flutter in the wind

6

and land further away from the base of the parent tree.

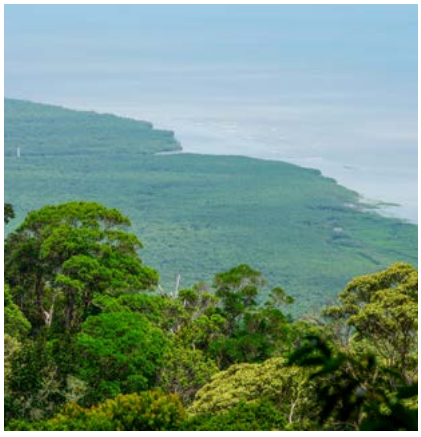
Thinking that we are on the peak, we take a quick look on the smartphone hiking app and realise that we are only on the lower northern peak; there is still some distance before the actual summit. A short detour at this lower peak leads us to a viewpoint, where we catch a glimpse of Pantai Acheh and its lush, mangrove-lined coast.

Getting back on the trail, we trudge past two minor junctions which lead to Pantai Mas and a Hokkien cemetery, before finally reaching the summit. There is a PBAPP rain gauge (No. 26) and a campsite there. It had taken us about an hour from the Seraya campsite to reach the peak, so we stop for a well-earned lunch.

7

After ample rest, it was time to continue the journey. We make our way back to the campsite, and here, we take the fork that leads down to Teluk Kampi. This section descends through the undisturbed parts of PNP, characterised by towering trees and a lush understorey. It is a steep and quick descent, taking only 45 minutes to reach the next junction, where the trail forks again, one leading to Teluk Kampi, while the other to Pantai Kerachut.

We turn right towards Pantai Kerachut, going a short way up before starting to descend. Emerging behind the meromictic lake, we glimpse its shimmering waters through breaks in the vegetation. The meromictic lake is a unique phenomenon, consisting of both saltwater and freshwater, but both remain separate without mixing. The sight of a spotted dove and a Pacific swallow near the lake lift our spirits.



8

9

Following the signboards leads us to the Pantai Kerachut beach, and we are welcomed by a refreshing sea breeze, much needed after hours of pounding down the hills. As the long-tailed macaques (*Macaca fascicularis*) watch us from a distance, we take another short break at the beach. We spot tourist boats at the water's edge, tempting us to take one back to Teluk Bahang. Eventually, the desire to complete the hike as a full loop proves more appealing, and soon, we are back on our feet, following the Pantai Kerachut trail to the exit.

It takes us another hour to make it back to Teluk Bahang, and by then, it was well past 5pm. Exhausted from a full day of hiking through the jungle, we conclude the adventure with refreshing coconut water.

Bukit Batu Itam may be a tough and lengthy hike—one which tests the limits of your stamina—yet, it is also one that rewards you with stunning views and a chance to experience Penang's rich biodiversity at its finest.

CAPTIONS

1. (Cover spread) The 460m tall Bukit Batu Itam.
2. The meromictic lake at Pantai Kerachut.
3. The wing-like petals attached to the seeds of a *Gluta* sp.
4. Passing through the tunnel-like section called Bukit Belah.
5. Sections of the trail cross small streams.
6. Bracket fungi spotted along the trail.
7. A spotted dove near the meromictic lake.
8. Viewpoint from the lower peak towards Pantai Acheh and its lush, mangrove-lined coast.
9. Long-tailed macaques (*Macaca fascicularis*) at Pantai Kerachut.
10. Stunning view of Teluk Bahang, flanked by the ridgelines of Bukit Laksamana and Western Hill in the background.

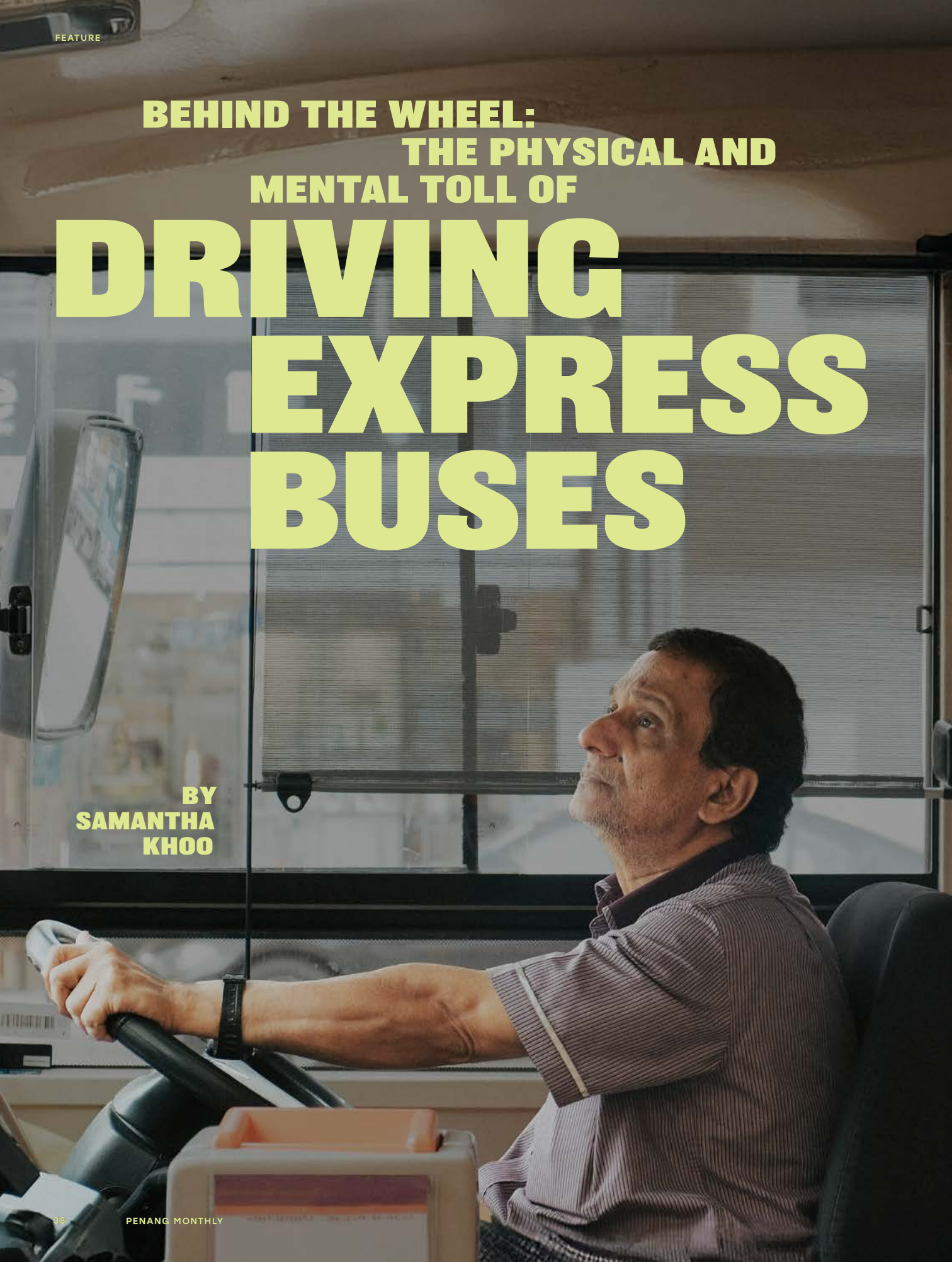
REXY PRAKASH CHACKO is an electronic engineer by profession and a nature lover by passion. While he spends his weekdays earning a living at the Bayan Lepas Free Industrial Zone, his weekends are spent reflecting and recharging on the green hills of Penang.

10

BEHIND THE WHEEL: THE PHYSICAL AND MENTAL TOLL OF

DRIVING EXPRESS BUSES

BY SAMANTHA KHOO



FROM JANUARY 2023 to May 2025, Malaysia documented a total of 203 bus-related accidents, with 39 fatalities, 68 serious injuries and 197 minor injuries.[1] Too many lives have been lost.

Responses in news articles and social media posts after such tragedies tend to do the following: Blame the bus companies. Blame the road conditions. Blame the drivers.

Where lie the faults?

At the moment, bus inspections are made every six months by Pusat Pemeriksaan Kenderaan Berkomputer (PUSPAKOM). Additionally, checks are conducted on brakes and headlights before a trip. GPS tracking systems have also been installed for the surveillance of buses on highways. Yet, life-threatening bus accidents still persist. Following the fatal crash in June 2025 of a bus chartered by UPSI students, Transport Minister Anthony Loke introduced a law requiring buses and other heavy vehicles to have speed limiting devices (SLDs) to ensure they travel at no more than 90km/h.[2]

"You could install an SLD to cap the speed at 90km/h, but if the driver still exceeds the zone's speed limit, such as driving at 60km/h on a sharp bend, then the SLD is still of no use," says JW Ong, a bus regional sales consultant who has been in the industry for a decade. "The best safety systems don't guarantee anything. Driver training and awareness are also important."

Can we blame it on the roads? Narrow roads, construction zones and bends can pose significant risks, particularly to heavy vehicles.[3] Proper street lighting also needs to be installed to increase visibility. Authorities have said that they will improve road conditions, especially in accident-prone zones. Yet, bus accidents still happen.

BLAMING BUS DRIVERS

So, can we blame it on the drivers? *Should* we blame it on the drivers?

"Bus drivers are often fatigued; they get very little sleep in between trips," says Ong.

When fatigued at work, anyone would perform sub-optimally. Let's dive into the working conditions of the average express bus driver.

A bus driver begins his day by reviewing his scheduled trips.[4] All interstate drives average five hours each. After each trip, he spends another hour cleaning up the bus, including picking up litter, wiping down the windows and mopping the floors. He rests for three hours before starting his next scheduled trip (sometimes he forgoes his rest if there had been a traffic jam during the previous trip that ate into his break time).

On average, a bus driver earns a minimum salary of RM1,700. A bus driver can choose to work up to 28 days a month to earn more. They earn an allowance for every trip completed, so the more trips they complete, the more money they earn. This leaves them with very little time to spend with their family, or for rest.

Sometimes, a driver will sacrifice sleep to take on more trips, even at ungodly hours. If you have seen or heard news of bus drivers watching movies or playing games when driving, they do it to beat fatigue. Mohamad (not his real name) served as an express bus driver for 10 years before switching over to be a *bas kilang* driver. Now, he ferries foreign factory workers from their lodging to the factory and vice versa. As a *bas kilang* driver, he works regular hours, meaning he gets more time to spend with his family and rest.

"It's not easy to be a bus driver these days. We are under a lot of pressure and stress because any accident we get into will cause not just our driving permit to be suspended, but the entire bus company's permit to be suspended for a few months, and it will cost the company a lot of money," says Mohamad. "Because of misbehaviour by one or two drivers, all bus drivers earn a bad rep, and we get looked down upon." He said that netizens are quick to leave harsh comments about bus drivers.

These strenuous work conditions might explain why there is an extreme shortage of bus drivers. The poor wages and long work hours are unattractive, and the prejudice against bus drivers is severe and widespread.

HIRING BUS DRIVERS

"This shortage leaves bus companies no choice but to hire desperately. They may overlook proper background checks and hire drivers even with pending summonses or a history of accidents," says Ong. "In my opinion, express bus companies should integrate regular performance reviews for drivers and implement grading systems that can be a metric to prove their skills. Most bus companies cannot predict how a newly hired bus driver will perform until they are really on the road."

Executive bus companies such as Aeroline have a different modus operandi. Because they are not limited by the Land Public Transport Agency's (APAD) price ceiling (operating instead on a floor price of RM0.15/km), they can charge higher fares.[5] An Aeroline bus ticket from Penang to KL now costs up to RM72, as compared to approximately RM35 on an express bus. Of course, this means Aeroline can afford to pay its drivers better.

Aeroline runs a fixed number of trips per day and ensures their drivers get sufficient rest after each trip. Their drivers do not need to clean their buses; they only focus on driving.

"Many of our drivers used to work at express bus companies before joining Aeroline. They initially requested more trips to earn higher pay, but that is not how we operate. Instead, we pay higher fixed salaries; a bus driver can earn up to RM4,500 a month," says Julie Ong, Recruitment and Communications Executive at Aeroline.

Aeroline conducts regular performance reviews of its drivers, which include an internal grading system overseen by HR, as well as external reviews based on customer feedback forms. "We give incentives for good performance and attendance," Julie adds.

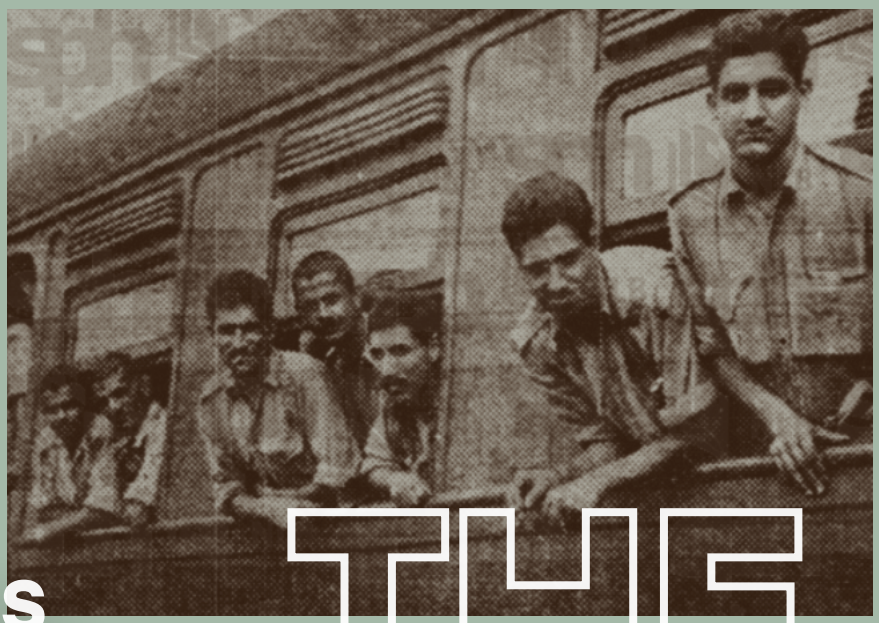
Knowing that there are better ways for bus companies to treat their drivers, it begs the question: Why aren't other bus companies implementing the same? Could it be the fare ceiling prices that force express bus companies to pay drivers low salaries?

As members of society, maybe it is time for our focus to shift from blaming bus drivers to lobbying for better, more humane working conditions for them. By understanding the circumstances that wall them into driving more hours despite experiencing total exhaustion, we can identify how to effectively apply pressure as citizens and work towards a solution.

FOOTNOTES

1. https://www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2025/06/23/over-200-bus-crashes-in-malaysia-since-2023-say-police-reasons-given-no-rest-drugs-and-faulty-vehicles/181362
2. https://www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2025/06/13/jpj-to-enforce-speed-limiter-checks-on-buses-heavy-vehicles-from-oct-1/180198
3. https://bernama.com/en/news.php?id=2387276
4. Fare schedules are regulated by the Land Public Transport Agency (APAD) for express buses at RM0.093/km. As bus fares are capped at a ceiling price, bus companies are forced to cut costs, with bus driver salaries being one of the costs affected.
5. https://www.buletintv3.my/nasional/harga-tambang-bas-ekspres-berdasarkan-kategori-eksekutif-atau-ekonomi-apad/?utm

A personal blogger since her teenage years, **SAMANTHA KHOO** has always enjoyed stringing words together. Her dream is to live off-grid in a cottage with all the coffee, ink and paper she can have.



2

FROM FORTRESS TO FROLIC

THE TRAGIC FABLE OF FORT

1

BY
EUGENE QUAH TER-NENG

IN 1980, teenager Andrew Hwang accompanied his father and other Public Works Department employees to inspect an abandoned British fort atop a hillock in Batu Maung. The jungle had begun to reclaim everything—barracks stripped bare, doorless ammunition stores gaping, concrete slowly surrendering to vines.

Hwang—now a lawyer and local historian—recounted this scene of tropical decay to me recently. He was one of the few who had seen the place before its transformation in 2002 into what journalist Natasha Venner-Pack describes as "a privately owned museum-cum-theme park, with… a paintball field attached." When James Jeremiah revisited the fort in 2016, having served there as an 18-year-old in the Eurasian "E" Company, he laughed: "Everything has changed. I don't remember any of this being here!"

With the fort's history now tangled in commercial entertainment, its actual story has become increasingly unclear. Using declassified top-secret British and Australian military reports, this article reconstructs what really happened—a tragic tale set at the very beginning of the end of the British Empire.

BATU MAUNG

CAPTIONS

1. Close-up of Gun No. 2 in February 1946. On the night of 16-17 December 1941, the Royal Engineers of the 36th Fortress Command destroyed it with gelignite. Source: National Archives, UK. Courtesy of Lim Khai Xi.

2. The hill the fort stands on was known to locals as Bukit Punjab—a likely reference to the Punjabi troops of the Penang garrison stationed there. These photos show the 5th Battalion, 14th Punjab Regiment en route to the island via a special train in early August 1939. Source: The Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser (1884-1942), 9 & 10 August 1939

3. Gun Emplacement No. 1 in February 1946. Colonel F.W. Rice reported that it was beyond repair, the "mountings severely damaged". The Japanese never bothered to remove it. They stripped the fort of all equipment such as generators and searchlights, making it useless as a gun post. Instead, the Japanese removed one of the guns at Fort Cornwallis and installed it at the Tanjung Pak Pajoh nearby. Source: National Archives, UK. Courtesy of Lim Khai Xi.

4. Top-secret War Department map, dated 18 July 1936, depicting proposed fixed coastal defences for Fortress Penang. The planned Fort Batu Maung is clearly marked. Source: National Archives, UK. Courtesy of Andrew Barber.

5. A derelict Battery Observation Post (B.O.P.) at Bukit Telok Tempoyak. Source: Rexy Prakash Chacko

4

AN EMPIRE'S GRAND DESIGN

In 1935, in anticipation of a future war, the War Department devised a triangular defence network on the Malay Peninsula, consisting of Fortress Penang, Fortress Singapore and Kota Bahru. The Defence Paper outlining this plan proposed that Penang's fixed defences should primarily prevent enemy ships from penetrating the harbour. On 18 July 1936, the Design Branch issued a top-secret map showing the new fixed defences to be built in Penang.

Fortress Penang, as the scheme was dubbed, consisted of two counter-bombardment gun batteries (Fort Batu Maung and Fort Auchry), an independent harbour battery (Fort Cornwallis), three Fire Control Posts (FCP), a Fortress Observation Post (FOP), a Fortress Planning Room (FPR) and Coastal Artillery Search Lights (CASL) sites. These coastal defences were put under the control of the Penang Fire Command.

Construction of Fortress Penang began in earnest in early 1937 with the official move to acquire land, but the project hit its first snag almost immediately. The initial plan, reported in the *Pinang Gazette* on 18 January, was to acquire a 120-acre site at Tanjung Bungah. This was quickly abandoned due to "local objections"—likely from influential landowners on the scenic coastline. Authorities then pivoted to a larger 259-acre site at Gelugor by July 1937. As construction began there in March 1938, a separate report noted that work was also quietly underway "near Batu Maung in preparation for another battery".

5

GUNS WITHOUT GUNNERS

Writing in late 1939, Brigadier Partap Narain of the Madras Sappers recounted:

"On 10 August, I was ordered to take my Section to Penang. It was the only Engineer Unit in Northern Malaya, so I spent the next few days in [reconnaissance] along the border.

"On a peaceful Sunday, 3 September [1939], as we sat in the Mess [at Gelugor] we heard the news of the declaration of war against Germany. We started repairing the fixed defence lights and got the engines at Batu Maung working by the 13th, but otherwise life went on much as usual with parties, lunches and [baths] on the beautiful beaches."

By this time, the fort was structurally complete.

6

The Batu Maung Counter-Bombardment Battery consisted of two coastal gun emplacements, a Battery Planning Room (BPR), barracks and auxiliary buildings. It was commonly referred to by both the military and the press as Fort Batu Maung. "Machine gun nests were also built over the adjoining south-facing Bukit Teluk Tempoyak and pillboxes along the coast."

The fort's two 6-inch rifled breech-loading (BL) naval guns were advanced Mark 24 models with Mark 5 mountings, boasting a maximum range of 22.4km—nearly twice that of the Mark 7 guns installed at Fort Cornwallis. These massive artillery pieces weighed 7,517kg each, and could be coordinated through a central fire-control system. They were operational by July 1939—"a firing exercise was conducted on the 10th from 10:00a.m. to 12:45p.m.".

According to a declassified report from the Singapore Defence Conference held from 22 to 31 October 1940 between the military top brass of Malaya and their counterparts from Australia, New Zealand, China and Burma, the newly completed fort was understaffed and under-equipped. The report highlighted that more personnel were required to complete the 8th Heavy Battery—a company of the Hong Kong Singapore Royal Artillery (HKSRA) battalion, who were then manning the guns.

Another shortcoming was that the battery could not effectively provide close defence due to a lack of crucial equipment. A coastal counter-bombardment battery's primary role was offensive—to engage relatively slow-moving enemy battleships at long range.

However, Fort Batu Maung was also expected to assume a close defensive role, likely because budget constraints prevented the construction of a separate close defence battery. This dual responsibility created a problem: the fort needed to defend against fast, close-range threats, such as "enemy vessels, minelayers, blockships and torpedo craft", but it lacked the proper equipment to do so effectively. The report noted that the battery urgently required "certain items to complete the Auto-Sight"—a device that could quickly and automatically set the range and elevation of guns for closer range and faster-moving targets.

In October 1941, a cable sent to all Chiefs of Staff in the Far East reflected the prevailing view championed by Sir Earl Page:

"JAPAN is now concentrating her forces against the RUSSIANS and cannot suddenly change this into a concentration in the south… Nevertheless, we reiterate our view that the last thing JAPAN wants at this juncture is a campaign in the south."

Sir Earl Page, a former Australian prime minister, was sent by Australia to meet with Winston Churchill. The British premier agreed to send two capital ships, the *Prince of Wales* and *Repulse*, to Singapore—an act of grandstanding they both hoped would be enough to scare off the Japanese.

7a

7b

CAPTIONS

6. Fort Batu Maung straddles the adjoining hillocks of Bukit Batu Maung, Bukit Teluk Tempoyak and Bukit Payung. The location offers a commanding view of the approaches to the South Channel. According to a 1976 news report, "The 33-acre site belongs to the State Government".

7a. Colonel F.W. Rice's 1946 report shows the wrecked gun in Gun Emplacement No. 2. Source: National Archive, UK. Courtesy of Lim Khai Xi

7b. Photo of Gun Emplacement No. 2 in April 2025. Source: Creative Commons (Wikimedia Commons, Author: LEE 003)

CAPTIONS

8a & b. The remains of a never-used anti-aircraft gun emplacement at the adjoining Bukit Payung. Of the 40 guns ordered, none arrived in Penang before the start of the hostilities, leaving the island defenceless against Japanese airpower. Source: Rexy Prakash Chacko (Photo), National Archives of Singapore (Archival Photo)

9. James Jeremiah (right) is seen here with a few British officers who visited him at his home in 2019. He was posted to Fort Batu Maung as an 18-year-old just before the invasion as part of the Eurasian "E" Company of Penang. In 2020, he became Malaysia's last WW2 veteran to pass on, at age 97. Source: British High Commission of Malaysia

10. Fort Batu Maung in April 2025: the front entrance of the Penang War Museum, which now occupies the grounds of the old military complex. Source: Creative Commons (Wikimedia Commons, Author: LEE 003)

8a

8b

"I am very glad that you are pleased about the big ship. There is nothing like having something that can catch and kill anything… Will advise you about publicity when the moment comes," Churchill told Australian Prime Minister Robert Menzies in a secret cablegram on 2 November.

Just after midnight on Monday, 8 December 1941, the Empire of Japan unleashed its coordinated strike across the Pacific. The first shots of the Pacific War erupted on the beaches of Kota Bharu, where Japanese troops stormed ashore. Hours later, sleeping Singapore was jolted awake by the thunder of Japanese bombs. Meanwhile, about 70 minutes after the Malayan landings began, the Imperial Navy struck Pearl Harbor, severely damaging the US Pacific Fleet. Caught off guard by this lightning assault, Malaya Command was swiftly overwhelmed and defeated in less than 10 weeks, despite the desperate valour of its motley collection of British, Australian and Indian regular forces, alongside Malayan volunteer units.

By the second day of hostilities, the *Prince of Wales* and the *Repulse* had both been sunk. Their loss shattered British morale. In his war memoirs, Churchill recalled the moment with grim candour: "As I turned over and twisted in bed, the full horror of the news sank in upon me… Japan was supreme, and we everywhere were weak and naked."

THE FALL

"During the evacuation of Penang on the night of the 16-17 December", the Royal Engineers of the 36th Fortress Command destroyed the fixed defences around the island. Malaya Command was informed:

"… 6-INCH GUNS BATU MAUNG WRECKED BY EXPLODING GELIGNITE IN CHAMBERS. CHARGE BOTH GUNS FIRED SUCCESSFULLY…"

By 19 December, European refugees and retreating units from Penang streamed into Singapore. Cecil Brown, a well-known American war correspondent who survived the sinking of the *Repulse*, was at the Raffles Hotel when he spotted a dejected-looking high-ranking officer, "shirt open at the neck… carrying a swagger stick, a steel helmet and gas mask… monocle suspended by an ordinary piece of cord"—it was Brigadier Cyril Arthur Lyon, the Fortress Commander of Penang. Brown recounted in his 1942 book *Suez to Singapore* that what the elderly brigadier told him—over glasses of icy-cold Stengah—was one of the most tragic stories of the British Empire:

"How are you?" Lyon asked.

"Fine, General. How are you?"

"Well," he said, "we got them all off."

"Penang abandoned then?"

"Yes, I'm finished. I was due to be retired in two months anyhow. I've been relieved of my command."

…

"I thought Penang was to be held … it was a second Singapore—or at least supposed to be."

"Not at all," Lyon explained. "About four days ago… they took almost all my men away from me to use on the mainland… Penang is not a base. We would have served no good by staying there, I know there is going to be a lot of criticism… but I did the only thing that could be done."

…

"What was done, General?"

"We didn't stand much of a chance… We destroyed everything we could. We blew up the guns set in their concrete bases…"

…

"General," I said, "did you get any of those anti-aircraft guns away?"

"We didn't have any."

"What! When I was up there [in Penang] last August you said you had twenty-eight or something like that."

"I had ordered forty… but I never did get them. I didn't have a single one."

"Do you mean to say that Penang didn't have a single anti-aircraft gun?"

"That's right…"

9

10

FROM FORTRESS TO FOLKLORE

In the years following the British reoccupation, the story of Fort Batu Maung branched into two paths: the documented, quiet decay of a military relic, and the rise of a dark, popular mythology.

The official record began in February 1946, when Colonel F.W. Rice arrived to inspect the Penang Coastal Defences. His report noted the fort was "[a] little damaged", though the generators and searchlights had been removed, and the buildings stripped of their fittings. The wrecked 6-inch guns were found still sitting on their emplacements. This indicated the Japanese military never used the fort for any strategic purpose.

As its military significance evaporated, the fort was slowly reclaimed by local memory and civilian life. Andrew Hwang notes the hill was once colloquially called Bukit Punjab—a likely reference to the Punjabi and Sikh gunners of the 8th HKSRA who were once stationed there. In 1955, the High Commissioner, Sir Donald MacGillivray, visited the "old gun emplacements at Batu Maung," and in 1973, the state government officially ended its military association by offering the site "to the Boy Scouts Association as an alternative to the Jubilee Camp in Telok Bahang".

Since 2002, however, a darker narrative has emerged, with persistent rumours of the fort being a Japanese execution site. This myth is unsupported by any historical record or local testimony. An eyewitness from the nearby village of Kampung Tempoyak Kecil stated in 1964 that when "the Japanese arrived, they soon occupied the gun emplacement above the village, but fortunately did nothing more than loot the few cherished possessions of the villagers". Hwang concurs, "We interviewed the local residents, and there were no stories of massacres."

Episode 7 of the National Geographic Channel's popular series *I Wouldn't Go in There*, which aired in October 2013, investigated the museum's haunted fort narrative. Finding no evidence of atrocities being committed there, the documentary's host, Robert Joe, concluded:

"I guess the War Museum was more intended as a symbol for the brutality of the Occupation than an actual place of torture…"

GHOST OF A FORT

Fort Batu Maung's transformation from military fortification to paintball arena presents a peculiar irony—today's tourists play at war, where real soldiers once prepared for a battle that never came. Yet, beneath this commercial veneer lies a more profound lesson about military planning and imperial hubris: sometimes the most telling stories emerge not from grand victories, but from forgotten follies, hidden in the undergrowth of time.

REFERENCES

1. Great Britain War Cabinet (1940–1943), "Principal War Telegrams and Memoranda: 1940–1943. 4. Far East," vols. 1–2.

2. F.W. Rice (1946), "Secret: Singapore and Penang Coast Artillery Report February 1946, Copy No. 5," UK Archives: WP 203/6034.

3. Winston Churchill (1935–1942), Winston S. Churchill: His Complete Speeches, 1897–1963: 1935–1942, pg. 6,526.

4. Cecil Brown (1942), Suez to Singapore.

5. "The Shedden Collection," "Far Eastern Defence - Sir Earl Page's Discussions in Singapore and London," Australian Archives: CRS A5954/1 475/1.

6. "The Shedden Collection," "Singapore Defence Conference, 1940 - Report," Australian Archives: CRS A5954/1 565/3.

7. "The Shedden Collection," "Combined Far Eastern Appreciation of Australian Chief of Staff - February 1941," Australian Archives: CRS A5954/1 565/3.

8. War Department, Design Branch (1936), "Secret Plan No. 479, Penang Harbour and Approaches (Latest Proposals, July 1936)."

9. War Department (1937), "Malaya: Penang Defences," UK National Archives: CO 323/1502/13.

10. Andrew Barber (2010), Penang at War: A History of Penang During and Between the First and Second World Wars, 1914–1945.

11. Andrew Hwang (2011), "Batu Maung Gun Emplacement," Penang Heritage Trust Newsletter, Issue 99 / March 2011, pg. 23–24.

12. Darmon Richter (2017), "Dark Tourism in Malaysia: Penang War Museum & Its Haunted History," published in Ex Utopia. Accessed: https://www.exutopia.com/penang-war-museum/

13. E.W.C. Sandes (1956), The Indian Engineers (1939–1947).

14. Natasha Venner-Pack (2016), "Surviving the WWII Bombing of Penang." Accessed: https://www.rage.com.my/lastsurvivors-james/.

15. New Straits Times (April 14, 1973), "Discovery of Bombs Hold Up Scouts' New Camp Site."

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.

1

CAPTIONS

1. Brewers focused at their stations, showcasing their skills.

2. Pablo, the other judges and I, tasting the contestant's brew.

3. Sem Lee receives a trophy as the first-place winner.

Photo credit: Etoit Lee

BREWING CONNECTIONS

PENANG'S AEROPRESS COMMUNITY IN BLOOM

BY AQILLA LATIF

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

THE YEAR 2025 marks the third year Nine Lives Coffee Roasters (NLCR) has hosted the Malaysia Aeropress Championship in the northern region. This time, it was held at Moonshine Bakehouse on Andaman Island, Penang—a fresh venue with big views and even bigger vibes.

What sets the Aeropress Championship apart from other coffee throwdowns, as Loo Yi from NLCR puts it, is its lighthearted, casual nature.

"That's why we took up the hosting in the first place," he says. "The charm of coffee events lies in how they bring the community together."

A TIGHT-KNIT COMMUNITY BOUND BY A SHARED LOVE

NLCR has been thoughtful about their role in this ecosystem. One of their values as hosts is to introduce new faces to the judging panel each year—helping to spark fresh interactions and expose newcomers to the coffee scene.

"After all, we wouldn't have had the chance to host in the first place without the recommendation from Ome by Spacebar Coffee. And we're so thankful to the national host, Ghostbird Coffee Company, for helping everything run smoothly."

In Loo Yi's words, Penang has a close-knit and dynamic coffee community, and events like this help cultivate it even further.

Penang is often associated with aesthetic cafés and Insta-worthy interiors, but dive deeper and you'll find a flourishing specialty coffee culture. From knowledgeable baristas to seasoned roasters and passionate home brewers, the community thrives on mutual support and shared growth.

It's not uncommon to find café owners hanging out at another shop on their off-days, or baristas exchanging beans and recipes between shifts.

FROM SPECTATOR TO JUDGE

This year was my personal milestone too—I was honoured to join as one of the judges. I used to stand among the crowd, sipping coffee from the tasting table and just soaking in the energy, but this time, I sat on the other side of the table.

Moonshine Bakehouse, where the competition was held, felt like a fresh chapter. It was bright, open and breezy, with the sea in sight. The venue had an openness to it—not just physically, but in spirit. It made sense why they picked this spot. You felt like something new was brewing, literally and figuratively.

The day started with a calibration session where we tasted the competition beans roasted by Sweet Blossom Coffee Roasters from Johor. It was a solid cup—bright and balanced—perfect for setting our reference point.

At the judging table, I sat next to Pablo, the head judge for this year's Penang regional. I asked him what he thought of the AeroPress competition culture in the long run.

"When the first AeroPress competition in Malaysia happened, there was just one event for the whole country. I organised one of the first back in 2017. We had around 70 to 80 registrations back then. By the time I stopped in 2023, we had over 200—so we started doing regionals. It will definitely grow. It's one of the most accessible competitions, and a great place for brewers to start."

Accessible is the right word. You don't need a lot to enter: just a grinder, some beans and an AeroPress. But from that simplicity springs creativity.

GHOSTBIRD COFFEE: BREWING SUPPORT AND SURPRISES

At the heart of this national championship stands Ghostbird Coffee Company—Malaysia's current national organiser.

I asked Ray from Ghostbird what he was excited to see this year.

"This time around, competitors are allowed to use flow control caps. It's a new tool that controls the pressure of the press. This can improve mouthfeel in the cup. It's one of the coolest changes this year."

Next to him was Abraham, with a camera slung over his shoulder, capturing the mood and moments as always.

"We've always loved the vibe of AeroPress events. That's why we want to bring them beyond KL. Now, we have regionals in Penang, Kelantan, Terengganu, even Borneo. And the best part? It's fun. Casual. No pressure."

There's something refreshing about how they approach it—less about rules, more about showing up and doing your thing.

OVER 20 CUPS AND A WHOLE LOT OF COMMUNITY

Throughout the day, I tasted more than 20 cups. Each round was different. Some brews surprised me, some comforted me and some stayed on my tongue a little longer than others.

By the end, I was slightly over-caffeinated, but in good company.

"Penang is often associated with aesthetic cafés and Insta-worthy interiors, but dive deeper and you'll find a flourishing specialty coffee culture. From knowledgeable baristas to seasoned roasters and passionate home brewers, the community thrives on mutual support and shared growth."

2

There was laughter between rounds, casual conversations among brewers and café owners, and familiar faces who've grown with the scene. It didn't feel competitive—it felt connective.

It was Sem Lee from Slow Coffee Person Coffee Bar, who took home first place at this regional round. With this win, Sem will compete at the national level and, potentially, represent Malaysia at the World AeroPress Championship in Seoul this December.

As the crowd dispersed and the day wrapped up, the feeling I left with wasn't just about who won—it was about how much the scene has grown.

Penang may be small compared to KL, but its specialty coffee community is strong, supportive and full of potential. With each passing year, Penang has proven itself to be a serious player in the Malaysian coffee scene—hosting regional competitions like this only further confirms it.

3

ART

ANYONE WHO WALKS into a gallery, studio or art space has no clue what is exhibited before them. It's true—no one does. In fact, art is everything it can be; simple, abstract, complex, rubbish. You might get it at first glance, or you might have to stand long enough, changing angles of sight, to grasp what you're looking at.

Art does not necessarily demand to be understood; it speaks the unspeakable.

IDENTITY IN ARTISTRY

An artist's identity is expressed through their works.

In "residues: hinging on my insanity", an open studio by Arundhati Kartik, Wang Xi Jie and Hendra Selamat held at Hin Bus Depot from mid-June to mid-July this year, the three artists engaged with the space as a site for reflection and change, where dislocation and transplantation of works and ideas take place from Singapore to Penang. By allowing fragments of the past to resurface within the present, their artistry responds to them both, materially and metaphorically.

Through depictions of light, Arundhati Kartik explores collective phenomenological experiences, such as interconnectivity, longing and contemplation, with the use of "windows". She turns personal experiences into shared ones, with emphasis on how one connects with spaces and on the passage of time by working primarily with drawings, light and projected media. Hendra Selamat dives into the possibilities of printmaking, namely in image transfers. He is now experimenting with (found) objects for installation works, building narratives by communicating notions of time and space, while identifying queerness that lies in-between, such as proximity where parallel lines should not meet, but do.

EXPERIENTIAL APPRECIATION IN ARTISTRY

While the first edition of "From Palais To Pulau" in Singapore involved artists exploring the interplay between care, ritual and the artistic process as shaped by heat and temperature, integral elements of both creative and domestic labour, the Penang Edition (a collaboration between Hin Bus Depot and the Critical Craft Collective) was a series of art pieces and installations that expanded the project's focus on care, kinship and island living (see *Penang Monthly,* June 2025). It explored shared and differing understandings of home and household management.

CONTINUES TO COMMUNICATE IN DIFFERENT REALMS AND IN DIFFICULT TIMES

BY MAYA FAUZI

Soft is the root of my houses (I, II) by Adeline Kueh, co-founder of the Critical Craft Collective, spoke of the act of playing house with patchwork that the women in her family had put together from the 1960s. *Sleeping Ustaz* by Hasnul J. Saidon explored the lives of his parents, Saidon Pandak Noh and Jamaliah Noordin, in the humble milieu of Kampung Teluk Kepayang in Bota Kiri, Perak. Revolving around hard work, patience and perseverance, Hasnul's parents navigated tirelessly through many ups and downs in building a life together, including raising their nine children. His experience, drawn on a large canvas, reflects their dedication.

Ain's ceramic plates, *Kerabat Tak Terlihat/Unseen Keen,* narrated traditions and personal aspects of life inspired by kitsch souvenir plates commonly found during holiday trips, where families commemorated their vacations through photographs printed onto the ceramic. She transformed the idea into something more nostalgic, shaping the ceramic plates from clay sourced from her backyard and then laser-printing on them recently rediscovered photographs in her hometown (some of which survived or were damaged in a flood 10 years ago).

Similarly, Divaagar introduced *Fine Malaya,* an installation exploring the banana leaf as both a functional and symbolic material in Southeast Asian food preparation. Through archival and fictional elements, *Fine Malaya* framed this material in its grandeur, reflecting cultural identity and heritage. This installation signified an appreciation for the traditional and cultural preparation of food through Southeast Asia's "fine china"—banana leaves.

SOCIAL AWARENESS AND SOCIAL JUSTICE IN ARTISTRY

The first installment of "negaraku" kicked off on 13 July 2024 (see *Penang Monthly*, November 2024). A collectors' show by Bingley Sim and Ima Norbinsha, it showcased a unique selection of artworks reflecting the complex socio-political landscape of Malaysia. It underscored the vital role of collectors in shaping cultural dialogues, evolving the exhibition from a mere showcase to an agitator for discussions on contemporary Malaysian identity, prompting reflections on the question, "What does it mean to be a Malaysian in today's world?"

Its most recent show, "negaraku II", advanced this inquiry by extending its narrative to include voices of those marginalised or excluded from mainstream conversations, such as citizens, migrants and those who shift between different cultural identities that make up Malaysia's diverse society and communities.

"When we talk about patriotism, it is always about the great side of the country,

MAYA FAUZI is a journalism and creative screen graduate from Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM). Her interests lie in writing as a principal form of expression and animal advocacy.

2

but not about the flaws. This exhibition also talks about the flaws, the racial disparity—these are also what makes Malaysia what it is today," said Ivan Gabriel, curator at Hin Bus Depot.

In 2012, Lithuanian artist, Ernest Zacharevic, earned international recognition for painting a series of murals around George Town. His work (namely, *Kids on Bicycle)* often appears in corporate advertising and commercial spaces without permission, proper credit or even fair compensation. "We Need To Talk" was an exhibition that centred around creative ownership and the persistent exploitation of artists' work in commercial branding contexts. His efforts to communicate with such brands ultimately resulted in denials, unsatisfactory terms and canned corporate responses. His experience spoke of a wider pattern of powerful corporations ignoring basic artists' rights, calling for greater accountability, respect and conversations in artistry. It addressed the creative rights of artists, the costs of creativity, meaningful collaborations and the phenomenon of Malaysian artists being silenced by local defamation laws when they challenge institutions for unauthorised use of their artwork.

ARTISTRY IN WILDLIFE ADVOCACY

With approximately 5,000 tigers remaining globally and fewer than 100 Malayan tigers left in their natural habitat, "Eye on The Tiger", a photo exhibition presented by Save Wild Tigers in a collaboration with The Habitat Foundation, served as a wake-up call to underline the plight of the majestic and endangered cat species.

Similarly, "Monkey Business", a duo exhibition by Peter Ong, a wildlife photographer, and Christine Das, a visual artist, celebrated the rich biodiversity of primates

3

in Malaysia. It underscored the dire need for conservation. Intimate photography by Peter captured the beauty and ecological significance of primates in Peninsular Malaysia, while Christine's detailed graphite drawings reimagined the primates with emotional depth, shaping powerful dialogues about nature's fragility.

THE ARTISTIC STRUGGLE

During my visit to "RINTIS Fine Art Showcase 2025: Echoes of Time", a group exhibition held at the Museum and Gallery of Tuanku Fauziah at Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM), I was made aware of how young artists struggle, especially at the varsity level. Developed through collaborative research with the Centre for Global Archaeological Research (PPAG) and featuring works from 41 Fine Arts students, the exhibition was structured into three parts: Resonance, Continuum and Traces. It delved into themes of memory, heritage and the elusive nature of time, along with field visits and data collected from archaeological sites at Sungai Batu and Lembah Bujang.

"Echoes of Time" encouraged young artists to demonstrate how principles of archaeology interplay with artistic interpretation to reflect how the past continues to shape present-day identities and perceptions by engaging with excavated remnants. Simultaneously, it invited viewers to examine how memory endures, meaning constructs, and the echoes of times still resonate today through diverse media and perspectives.

As presented in the showcase, it felt extremely extraordinary to see how these students pulled off something so remarkable. It had me ruminating on the number of days and hours they had spent on their final year project. Standing before their canvases, installations and sculptures sent chills down my spine. Knowing how much hard work and effort were put into their art pieces made me reflect on the persisting issues, where art and artists are still taken for granted.

According to Punithalechumy Sivakumar, a final year student and one of the artists from "Echoes of Time", "A big challenge in the future will be making artwork stand out since so many people are creating. It might also be hard to balance personal style with what others expect. Another challenge could be staying original, while still making art that people can connect with and understand."

As emerging and established artists continue to push further with their creations, hurdles such as basic artists' rights are still overlooked, ignored and neglected. The grandeur and appreciation of art are fading away; it is in dire need of a shift in mindset and perspectives in society as well as corporate bodies. Stricter laws and regulations in the arts are exceedingly crucial to the protection of basic artists' rights.

4

5

6

CAPTIONS

1. (Cover spread) *Soft is the root of my houses (I, II)*, by Adeline Kueh, presented in "From Palais To Pulau (Penang Edition)" at Hin Bus Depot. Photo by Team Hin Bus Depot.

2. "Eye On The Tiger", a photographic exhibition presented by Save Wild Tigers in collaboration with The Habitat Foundation, held at Hin Bus Depot. Photo by Team Hin Bus Depot.

3. *Kerabat Tak Terlihat/ Unseen Keen* by Ain, presented in "From Palais To Pulau (Penang Edition)" at Hin Bus Depot. Photo by Team Hin Bus Depot.

4. *The Journey: From Malaya to 1 Malaysia,* 2013, by Stephen Menon. Presented at "negaraku", a collectors' show by Bingley Sim and Ima Norbinsha held at Hin Bus Depot in July 2024. Photo by Team Hin Bus Depot.

5. *Sleeping Ustaz* by Hasnul J Saidon, presented in "From Palais To Pulau (Penang Edition)" at Hin Bus Depot. Photo by Team Hin Bus Depot.

6. *As much of light as I could take,* 2025, by Arundhati Kartik, presented in "residues: hinging on my insanity", as part of the Artist HinResidency Programme. Photo by Team Hin Bus Depot.

7. *Fine Malaya* by Divaagar, presented in "From Palais To Pulau (Penang Edition)" at Hin Bus Depot. Photo by Team Hin Bus Depot.

7

THREADS OF

WEAVING WASTE INTO ART

CHANGE

BY SHERYL TEOH

FIERY RED, ORANGE and yellow hues blaze across the exhibition space at Think City. Panels of what seem to be woven fabric cascade from ceiling to floor, intersecting like flames suspended in mid-air. Every inch of the tapestry is interesting if you look closely enough. You recognise the ubiquitous logos of large corporations on plastic bags, tinsel garlands sparkling in between fertiliser sacks and bubble wrap, the crystal head of a landline cable poking out unexpectedly.

Visitors weave between the tapestries, their curious fingers brushing, gently squeezing and exploring the various textures of the artwork. Unlike most art pieces, this one invites touch.

"Everything is made from trash," the artist explains. "So I don't have to worry about fingerprints or anything like that."

3

2

4

5

CAPTIONS

1. (Cover spread) The colours of this series of artwork was inspired by the heat wave triggered by farmers burning their crops.
2. Smaller woven works.
3. The logos of Thai rice and fertiliser brands woven neatly into the tapestry.
4. A cable head and colourful tassels poking out of the tapestry.
5. Kelsey explaining her work process.

ONE PERSON'S TRASH IS ANOTHER'S TREASURE

Kelsey Merreck Wagner was trained in printmaking and ceramics. Since the very beginning, her art has been deeply tied to environmental concerns close to her heart, addressing human-animal relationships, climate change and the unsustainability of current waste management practices.

It wasn't until 2017 that she decided she wanted to weave. "I joined a local group and started taking classes. My undergraduate degree didn't have a weaving programme, so it was completely new to me. But once I started weaving, I fell in love with it right away."

At first, weaving was more of a hobby and less of a statement for Kelsey.

"I wasn't sure yet how to connect it to environmental issues. It felt more like a side project at the time."

This changed during the pandemic. When Covid-19 forced small alpaca farms and cotton suppliers around her to shut down, Kelsey found herself cut off from the supply of locally produced fibres she had relied on to weave.

"I really didn't want to turn to Amazon or big companies. So, I asked myself: what do I already have at home?"

The answer: trash. Or more specifically, lots and lots of plastic waste.

Drawing from a crochet technique called "plarn"—a portmanteau of plastic and yarn—Kelsey sorted washed plastic waste by colour into bins, cut them up into strips and glued each piece together.

"I then wrapped them around what are called shuttles—those are like the bobbins that you pass back and forth between a floor loom. And you just repeat the process. So, the part that goes across is called the weft, which is all these recycled materials. And the part that is vertical, that's the warp. For this, I use recycled cotton, and it's basically the only thing I have to buy."

She started with smaller-scale pieces, but when these turned out well-received, she began making bigger pieces for solo and group exhibitions.

"It became a really good transition to a new body of work. I can focus on a different environmental issue, and switch to talking about plastic pollution and our relationship with the things that we consume."

AN ANTHROPOLOGICAL TAKE

Kelsey isn't just an artist; she recently completed a PhD in cultural anthropology at Michigan State University, focusing on Thai artists who address environmental issues in their work. Splitting her time between Thailand and the US, where she is from, Kelsey is also part of an artist collective that works on issues related to the Mekong River.

"We do a lot of collaborative research trips. We'll go to different places along the Mekong River, interview the local people, and just watch and experience how people living there use the land."

While living in Thailand, she was introduced to Warin Lab Contemporary, an art gallery in Bangkok that exhibits art with environmental themes. Initially connected to the gallery for an interview in 2023, its curator and founder offered Kelsey a solo exhibition when she found out that Kelsey is herself an artist. Since then, she has been represented by Warin Lab.

As a researcher, Kelsey believes that art is an important medium in bridging differences, such as political divides, and in spurring awareness. When asked why she thinks art often makes it easier to talk about issues, Kelsey offers, "Art is visual, so there's no language barrier, which I think is great for bringing people from different cultures, different places together."

It is also, she believes, more accessible than academic writing.

"Even though I have a PhD and I'm a researcher, I get really bored reading intense academic articles. But when you see this artwork, for example, I hope you feel the overwhelming sense of how much trash there is. And art is just much more interesting for most people, and reaches different audiences from all walks of life."

FIRE IN THE SKY

The tapestries displayed at Think City are huge pieces, each about 12m long and 78cm wide. Hung criss-cross in all directions, the bright-coloured streaks look almost like the long, serpentine bodies of dragon dance puppets. Against the minimalist backdrop of Think City's hall, they look particularly striking.

As Kelsey worked on these pieces for an exhibition supported by Warin Lab, Chiang Mai's annual smoky season had started, and the smoke from burning fields ensnared the valley in a dense, choking haze. Slash-and-burn agriculture is still practised by the farmers there.

"For four to five months, the air was thick, and the sky glowed orange and yellow," she recalls. "It was hard to breathe, and it made me think about how humans are suffocating ourselves and the environment—through air pollution, through plastic pollution… It is in the air we breathe and in the water we drink."

The inspiration behind the colours used in her "Threads of Change" series combines this experience with the idea of employing heat maps as a central motif to signify the mounting dangers of a warming planet.

INSPIRING COMMUNITY AND COLLECTIVE ACTION

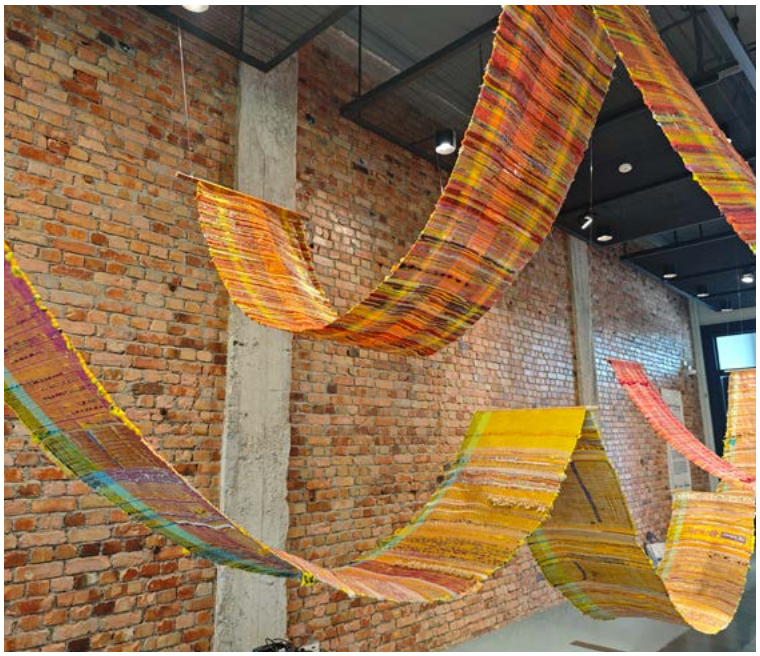
When Kelsey was working on her large-scale projects, her own household plastic waste was no longer enough to complete the massive pieces she had in mind. She reached out to friends, family and even posted in local Facebook groups for their wastes and recyclables. Her community responded to her requests, and she found herself with all sorts of post-consumer waste such as old clothes, home decorations and even odd things like earphone wires and cables.

"It was a really good way to engage with my community during the pandemic, when people were kept apart and isolated."

Community engagement is an important component of Kelsey's work. She holds weaving workshops for people of all ages, and also organises clean-up efforts to collect trash for her art.

"I think that, for one, everyone is an artist. We live our lives in creative ways, whether we realise it or not. I also think anyone can be an activist; there are always things that we care about. For me, it's the environment, race, gender and healthcare… Art is powerful because you can use it to talk about anything. And I really try to empower people to think about that… That they can use their creativity to make positive changes."

With her workshops, Kelsey also hopes to revive the tradition of weaving, which is at risk of being lost.



6

7

CAPTIONS

6. Each tapestry demanded approximately 100 hours of labour, totalling over 500 hours collectively.

7. Kelsey's "Long Blue Weaving" series.

THE TRADITION OF WEAVING

Weaving is one of the oldest surviving crafts in the world, tracing back to Neolithic times some 12,000 years ago. Practised in all major civilisations, weaving has historically and traditionally been the work of womenfolk, passed down matrilineally from grandmothers to mothers and aunts, and from mothers to daughters. In many societies, weaving was the work of the nobility and upper-class women.

"I really like the idea that it's considered women's work, but because of that, artwork that utilises weaving has also been seen more as just a type of unserious craft, rather than contemporary art."

Traditional weaving uses mostly yarn and seldom anything thicker than that. I asked if it is hard to weave with waste products, with varying thickness, malleability and textures.

"I live in North Carolina, where there is a rich textile weaving tradition, and they do something that's called rag rugs. They cut up leftover fabric into really long strips and weave with it, and then the finished products are used as rugs at home. I was kind of inspired by that because they too were using thick, discarded materials. But overall, it's pretty much the same process."

Kelsey's works are visually striking and materially provocative. They challenge viewers to think about the life cycle of consumer products, the detrimental permanence of plastic waste and the possibility of transformation.

"I want people to walk away asking themselves: what can I do with what I already have? How can I give it a second life?

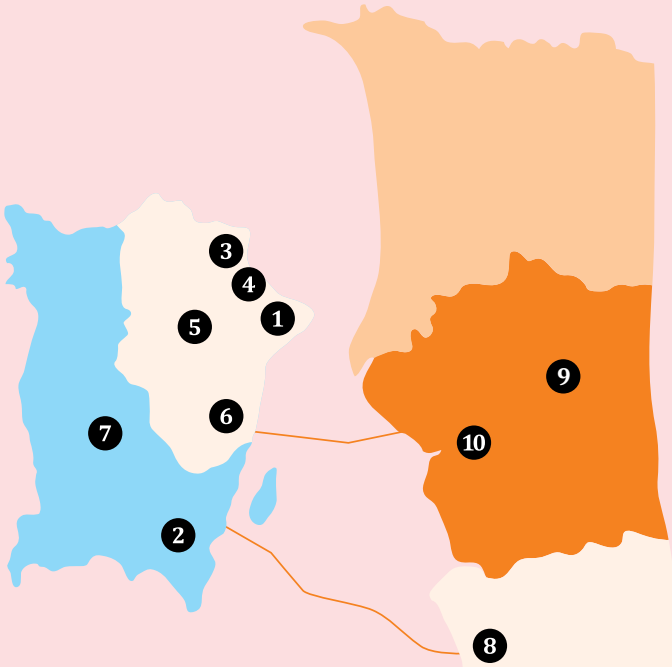
"We need imagination to figure out how to reuse, reduce and repurpose what we consume. The amount of garbage piling up is overwhelming. We have to do something different."

Trash weaving, as Kelsey affectionately calls it, is one such way.

Note: See more of Kelsey's work on kelseymerreckwagner.com or on Instagram @trash_weaver

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

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

GEORGE TOWN LITERARY FESTIVAL

28 • 29 • 30 NOVEMBER 2025

Bangunan UAB & Bangunan Wawasan

#GTLF2025

Urban Myths and Memories

georgetownlitfest.com

Organiser
PENANG INSTITUTE
making ideas work

Official Media
PENANG MONTHLY

Platinum Sponsor
GREATECH

Gold Sponsor
HSBC