PENANG MONTHLY

JULY 2025 | FREE COPY

CELEBRATING MALAYSIAN FABRICS

PHOTO ESSAY
A COUPLE'S PASSIONATE JOURNEY ON THE *IKAT* TRAIL

FEATURE
THROUGH FOREIGN EYES: A JAPANESE EMBRACE OF MALAYSIAN TEXTILES

FEATURE
TENUN PAHANG DIRAJA: HEADING FOR THE GLOBAL MARKET

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Penang Monthly invites submissions of original short fiction in conjunction with the George Town Literary Festival 2025 (28–30 November).

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COVER STORY
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CELEBRATING THE KERAYA

DEALING WITH THE DROPPINGS OF DAILY LIFE

BY OOI KEE BENG

My vocabulary and wardrobe are some of the most effective and immediate tools I have. Likewise, for everyone else. And with these we fence, we clash, we duel. With them, we both love and hate."

MY WARDROBE IS overflowing. With no Spring Cleaning habit for tropical people like me, my short-sleeved and long-sleeved shirts hang next to each other, expanding year by year. My trousers are much too few in number, and have been relegated to the lower section. My short pants are now in the drawers, folded next to my dozens of T-shirts.

My socks and underpants share a shelf, some always favoured; some not. They share the same fate as the bottles of spices in the kitchen.

Meanwhile, my shoes, though not many, have been moved to the backroom to rid my apartment entrance of the unwelcoming sight they collectively make.

My books overflow as well. E-books never caught on as a reading habit.

With age, my cabinet of pills also fills up. The simple alphabet vitamins are pushed to the back by other more sophisticated ones. There are the range of paracetamols (fast-working, slow-working, effervescent tablets), charcoal pills for indigestion or worse, and cough tablets and liquids. The prescription stuff all goes into a special drawer. This is the special place for stuff I must not forget to imbibe every morning.

Then, there are the cables for my devices in the storeroom, documenting the march of technological shifts in the home: USB-As, USB-Cs, micro-USBs, lightning cables… All in over a decade.

LIVING LEGACY

Novelties, novelties and new fashions. All crowding our homes and our heads.

Within this paraphernalia of modern living, we try to stay balanced. We store these in separate places at home, some for use at home, like medications, seasonings and books, and some for use outside the home, like shirts and pants, and socks and shoes. The former categories are not other people's business generally, while the latter, in contrast, have distinct immediate social functions. These latter, therefore, are much more interesting to talk about, and to disagree over.

I was once told by a wise person that when I interview someone for a job, I should study their shoes more than I should consider the clothes they wear. Since then, I have added hairstyle as among the more important features that are potentially revealing of a person's character.

It is easy to see why this is the case. I have 30 T-shirts, two dozen long-sleeved shirts and two dozen short-sleeved ones. Of long pants, I may have as many as I have toes.

But shoes that I own? … they number no more than the fingers I have on one hand, if even that. And I prefer my hair to grow and flow as it wishes. And hair grows fast. I don't vary these two much, and thus, they are possibly more revealing of my character than the clothes I wear.

That much may be true. However, I do not quite believe that clothes are less revealing of the man (or woman). Like most things human, I think clothes are as revealing as they are concealing. That is how humanity works; that is how human perceptions of each other work. There is a deep element of cop and robber about it—a cold war, an arms race, if you prefer.

We may dress to kill; we may dress to conceal. We dress to tell truths; we dress to tell lies. We dress to attract; we dress to repel. We dress to progress; we dress to rebel. In fact, we dress the way we use language—to manage, manipulate and manufacture our individual world.

INTANGIBLE LEGACY

My vocabulary and wardrobe are some of the most effective and immediate tools I have. Likewise, for everyone else. And with these we fence, we clash, we duel. With them, we both love and hate.

But while language is without doubt a tool of power, it requires an audience. Clothes, on the other hand, only require spectators, and these are more easily available. As a pedestrian on the street—which I am most of the time during a normal day—I am immediately more visible than audible. I am more seen than heard.

This gives reason for why I have so many shirts and trousers, and why I find it hard to throw them away, even the faded ones and the out-of-fashion ones. They are like my books in some sense. I don't throw my books out because they still have their use, apart from reminding me of who I have been and what I have been interested in.

But what about clothes that don't even fit anymore, not to mention the torn ones and the ones I wouldn't be caught dead in—or living in?

Well, I suppose old clothes remind me of how I had wanted to be seen in the recent past, for whatever reason, and in whatever context and era. They are the evident remains of my psychological battles, of my performances, good or bad. Yes, they bear my scars and wounds, my successes and failures. They are my intangible legacy.

But should a passion to spring clean cross my mind one morning, I might chuck them out. Maybe I don't need reminders of my past as much as I think. Maybe Summer does come after Spring, just as Spring comes after Winter.

THE NYONYA KEBAYA

BY LIANI MK

WEARING A DEEP HERITAGE

THE KEBAYA–hand-embroidered fabric reflecting detailed lace and embroidery work—is today at once a symbol of style and status, and a shared cultural heritage across Southeast Asia.

Of sartorial elegance, the garment is usually a lace-top paired with a sarong or *kain lepas* skirt with batik patterns. The traditional wear, threaded with *tenun* details and steeped in natural dyes, is often handed down for generations.

On 4 December 2024, after being jointly nominated by Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, Brunei and Thailand, the kebaya was successfully added to UNESCO's Lists of Intangible Cultural Heritage. This is recognition of the strong historical and cultural relationships that extend across the region. The nomination draws attention to the uniqueness of the textile, and at the same time, encourages educational and intercultural dialogue across communities in Southeast Asia.

HISTORY OF THE KEBAYA

In a string of casual but in-depth public talks on the nomination of the Nyonya sarong kebaya organised in Penang, Kenny Loh in "Road to UNESCO—Nyonya Sarong Kebaya" elaborated on how the wearing of the kebaya dates back to the time before World War II, when George Town's role as a trading port inspired an exchange of cultures that fused Chinese and Malay influences.

"Change is part of the soul behind Baba Nyonya culture," he enthused during the highly animated discussion.

Kenny Loh, a fashion designer who founded Kenny Loh Couture, is himself a fifth-generation Peranakan Nyonya who has taught himself Nyonya kebaya embroidery. He often organises workshops that promote cultural preservation and interest, and exhibitions that showcase local artisans and kebaya designers.

One of the invited speakers was Cedric Tan, who walked the audience through the evolution of the Nyonya kebaya in Melaka and Penang, and the different styles and accompanying accessories across the years. "The kebaya is more than just a piece of cloth," he said. "It carries stories of the generations before us and we still have a lot to learn from it today."

Cedric was formerly president of the Persatuan Peranakan Baba Nyonya in KL and Selangor. He is also a consultant to the National Heritage Department of Malaysia, leading the multinational nomination of the kebaya since 2023, which led to the kebaya being listed on the UNESCO Representative List of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity.

Endearingly known as Baba Cedric, he shared how there have been sketches found of people adorning the kebaya from as early as the 1600s. It was also seen to be an attire worn by the hybrid *mestiza* communities in Goa and Melaka in the 1630s.

The exact origins of the kebaya are not known and are still debated, but two theories appear to prevail. For one, many historians have suggested that the Portuguese settlers introduced a cotton surcoat blouse style similar to the kebaya in the 16th century. Other sources point to Muslim merchants who would trade long gowns.

The word *cabaya* or *cabaye* is found in the Persian, Turkish and Urdu languages, and seems to have been derived from the Arabic word *qaba*, which meant a long attire, coat or robe. The word *cabaya* (a vesture) was, according to scholar Eredia in 1618, introduced by Arabs to Southeast Asia, and used to denote long tunics worn in India. This term was found in Portuguese records dating to the 16th century that was later used in Southeast Asia.

At the first UNESCO nomination working meeting hosted by Malaysia in 2022, Baba Cedric said that the kebaya today has been defined as a front-opening blouse with or without a gusset, and is known for its intricate floral and geometric embroidery and decorative fasteners—or brooches, called *kerongsang*—and is paired with a sarong or *kain lepas*.

The design of every kebaya reflects the skill of the seamstresses and embroidery artists who stitch the intricate flora and fauna motifs. For centuries, the kebaya has been worn by women as daily wear and on occasions such as weddings, and even in mourning the dead. The garment is common across Southeast Asia, with each region flaunting its own variation. Traditionally paired with a sarong, the whole ensemble can hint at the background, status and taste of the wearer.

One can tell which country a kebaya is from based on the ornate *kerongsang* brooch design, accompanying sarong batik patterns, cloth type and even kebaya length. For instance, Baba Cedric explained, the Penang *kerongsang* style includes a large, unique star-shaped design that pays homage to the queen, reflecting its British influence.

THE KEBAYA TODAY

The kebaya received national and international attention when the late Endon Mahmood, wife of former prime minister the late Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, championed its revival in the early 2000s, including in her exhibition of kebaya collections catalogued by Baba Cedric.

"For as long as I can remember, I have loved and collected beautiful things," she had once written. She attributed her love for the Nyonya kebaya to her parents, particularly her mother, who would wear it. "While she was not a Nyonya herself, the image of my mother in kebayas brings me back to the old sepia-tinted days when I was much younger, striking a sentimental chord in me."

Renewed interest in the kebaya has emerged, culminating in its nomination for UNESCO's Intangible Cultural Heritage List. The submission process was spearheaded by four consultants, including Baba Cedric, and supported by institutions like the National Heritage Department (Jabatan Warisan Negara). Discussions, such as the talk "Kebaya: Road to UNESCO" organised by Kenny Loh, further highlighted the cultural significance of the garment and its place in contemporary society.

The nomination also highlighted the appreciation for shared ownership and cultural identity—the kebaya belongs to no single country, but rather to the collective history of Southeast Asia. The garment is just one element reflecting the diversity of the Malay Archipelago, where trade, migration and exchanges have been shaping traditions for centuries.

Beyond the kebaya, other traditional textiles such as batik, *songket* and *tenun* have also gained recognition as intangible heritage. The growing appreciation for these art forms underscores the importance of safeguarding traditional craftsmanship.

As Southeast Asians examine new styles of the kebaya, many have altered it to fit their own taste and wardrobe. Regardless of the variations, its history is manifested each time it is worn and remade.

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Photo Source: Wikimedia Commons

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Kebaya_from_Singapore_ca_1950s_IMG_9860_singapore_peranakan_museum.jpg

Of mixed indigenous roots, **LIANI MK** is an independent writer, journalist and artist covering indigenous knowledge, migration, language, film and culture in Southeast Asia. With a background in history and Southeast Asian Studies, she also engages in media advocacy with a regional feminist organisation.

THE ART OF *CINDAI:* A PIECE OF CLOTH THAT CAN SAVE YOUR LIFE

BY MUHAMMAD AMIRUL NAIM

PAINFUL AND TERRIFYING. That was exactly what I thought of it the first time I was training in the *cindai* technique in Silat. The pain cannot be avoided—but like an addiction, the more it hurts, the more exhilarating it is. In Malay martial tradition, *cindai* refers to the technique of using a piece of fabric as a weapon. Most commonly practised using everyday garments worn by the Nusantara Muslims, such as sarong, *pelikat* or batik, *cindai* is easily accessible and practical.

But *cindai* is more than just a cloth for entangling or tying down an opponent. Historically, the technique was also used to wrap weapons, such as the *sundang*, a sword-like tool. *Cindai* originally referred to a specific type of textile that came from Gujarat, India. Over time, the term evolved to denote both the fabric and the combat technique involving it.

A TEXTILE TRADITION

The roots of *cindai* can be traced back to the weft *ikat* technique introduced to the Malay world by Indian and Arab traders in the 14th or 15th century. According to the book *Tenun Pahang Diraja: A Fashion Tradition*,[1] the technique involves tying and dyeing the weft threads before these are woven into fabric; this is a method requiring deep precision and memory. Geometric shapes and floral patterns dominate these designs. Each dyed thread is carefully arranged on bobbins in a specific order to achieve the intended pattern.

Malay textiles like *kain cindai* and *kain limar* often exhibit a weaving style where the patterns are made up of fine lines, dots and dashes, which sometimes look like drops from squeezed limes. This effect comes from interweaving colourful weft threads with plain-coloured warp[2] threads.

FROM PATOLA TO *CINDAI*

According to *Pelestarian Kain Cindai: Satu Kajian Kes di Galeri Tenun Johor*,[3] *cindai*'s origins can be traced to the Patola silk produced by the Salvi community in India.[4] Rich in Hindu symbolism, Patola features motifs such as the *padma* (lotus) and *kala* (mythical floral element). With the advent of Islam in the Malay world from the late 12th century onwards, motifs gradually shifted toward floral themes such as *pul bhat* (flower), *pun bhat* (leaf) and *bunga cempaka*.[5]

Both Patola and *cindai* share the complex double *ikat* technique, where both the warp and weft threads are tied and dyed multiple times before the weaving process; this is a labour-intensive method reflecting deep artistry, status, and at times, spiritual meaning.

TEXTILE, WEAPON AND BELIEF

According to Norwani Md Nawawi, a national textile expert whom I interviewed, *cindai* is not made of pineapple fibre, as many believe, but of pure silk derived from silkworm saliva—rich in protein and said to possess healing properties. Norwani suggests that when wrapped around wounds, the fabric could reduce bleeding. This aligns with stories in Malay epics such as the legendary duel between Hang Tuah and Hang Jebat in the Melaka palace.[6] Despite being stabbed with the powerful *Taming Sari* keris, Jebat is said to have descended from the palace before rampaging through the streets, killing many before succumbing to his wounds. The stories say that the use of *cindai* (or a similar silk cloth) to bind his injury helped him survive long enough to unleash his wrath. It seems that *cindai* was regarded as a tool for use in the very heat of battle.

Given the expense, silk-based *cindai* was typically reserved for the nobility and upper class, while commoners resorted to cotton alternatives—more accessible, but lacking the same tensile strength and symbolic prestige.

Cindai's close resemblance to *kain limar* often leads to confusion, but its distinguishing feature is its one-tone colour combined with recurring motifs, especially *bunga pucuk rebung*, a familiar design in Malay weaving. *Kain limar* is thought to have originated in Pattani, but *cindai* was said to have been woven in Gujarat specifically for the Malay market, and was successively adapted by Malay artisans.

Nik Iznan Musyahmi Mohd of Pertubuhan Gayuman Hulubalang Kebangsaan noted that the term "*limar*" itself means "to dye thread"; yet in many regions, *kain limar* is synonymous with *cindai*. The similarities in appearance, especially when used ceremonially or in performance, blur the lines further.

CINDAI IN THE HIKAYAT AND MARTIAL TRADITIONS

According to Nik, *cindai* was not only reserved for royalty. In *Hikayat Hang Tuah*, Hang Tuah is said to have worn a long belt—a safflower-coloured[7] *ikat pinggang* inscribed with verses—during his duel with Hang Jebat. Though *cindai* is not mentioned directly, the description implies the use of a cloth of high quality.

It was likely chosen for its high thread count and strength, attributes allowing it to resist blade thrusts. Interestingly, Mongol warriors were said to wear silk shirts beneath their armour to prevent deep arrow penetration.

Beyond the battlefield, *cindai* held ritual significance. In the traditional Malay *tangas wangi*, a pre-wedding herbal steam bath, fragrant herbs were wrapped in *kain cindai* to cleanse the bride. In Javanese courts, it was worn as part of ceremonial dance costumes such as those worn in Wayang Wong and Topeng performances, and in Balinese rituals, and was presented as treasured ceremonial gifts in Riau.

THE HIGHEST WEAPON

Seni Cindai pusaka purba
(The art of *Cindai* is an ancient legacy)

Disandang mari dihujung bahu
(Carried lightly upon the shoulder's end)

Jangan serang membabi buta
(Do not attack with blind fury)

Jerat maut sedia menunggu[8]
(For the trap of death lies in wait)

This *pantun* captures the essence of the art of *cindai* in Silat Seni Gayong. It is worn like an unnoticed accessory, resting humbly on one shoulder, ready for a potentially deadly attack.

Ismail bin Chik, the Chief Instructor of Pertubuhan Silat Seni Gayong Warisan Pusaka Malaysia and also the President of Penang State Silat Council, recalls his first encounter with the *cindai* technique. Five members of his group, including Grandmaster Awang Daud of the Awang Daud Martial Arts Academy (ADMAA), who were all previously active in *Tomoi* (Thai boxing), were gathered in a house in Gurun, Kedah in the 1960s to perform the Mandi Tapak ceremony (a traditional initiation rite for new disciples). Together, they demonstrated *cindai* to both active and new disciples.

In Silat Seni Gayong, especially prominent in Peninsular Malaysia and Singapore, *cindai* is considered the highest-ranking weapon,[9] and according to Nik Iznan, it is divided into two categories, a male and a female: *cindai jantan* emphasises whipping and striking, and *cindai betina* focuses on entangling, knotting and trapping.

Throughout history, textiles have woven itself not only into the economy, but also into identities, rituals and, surprisingly, warfare. In the Malay world, *cindai* covers these realms. While few may grasp its full significance today, *cindai* remains a heritage where artistry, tradition and self-defence intertwine in a single length of fabric.

FOOTNOTES

[1] Azizah Aminah Maimunah Iskandariah binti Sultan Iskandar Alhaj (Crown Princess of Pahang), Ahmad Farid Abd. Jalal, Tenun Pahang Diraja: A Fashion Tradition, pg. 110, 2017, Pahang State Museum Corporation

[2] Also known as surface threads, they are stretched vertically on the loom. They are usually made of stronger, coarser fibres than weft threads.

[3] Nur Atiqah Zainuren (2023) *Pelestarian Kain Cindai: Satu Kajian Kes di Galeri Tenun Johor.* Final Year Project thesis, Universiti Malaysia Kelantan.

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[6] *Hikayat Hang Tuah*, Bot Genoot Schap , Pusat Bahasa , Kementerian Pendidikan Nasional (Indonesia), page 86. (2010)

[7] A natural dye that creates an orange-yellow hue originating from the seeds of the safflower plant.

[8] *Pantun Seni Cindai*, PSSSM Gelanggang Sg Rapat Website. https://gelkgsgrapat.yolasite.com/pantun-dan-sajak-gayong.php

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CELEBRATING THE KEBAYA

BY LILLIAN TONG

INTRICATE EMBROIDERY SEWN on diaphanous Swiss voile and draped over the silhouette, the kebaya—traditionally worn by Nyonyas and Southeast Asian women—is the epitome of femininity and cultural pride. Worn daily as well as during traditional ceremonies and rites of passages such as weddings, celebrations, religious events and festivals, it also came in the early 20th century to symbolise women empowerment and nationhood.

1

The kebaya is a long-sleeved blouse with a front opening. The lapel of the Nyonya kebaya runs to the waist, and the blouse tapers to a dipped front. This traditional blouse in Swiss voile, silk, lace or cotton organdie comes in varying lengths and forms, and is worn with a batik or *songket* sarong.

The kebaya holds deep cultural significance for women and communities across Southeast Asia, symbolising refinement, femininity, tradition, cultural heritage, women's empowerment and identity. Local customs, aesthetics and cultural practices influence regional styles. In this article, Penang Baba Nyonya terms are used for the different styles of kebaya—although other communities may use different names.

In Malaysia, the garment evolved as various communities were influenced and impacted by interactions with the West, the movement of people, commerce, history as well as social and spiritual values, ceremonies and traditions.

Since the 15th century, women in the Javanese court had been wearing the kebaya. Today, the kebaya is still worn on Kartini Day to honour Raden Adjeng Kartini, an early national activist championing women's emancipation. In the late 20th and early 21st centuries, President Sukarno endorsed the kebaya as the official national attire for Indonesia, and First Ladies Fatimawati and Dewi Sukarno wore it during official and national events. The country's first female president, Megawati Sukarnoputri, also frequently wore the kebaya while holding the highest office of government.

THE EVOLUTION AND FORMS OF THE KEBAYA

The earliest Nyonya kebaya form is the *t'ng snah* or *baju panjang*. From the 18th century till the early 20th century, when Penang was an important port city and emporium, the influx of different cultures and practices led to a mindset receptive of diverse perspectives, ideas and experiences. The globalised Baba Nyonyas, exposed to trade and with familial connections to the Peranakans in Phuket and Medan, quickly embraced the kebaya during this time.

The Nyonya kebaya's design and aesthetics were influenced by maritime trade, which introduced and supplied the materials needed to make the ensemble. In hot tropical climate, Dutch women and Eurasians chose to wear kebayas derived from the Javanese court kebaya, and introduced hand-woven fabric or white cotton trimmed with white European lace as a decorative element. This style, known as the kebaya *renda*, became widespread around the 1920s among Nyonyas in Medan and the Straits Settlements. The kebaya *renda* also has a shorter hem, and this new form slowly displaced the *baju panjang*.

Later, the invention of the sewing machine superseded European lace and hand embroidery, leading to the popularity of the kebaya *biku*, which has simple machine-embroidered edging on robia and broderie anglaise. The Chinese diaspora also introduced silk embroidery techniques that evolved into the kebaya *encim*, worn by Betawi and Peranakan women in Indonesia, and known as *pua t'ng tay* or kebaya *sulam* to the Penang Baba Nyonyas. Kebaya *sulam*—worn over a cotton camisole—has *kerawang* embroidery along its edges, and spread on its dipped tapered front and middle back. The front opening of the blouse is fastened by a *kerosang*, which is made up of three brooches linked by chains.

Meanwhile, the kebaya *tuaha* is worn over the three-year mourning period, which is customarily observed by children (especially the first-born son) upon a parent's death. This is paired with black, blue or green sarongs.

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Vintage Nyonya kebayas reflect the fashion, craftsmanship and cultural values of their time. The choice fabric for a Nyonya kebaya is robia voile, often in muted colours, though some are made of other fine fabrics and in bright colours. A hallmark of most vintage kebayas is the characteristic *sulam* embroidery—stitches often enhanced with *kerawang* open-work—*potong kot* (coat) or side-back seams cut, and seams worked over in *tebuk lubang*. As vintage kebayas are personalised and made to measure, it allows for a continuous embroidery work running through the side seams and hem without break where the side seams meet.

Aside from trade and migration, the onset of the golden age of Malaysian cinema in the 1950s and 1960s also inspired new kebaya styles. It had Nyonyas decked out in kebaya Bandung or kebaya Saloma and kebaya *moden* of the likes of movie stars and songstresses such as Maria Menado, Siput Sarawak, Latifah Omar, Saloma and Anneke Gronloh.

The kebaya Bandung from Central Java has a distinctive bef triangle—usually ruché or enhanced with manipulated tucks—at the front, and traditionally worn with a cumberband. Known as kebaya *kutubaru* to the Jawi Peranakans and kebaya *kotabahru* to other groups, Javanese and Balinese women still wear the kebaya Bandung at festivals and ceremonial and religious parades.

The kebaya *moden* is a modernised form of the kebaya, often featuring wide, rounded necklines best represented by the attire designed by Pierre Balmain and worn by Singapore Airlines' flight attendants. Perky peplum sleeves were also favoured by Malay artistes of the time.

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> **The kebaya holds deep cultural significance for women and communities across Southeast Asia, symbolising refinement, femininity, tradition, cultural heritage, women's empowerment and identity. "**

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THE "ROAD TO UNESCO" RECOGNITION

In 2022, the Ministry of Tourism, Arts & Culture (MOTAC) and its agencies' officers—the National Heritage Board (Jabatan Warisan Negara), Krafttangan Malaysia and Jabatan Kebudayaan & Kesenian Negara—approached me for initial discussions to submit the kebaya *pendek* as a UNESCO Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. It was to be a multi-national submission by Malaysia, Indonesia Singapore, Thailand and Brunei.

I found the term "kebaya *pendek*" to be limiting, and suggested the term "kebaya" instead, as being more inclusive and encompassing the many types of kebaya worn by different communities in Southeast Asia.

During the Covid-19 Movement Control Order (MCO), these governmental agencies obtained permission for an initial "Kebaya To Go" filming with Sayang Nyonyas and Ronggeng Rhapsody dancers at Pinang Peranakan Mansion. The National Heritage Board and the National Textile Museum came along, and I became more involved in the project, conducting interviews, research, recordings and webinars, as well as writing manuscripts and filming documentaries.

MOTAC requested that I present as many activities, photos, exhibitions and webinars featuring kebayas in Penang as possible to raise awareness and visibility for Malaysia's bid. Since I love learning, researching and discovering new information about this topic, I immediately dove in with enlightening interviews with kebaya doyennes, artisans and resource persons.

Yusri Gulam, the Director of Kraftangan Malaysia for Penang, invited me to a kebaya webinar presentation as resource person in the panel discussion for Festival Kraf Utara 2024. I also managed to cajole Penang's Heritage Commissioner to partner for the "Kebaya: The Nyonya Kebaya and the Malay Kebaya" webinar, and presented it at JKKN Penang's "Menyemarakkan Seni Budaya" programme in September 2023.

Further afield, live streaming broadcast collaboration with international partners gave the kebaya a wider and more global audience. I presented on the chronological evolution of the kebaya at the Virtually Peranakan Festival 2023 Singapore, and again at the invitation of the Phuket Museum in 2023, on top of writing the storyline for a Japanese television programme.

> **The Nyonya kebaya has been a staple garment in Southeast Asia for over a century."**

Meanwhile, Penang Global Tourism, the state tourism agency, featured Sayang Sayang Nyonya Dancers in kebaya in a documentary to promote *The Little Nyonya*, a Singaporean period drama, to Chinese audience. These were shown on China's CCTV, Weixin and Douyin channels and media. The 2022 George Town Festival's Cahaya XR's community stories brought the kebaya into the metaverse.

I held a two-day showing of "The Making of Kebaya Sulam" for members of the State Chinese Penang Association and the general public, and curated a Baba Nyonya wedding featuring Baba Nyonya fashion and kebaya for Tourism Malaysia in Sept 2023. In 2024, Eyo Yeng Lan, Director of the Division of Intangible Cultural Heritage at the National Heritage Board, and I were among the panellists for the "Kebaya to UNESCO" forum in KL. Corporate entities and state agencies supported the national effort, and I was a judge for several kebaya beauty pageants. Moreover, I presented a documentary on the Nyonya kebaya for television, RTM Berita Wilayah Utara and Mutiara FM, hoping this would raise national awareness of the "Kebaya to UNESCO" journey.

Concurrently, Pinang Peranakan Mansion and Persatuan Peranakan Baba Nyonya Pulau Pinang actively advocated for "Kebaya to UNESCO". Vice-President of Persatuan Peranakan Baba Nyonya Pulau Pinang, Jewel Tan, curated a kebaya exhibition for the MOTAC's "Kebaya on the Go" roadshow, partnering with Christina Yeo of MOTAC's International Relations Division (Culture) and her team to dress up visitors to Pinang Peranakan Mansion in kebaya. The National Heritage Board also brought various styles of kebaya for loan, and their photographers took over 100 portraits of locals and tourists arrayed in kebaya to be duly included in the submission to UNESCO.

THE KEBAYA'S RESURGENCE

The Nyonya kebaya has been a staple garment in Southeast Asia for over a century. In the late 1900s, interest in the Baba Nyonya culture gained a boost; Khoo Keat Siew's founding of the Peranakan Federation, Endon Mahmood's publication *The Nyonya Kebaya: A Century of Straits Chinese Costume* and the release of *The Little Nyonya* drama by Singapore's MediaCorp all contributed to this renaissance.

By then, Singapore Airlines, Malaysian Airlines and Batik Air already had their flight attendants clad in kebaya. Penang Global Tourism too dresses its officers in sarong kebaya at international tourism and trade fairs. Artists painted kebaya-themed paintings and produced kebaya designs on porcelain. Kebaya-themed wedding parties and kebaya-clad wedding cakes became fashionable too!

I observed the kebaya's integration with contemporary fashion and its evolution at the annual Peranakan festivals in Singapore and Jakarta at the end of the 20th and the beginning of the 21st century. Jojo Gouw of Indonesia and Raymond Wong of Singapore raised the bar for kebaya *sulam* by introducing new kebaya styles, such as short-sleeved kebaya and extensive *sulam* embroidery. Heath Yeo embellished his local Singaporean parish priest's garments and paraphernalia with *sulam*. Peranakan men too had *sulam* embroidery on their shirts. Meanwhile, wardrobe designers for Nyonya-themed movies and dramas introduced new elements such as flowers and beading on the kebaya, and *sulam* on *baju panjang*.

The listing of the kebaya as a UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage was announced on 4 December 2024 at the 19th session of the UNESCO Intergovernmental Committee for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage held in Paraguay. At the Peranakan Festival 2024 in Phuket, Ael Sirima of Thailand and Raymond Wong came to me and suggested holding a concurrent celebration for the award in our respective countries. Raymond Wong shared the dates for Singapore Heritage Board's "Appreciation of the Kebaya" event at the Peranakan Museum in Singapore. At the same time, the Thai delegation to UNESCO Paraguay received a hero's welcome upon their arrival at the airport, and there was much celebration among communities in Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand and Brunei over this momentous event.

In Penang, Jewel Tan and I organised a "Kebaya, Makan & Joget" event to jointly celebrate UNESCO's recognition of the kebaya, and of Malaysia's breakfast culture on 27 December 2024. We breakfasted on *nasi lemak* and *teh tarik*, and guests had the privilege of viewing Ang Eng Nyonya Kebaya's collection and exhibition showcased in Paraguay for the UNESCO committee, as well as a preview of her book on kebaya. Needless to say, we celebrated with a Ronggeng dance party afterwards.

But, my happiest and proudest moment came when MOTAC and the National Heritage Board held a national appreciation ceremony to acknowledge artisans, resource persons, academics, curators and those involved in and who aided Malaysia's submission of the kebaya to UNESCO. It was a rewarding moment, and I felt fulfilled by the fruition of our combined individual and multi-national effort.

This recognition of the kebaya and the art of *sulam* honours and celebrates centuries of artisans' creativity, skills and ingenuity. Beyond its UNESCO recognition, this attests to the kebaya as a symbol of Southeast Asia's interconnection, shared history and culture. As the kebaya continues to weave its story across generations, it stands not just as a garment, but as a living testament to the artistry, resilience and shared heritage of Southeast Asia—a legacy stitched with pride and worn with reverence.

CAPTIONS

1. A kebaya (not vintage) to show the embroidery work decorating the back of the top.
2. Vintage kebaya.
3. *Kerawang*, the lace-like open work embroidery.
4. Kebaya *biku*, embroidered only at edges.
5. Kebaya *renda*. Sometimes Penang Nyonyas pronounce it as kebaya *lenda*.

DATO' LILLIAN TONG is many times asked what will become of the Baba Nyonyas. Hopefully, the fate of the Straits Chinese community will not be like hers—she ended up in a museum.

REMIX THE *SONGKET*?

OF COURSE WE CAN

BY HUSNA SHAFIRAH

HUSNA SHAFIRAH is a final-year student of Applied Language (Hons): English for Intercultural Communication from Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM). Currently interning with *Penang Monthly*, she is enjoying her first opportunities in writing about culture and lifestyle along with the smell of freshly printed magazines.

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***"TOUT PASSE,** tout lasse, tout casse"*—everything passes, everything wears out, everything breaks. Yet, standing against the tides of time is the *songket*. Once exclusively crafted for the Malay Sultanate's regalia, it has evolved into a more accessible symbol of heritage for all.

But going beyond the evolution of the *songket* into a piece of clothing accessible to the public, lies the challenge of how open we are today to the reimagining of it in non-traditional forms. I, for one, am intrigued by a rising Malaysian brand, Fétiche the Label, that has been experimenting with the *songket*—very daringly at that.

Fétiche the Label reflects its young and bold creator, Shoong Nuo-Wen. She started the brand when she was fresh out of ESMOD Kuala Lumpur, a fashion school. This was during the pandemic, and there was no safety net. She first dabbled in merging Western fashion with cultural textiles—now a signature of her designs—by creating a corset from *qipao* fabric.

Following her success in the batik corset collection, which was donned even by local celebrities, Shoong was out seeking something novel for Fétiche the Label. On one of her walks for inspiration, she stumbled on a *songket* casually hanging off a rack in a store on Jalan Tunku Abdul Rahman—she fell in love. Her original intention of reimagining the *songket* was to make it more accessible for all races, and at that, she has been successful.

"It may seem that the *songket* is exclusive to *orang Melayu*, but when you look more into it, it is also commonly worn by the Baba Nyonyas, the Indonesian community in Malaysia, the Thais and the Burmese. It is not as common to see Chinese and Indians wearing *songket*, but seeing it on the rack in the store, I loved it so much I wanted my Chinese friends to also fall in love with it."

While Shoong's work has garnered a sizeable fan base, some view her approach to be challenging the status quo of *songket* as a highly dignified Malay fabric—traditionally worn in modest forms. But as Fétiche the Label gains mass exposure, the trifling hate comments are now drowned out by voices of encouragement. The brand's outreach now extends beyond the border—she has been approached by customers from Indonesia, Brunei, Myanmar and Thailand to make designs using their own versions of *songket*. "The patterns are completely different, but the weaving is almost similar. They really want something that represents their own culture."

Shoong turned them down for now. "I am open to it, but for now, I just want to present what is Malaysian. I want to really master it, and I want to open the hearts of people who are still closed to it."

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CATERING TO THE YOUNG

Fétiche the Label shot to fame on Instagram and TikTok in mid-2024 through their viral *songket* corset-pareo set videos. The star of those videos is the limited-edition, pink-lilac *songket* corset-pareo set with a flowery cape inspired by Rapunzel as portrayed in the Disney movie.

Combining pastel colours and princess-y looks, this fusion of *songket* with royalcore aesthetics—aesthetics based on the visuals associated with Western European royalty—instantly piqued the interest of local young women. There is finally a look for a Southeast Asian-Western European princess crossover!

Part of *songket's* decline is due to the hefty price tag that comes with owning one, and is typically only worn on special occasions. Fétiche the Label comes into the game offering value in versatility. Their *songket* set, priced at around RM200, includes a *songket* corset, *songket* pareo and a pair of king sleeves. Worn together, it makes an ethereal outfit for any grandiose occasion; meanwhile, each piece can also be mixed and matched with other more casual accompaniments. Her clients individually style the *songket* corset with dress shirts, jeans and other creative combinations.

This is aligned with Shoong's design philosophy, which prioritises versatility and flexibility. All of their corsets are made reversible, and can be worn on both sides—the *songket* side and the full satin side. As a young person herself, she understands the economic qualms of her young clientele, and wants them to feel like they are getting multiple outfits for the price of one.

"We're not H&M or SHEIN, and this is not a RM50 *baju*. This costs a few hundred ringgit, and I really want them to feel like 'Oh my God, this is really worth my money!' I want them to feel like, 'I can wear this every day, I can wear this every week!'"

WORKING WITH TRICKY FABRIC

To keep costs low, Shoong chooses to use machine-made *songket*, as handmade ones can cost from RM1,000 per metre. But working on Western designs with machine-made *songket* poses some challenges: the rigidity of a machine-made *songket* often turns dreamy, voluminous designs into bulky disasters. Adding to that, complex pattern cuts can upset the *songket* threadings, risking costly mishaps.

So, what underpins their successful venture with this fabric?

The *songket* collection went through numerous periods of trial and errors to figure out ways to manipulate the thick fabric. "For the pareo, we have a specific cutting for it, it's actually not just one big piece of fabric," Shoong explains. The set comes with a customised pareo ring, redesigned from a Bawal scarf ring to fit the pareo strap. This

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is the key behind the waist-snatching look of her *songket* pareos.

Aside from that, Fétiche the Label ensures that *songket* fabrics undergo exceptional care before production begins. The fabrics are pre-treated with heat, which locks them in shape and prevents shrinking. And before she cuts, the fabric must be reinforced with fabric stabilisers to maintain the integrity of the thread structure.

Another secret ingredient is their fine craftsmanship. During the interview, my eyes lit up when Shoong pointed out the boning insert in the corset centrepiece. The stitching was impeccably neat, and it blended seamlessly with the *songket* motifs, as if it had always been part of the design. I was even more surprised when Shoong revealed that aside from her, some of these masterpieces are handcrafted by artisans from George Town.

According to Shoong, growing demands led her to commission tailors to help with production. Given her strong belief in slow fashion, it was not an easy decision. She ultimately chose a small factory in George Town. "It costs a lot to ship materials to and from Penang," she admits. But for Shoong, it was a worthwhile investment, as she has the utmost confidence in the tailors' skills and craftsmanship. To add, the tailors were actively overseen by another ESMOD alumnus—her junior.

"THE KING IS A WOMAN"

Shoong utilises her designs to uplift and empower women through inclusivity and bold thinking. In her latest *songket* collection "The King is a Woman", Shoong took inspiration from an ancient Chinese empress, who took over her sick husband as the decision-maker in the Chinese court. "For a while, people looked to her as the king," she shares.

"So far, our corset tops can be quite exposed. I really want to make designs that can be worn by hijabis as well, and anyone who wants to dress more modestly than what Fétiche the Label has been offering," Shoong says.

Thus, this new collection featuring her king-sleeved blouses is a gift for her hijabi fans, and her way of being more inclusive. The regal *songket* colours—black, royal blue and white, interlaced with silver *songket* threads—gives the wearer a commanding presence. In contrast with her previous collection, which showcases more girly, soft colours, this collection celebrates women's resilience and power.

Through her bold vision and meticulous craftsmanship, Shoong Nuo-Wen and Fétiche the Label have not only redefined *songket* as modern fashion, but also created a brand whose universal values—women empowerment and cultural pride—resonate with its diverse audience.

CAPTIONS

1. Fashion sketch
2. Shoong in her *Songket* corset and pareo set in matcha green.
3. Limited Edition Rapunzel *Songket corset-pareo set.*
4. Corset designed for DOLLA, a Malaysian girl group.
5. Early design of *Songket* Elizabeth Corset in wine red.
6. White and gold *Songket* bridal custom by Fétiche the Label.
7. *Songket* corset and pareo set in wine red.
8. Custom bridal dress inspired by Taylor Swift's folklore fit from her Eras Tour.
9. *Songket* corset and pareo set in lilac purple.
10. *Songket* corset and pareo set in emerald green.
11. "The King is A Woman" royal blue.

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THROUGH FOREIGN EYES: A JAPANESE EMBRACE OF MALAYSIAN TEXTILES

BY SAMANTHA KHOO

OUTSIDE MALAYSIA—in Japan, for example—there is a quiet but growing interest in our local textiles. But what is it about our batik, Nyonya kebaya and *baju kurung* that captures the interest of fashion enthusiasts in Japan?

In this article, *Penang Monthly* explores how Japanese and Malaysian textiles overlapped in history. We also speak to several Japanese collectors of Malaysian traditional costumes, and explore how these crafts are being reinterpreted in Japanese fashion.

TEXTILE CROSSROADS: A SHARED HERITAGE FROM INDIA TO SOUTHEAST ASIA AND JAPAN

In the 15th century, India began to export chintz, derived from the Hindi word *chint,* which means "spotted". The Indian chintz is a colourful, floral-patterned cotton cloth that is hand-painted or woodblock-printed. Before its mass popularity in Europe and North America in the 18th century, the Portuguese had traded in it with China, Indonesia and Japan.[1]

Sarasa (更紗), the Japanese term for the Indian chintz, is believed to have been introduced to Japan at the beginning of the 17th century.[2] The vibrant patterns and colours of the Indian chintz were deemed rare and exotic, and as such, were admired by the Japanese. Demand for it increased, but being a luxury item, it was only accessible to the upper class.

During the late Edo period, in 1820, imports of the *sarasa* dwindled and ceased following Japan's Seclusion Policy. However, skilled Japanese artisans at the time had begun developing a locally made and more affordable version of the Indian *sarasa*. The Edo *sarasa*, as it was called, incorporated Japanese motifs, and slowly spread to different regions, which in turn evolved their own unique variations.[3]

Down south in the 14th century, the Ryukyu Kingdom was also actively trading goods with Southeast Asia, including Siam, Melaka and Java, as well as with China and Korea. Besides spices and other goods, it is recorded that cotton prints and art from Southeast Asia were also being traded.[4] These trading partners heavily influenced the motifs and dyeing techniques of the Okinawan *bingata*—a garment exclusively worn by the royalty and the warrior class—which (unsurprisingly) resembles batik.

Centuries after these fabrics were first traded, they are now being reinterpreted to suit the modern-day man and woman.

OTO FURUKAWA—BLENDING THE *BAJU KURUNG* AND THE YUKATA

Oto Furukawa is an editorial writer and Malaysian cuisine specialist. After spending four years working in a Japanese publishing company in KL, she returned to Japan and started *WAU* magazine[5], an online media outlet that introduces to Japanese audiences Malaysian food, tourism, art and culture. In 2017, they explored how elements from the *baju kurung* and the yukata[6] could come together to make a hybrid piece of garment.

Q: TELL US WHAT INSPIRED THIS PROJECT.

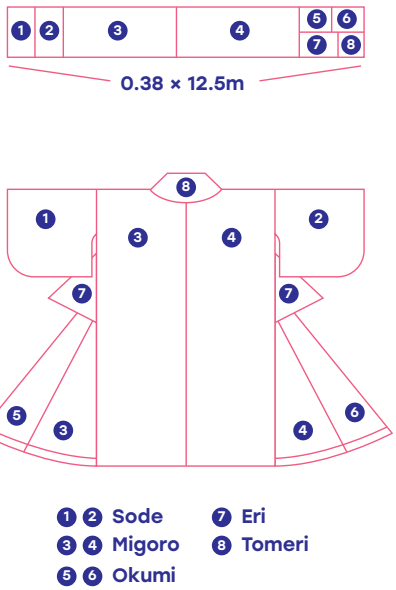
In 2017, we were looking to raise funds for *WAU* magazine. Since my team and I are passionate about introducing Malaysian culture to the Japanese community, doing a crossover of the *baju kurung* and the yukata seemed like a good crowdfunding initiative. We had not seen this done before, so it was a novelty. Our aim was to sell three sets each of the yukata and the *baju kurung*, and we were pleased that we managed to meet our crowdfunding target!

Q: HOW DID YOU MAKE THE BATIK YUKATA?

The designs and motifs of the batik are so beautiful, and rarely seen in Japan, so we wanted to incorporate them into Japanese traditional attire. We made a yukata using batik fabric sourced from Melaka, and brought them with us to Tokyo. There, we worked with a Japanese tailor, who was an expert in making yukatas and kimonos, and had the batik fabrics hand-sewn into yukata.

Q: HOW DID YOU MAKE THE YUKATA *BAJU KURUNG?*

Likewise, we purchased three rolls of yukata fabric, called *tanmono*, from a Japanese kimono store in Nihonbashi. We brought them back to Malaysia and worked with a tailor in Johor to make the *baju kurung*. The process was an interesting challenge—a roll of *tanmono* typically makes one female yukata, this makes adapting it for the *baju kurung* more difficult than anticipated. Our tailor needed to get creative, sewing the *tanmono* together while ensuring the floral motifs could be seen on the main body of the *baju kurung*.



A bolt of *tanmono* measures 12m in length and 36cm in width, and one roll of the fabric is usually cut into the eight parts that make up the kimono or yukata.[7]

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CAPTIONS

1. Left: *Bingata*, Right: Batik.
2. Furukawa wearing her batik yukata.
3. Yukata made with batik fabric.
4. From left: Ai Watanabe and Misato Igarashi wearing the kebaya blouse in Tokyo.
5. Rolls of yukata fabric being sewn into *baju kurung*.

Q: HOW POPULAR IS BATIK AMONG MODERN JAPANESE?

In Japan, batik is commonly known as the Javanese *sarasa* (ジャワ更紗). It certainly is very niche, and is appreciated by a small group of older Japanese, who are still passionate about preserving the kimono culture.

AI WATANABE AND MISATO IGARASHI– KEBAYA AS URBAN OUTERWEAR

Just as modern fashion has adapted the Japanese kimono into a form of outerwear, some Japanese don the Nyonya kebaya blouse in the same way.

Ai Watanabe and Misato Igarashi are modern Tokyoites who love travelling and exploring different cultures. They enjoy elevating their everyday outfits by integrating elements of traditional Peranakan wear, such as by wearing the blouse of the Nyonya kebaya as a jacket and pairing it with jeans.

Q: WHEN DID YOU FIRST ENCOUNTER THE NYONYA KEBAYA?

AI WATANABE: I learned about it through my friend, Misato Igarashi. While travelling in Melaka, I found a shop selling Nyonya kebaya.

MISATO IGARASHI: I've always loved looking out for traditional clothing and local patterns whenever I travel. During my trip to Singapore, I learned about the kebaya. Since then, I've loved embroidered clothes—it was love at first sight.

Q: WHAT DREW YOU TO THE NYONYA KEBAYA?

AW: I found it very attractive, and especially elegant with the sarong. It makes me feel happy and energetic.

MI: I was moved by the delicate embroidery, the floral patterns and the bright colours.

Q: HOW POPULAR IS THE NYONYA KEBAYA AMONG THE JAPANESE?

AW: I haven't seen people wearing the kebaya much in Japan, but there is a very niche community that does know about it and like it.

MI: The kebaya is not so common here yet, but being so cute and attractive, it definitely has the potential to be popular!

MIKI TAMPO OF *THE BEAUTIFUL WORLD OF PERANAKAN IN THE MALAY PENINSULA*

Another Japanese who is an active proponent of Peranakan culture is Miki Tampo, a researcher and writer who resided in Penang. Her interest began in Singapore, where she lived and worked for 15 years. On top of publishing *The Beautiful World of Peranakan in the Malay Peninsula,* which introduces the culture to the Japanese, she was also invited to speak at the Sarong Kebaya Exhibition in Tokyo, a joint event organised by Singapore-Japan Diplomatic Relations, in 2016.[8]

For centuries, textiles have crossed borders through trade, and now via personal encounters. As each person wears them, and writes and shares about them, the story continues.

For those of us in Malaysia, this is a quiet but pleasant reminder that what feels everyday to us might be seen elsewhere as rare, radiant and worth celebrating. Perhaps this is how we can revive and raise local interest in our art and culture—by looking at it through foreign eyes.

FOOTNOTES

[1] Chintz | Encyclopedia of Art | Textiles

[2] Yuzuruha, Oyama. "The Textile Exchange Between Japan and India During the 16th and 19th Centuries." Tokyo National Museum.

[3] Kaji Antiques. The Charm of Edo Sarasa

[4] Sakamaki, Shunzō. "Ryukyu and Southeast Asia." The Journal of Asian Studies 23, no. 3 (1964): 383–89. https://doi.org/10.2307/2050757

[5] WAU | hatimalaysia.com

[6] A yukata is a casual, lightweight Japanese kimono made of linen or cotton. A sash, called an *obi*, is tied around the waist. It is a traditional costume for both genders; women's yukata is designed with more floral motifs, while men's yukata bears minimalist designs.

[7] Hirota Tsumugi. "The Size of 'Tanmono' Kimono Fabric Bolt." Hirota Tsumugi Blog, January 7, 2019. https://hirotatsumugi.jp/blogen/post-5579.

[8] Tampo, Miki. "Our Nippon Nyonya Fans." *The Peranakan*, no. 2, 2016, pp. 34–35. The Peranakan Association Singapore. https://peranakan.org.sg/magazine/2016/PA_2_2016.pdf.

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.

PROMOTING GREEN PRACTICES IN TEXTILE DYEING

BY NICOLE CHANG

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SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOAL (SDG) No. 12: Responsible Consumption and Production is probably one of the reasons creators and producers are advocating green practices; these can go from adopting eco-friendly materials (raw and supporting materials) to using green production mediums, techniques, processes, eco-packaging, etc. The same trend can be observed among textile artisans who live as "ambassadors" for the environment.

A study[1] by researchers from Universiti Malaysia Kelantan (UMK) highlights the resurgence of local knowledge in textile dyeing using colourants/pigments extracted from natural resources, including insects/invertebrates (e.g. sea snails), plants (e.g. fruits, leaves, flowers, barks, roots, fungi, rhizomes, etc.), and soils and minerals (e.g. mud, orpiment, graphite). Figure 1 summarises the findings on the general process flow of natural textile dyeing, indicating the common techniques employed.

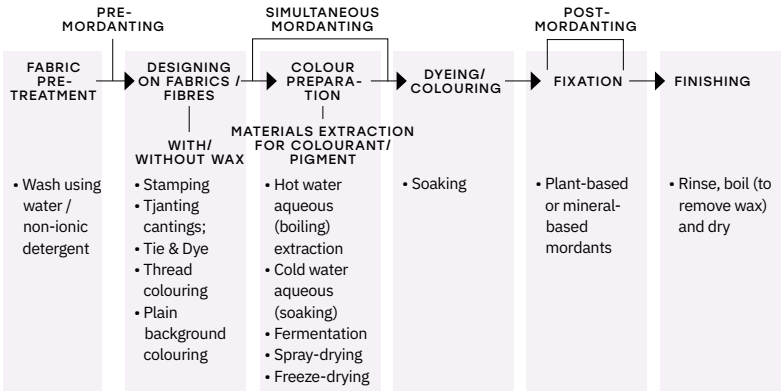

FIGURE 1

The mordant (a fixative to improve colour fastness) may be sourced from eco-friendly solutions such as turmeric, henna, orange peel, lemon extract and pomegranate peel. However, many practitioners opt to use metal/mineral-based variants like aluminium potassium sulphate (commonly known as "alum"), calcium acetate, copper sulphate and iron sulphate.

NATURAL DYE

During "IKAT 2023: Immersive Knowledge and Textile" held in Penang, Nawwal Abdul Kadir, a member of the research crew, shared about natural textile dyeing practices in Kelantan. To achieve vibrant colours with natural dyes, "Pre-prepare the fabric by washing it in water with the addition of one litre of peanut oil and a cup of Dettol to loosen the fibres." She added that this "enhances colour absorption when the fabric is immersed in the dye multiple times". The fabric must then be continually squashed to further loosen the fibres and to allow the dye to penetrate even more effectively.

Adopting natural textile dyeing methods and techniques, Elizawati Ellias, from Taiping, Perak, pioneered eco-print batik craft production by setting up Ghomah Batik in 2020 in Manjung, Perak. Constantly testing the potential of botanical resources, she uses different species of leaves and petals as her core design materials when crafting batik wearable and decorative pieces that range from fashionable blazers, shawls, patterned t-shirts, tote bags, cushions and fabric decorations.

Each creation captures the essence of natural colour pigments. "Shifting from a career in banking to textile designing without a background in the arts wasn't an easy journey. It took everything to gain momentum, to discover the right formula. You can't just ask around for the recipes or techniques. You have to sacrifice your energy and time, and even shed tears through continuous research and experimentation to achieve the best version," said Eliza. "I strive to promote eco-friendly, zero-chemical crafting by leveraging local natural resources to minimise impacts on environment." Waste generated from her natural dye solutions are safe for disposal in nature, and suitable for composting and nourishing the soil.

Eliza furthers her passion by generously sharing her crafting journey and entrepreneurial experiences with local artisans. She is engaged in local youth and women's communities involving single mothers or underprivileged groups through eco-print batik-making workshops, and encouraging them to explore eco-printing so as to add value to their existing practices or to develop their own local craft practices.

FOOTNOTE

[1] Mat Hussin, N.S., Ismail, A.R., Abdul Kadir, N., Hasbullah, S.W., Hassan, H. & Jusoh, N. (2020) Resurgence the Local Knowledge: Environmental Catalysis Practiced in Local Textile Dyeing. IOP Conf. Series: Earth and Environmental Science 616 (2020) 012043. doi:10.1088/1755-1315/616/1/012043

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CAPTIONS

1. Nawwal sharing about industrialised and artisanal practices of plant-based natural textile dyeing process and its finished products. These are all available in Kelantan.

2. Eliza sharing her crafting process flow with the community in Kuala Sepetang.

3. Ghomah Batik's creations use local natural pigments and present organic patterns derived from the bark, leaves and petals of tree species found in Perak (e.g. teak, mangrove, guava, gelenggang, sepang, lemuni, etc.). Natural dyeing and eco-printing techniques include directly hammering leaves/petals onto fabric, and employing boiling and steaming methods. (Photo credit: Elizawati Ellias)

4. Yann Indigo Dye Room Exhibition, titled Isle Blue Serendipity held at Penang Book Island @COEX, Hin Bus Depot, Penang (30 August - 15 September, 2024). Yann's creative and innovative indigo dye art and artisan products showcase her mastery of various researched and learned techniques. Each handcrafted indigo piece reflects her passion for this sustainable artisanship, highlighting the beauty of natural pigments and the relevance of traditional techniques in contemporary living.

5. & 6. During a workshop in conjunction with Yann's (middle, in hat) exhibition, participants had the opportunity to experience hands-on Hachinosu Shibori using natural indigo dye. The prepared fabrics, tied using various methods, were immersed in the indigo dye bath multiple times to achieve the desired intensity of colour. (Photo credit: Michelle Ng)

NICOLE CHANG has just completed her PhD programme at the Department of Development Planning and Management, School of Social Sciences, Universiti Sains Malaysia.

"I encourage them to start locally: to source materials locally, to craft something feasible and learn to market their creations, not only within Malaysia but also in the outside market."

With support from United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) Malaysia, Ghomah Batik Productions has created job opportunities in Manjung, Perak. Eliza invites interested people to co-create or collaborate on projects promoting eco-print batiks as a distinctive product for the Manjung district. Ghomah Batik's creations are now frequently featured by Tourism Perak and Kraftangan Perak as unique local products.

INDIGO DYE ART

Drawn to the traditional *Lanjiaxue* (蓝夹缬) textile dyeing technique (one of the four primary inherited methods of natural indigo dyeing originating from the Dong ethnic minority in Guizhou and Zhejiang Provinces in China), Kam Woei Yann picked up crafting techniques and its processes from a Dong master artisan during her visit to Guizhou. Her immersive 10-day mentorship brought her on an artisanal journey in handcrafting fine wearable and home decorative masterpieces using natural indigo dye.

As she honed her skills, she began exploring different techniques such as the Japanese *shibori* (e.g. *katazome shibori* and *hachinosu shibori*) and tie-dye. "Different techniques, including folding, tying/binding, stitching, masking, twisting or compressing fabric to resist-dye, may result in different intricate designs with different shapes/patterns; from circular, spiral, symmetrical patterns to various possible shapes or visuals on naturally dyed fabric," Yann explained.

According to Yann, of the 750 or so species of indigo plants found in tropical and subtropical regions, *Indigofera tinctoria* (木蓝), commonly called *pokok nila/tarum* in Malay, is the most well-known. It can be found in India, Thailand, Taiwan and Malaysia.

She started Yann Indigo Dye Room to share her artisanal practice and to promote natural indigo dye art through hands-on experience workshops. Yann explained the process of transforming the indigo plant into vibrant dye: "First, the leaves with stems from *Indigofera* plants are bundled and placed in a vat/fermentation pit to convert glycoside indican into blue dye (indigotin). The fermented solution is then gently mixed with lime ($Ca(OH)_2$) and continuously beaten until it becomes frothy and attains a navy hue—a result of oxidation during the process. Finally, the dye solution is decanted or filtered to yield a concentrated indigo dye paste."

IT TAKES COMMITMENT

When it comes to commitment to sustainable crafts, Yann commented that "It takes more time and greater effort to source and process quality, ready-to-craft, eco-friendly materials—which are not readily available. As additional steps and specific expertise may be required, costs can get relatively higher. Green practices in production demand attentive care and execution. Lastly, competing with mass-produced cheaper alternatives is another big challenge for artisanal products."

Despite the challenges, Eliza hopes to inspire eco-friendlier crafting practices. "The more practitioners adopt natural or eco-friendly materials and techniques, the better we can protect and preserve our environment, which is crucial for future generations." Nevertheless, Yann emphasised the importance of greater consumer awareness and appreciation for the values and significance of sustainable artisanal products.

6

A COUPLE'S PASSIONATE JOURNEY ON

THE

BY
LIM
SUAN POH

AND
ANDREW
SHENG

IKAT TRAIL

Photo credit:
Suan I Lim

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TEXTILES ARE MORE than just fabrics—they are the woven stories of our cultures, histories and identities. Among the most intricate and meaningful of the textile traditions is *ikat*, a resist-dyeing technique that produces mesmerising patterns through a meticulous process of tying, dyeing and weaving.

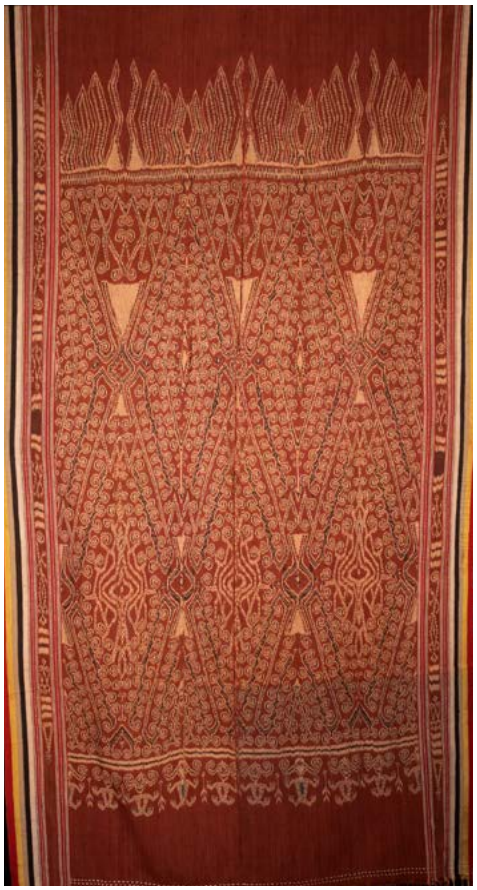
Our personal collection of *ikat* textiles spans the Nusantara region, with different tribal cultures and histories, from the lush rainforests of Sarawak to the stunning, exotic islands east of Bali in Indonesia. Each piece tells a story, not just of artistry, but of the societies that created them, and the love and the dedication which the weavers tied, dyed and wove into every piece. We treasure them as the *warisan* (cultural heritage) of Malaysia and the Malay Archipelago.

Here, we trace the cultural significance of *ikat* weaving. These textiles are what we call the Versace, or primitive couture (high culture), of indigenous fashion, woven and worn with pride and elegance by the peoples in Sarawak, Borneo and the islands beyond the Celebes Sea. Our journey as collectors of *ikat* textiles date back nearly half a century, from our first *pua kumbu* (traditional ceremonial cover cloth) from Kuching, Sarawak collected in 1979, to the regal sarongs of Sumba.

THE HISTORY OF *IKAT:* ONE OF THE OLDEST OF WEAVING TECHNIQUES

The term "*ikat*" comes from the Malay-Indonesian word, *mengikat*, meaning to tie or to bind. It refers to the process of resist-dyeing threads (usually cotton) before they are woven into cloth. This ancient technique dates to Neolithic times (at least 6,000 years ago), with archaeological evidence of early *ikat* found in various parts of the Middle East, Central Asia, Africa and the Americas. Today, Japanese, Chinese, Vietnamese, Thai, Filipino and Indonesian craftsmen weave with pride their *ikat* with indigo blue and morinda red, and continue to use them in their traditional costumes.

In a wooden frame (loom) that holds vertical (warp) strands of thread, the weaver threads through horizontal threads (weft) until the whole piece of cloth is produced. The vertical warp yarns are held stationary in tension on the loom frame, while the horizontal weft is drawn through (inserted over and under) the warp thread. The tighter the weave, the tougher the cloth; the finer the thread, the softer and smoother the fabric; the finer the tying and dyeing process, the more treasured the cloth and the more intricate the designs. The pattern emerges like digital pixels—the denser the pixels, the sharper the picture.



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CAPTIONS

1. Cover spread: Left: Melaka, West Timor, Tetum people. In the centre of Timor island—eastern part of West Timor—are unique designs of humanoids with small ears, single eyes and hands pointing up or down, some of them showing family and kids. See Peter Hoopen collection, https://ikat.us/ikat_031.php; Right: Woman's ceremonial skirt with anthropomorphs—*tais keut bati.*

2. Royal Princess Sarong and *hinggi* (shawl) from Rende, East Sumba.

3. Sarong of a girl. Collected in Kuching, 1979.

4. Classic key design, the borders are in yellow and red—the colours of Sarawak.

5. This piece, bought in Bali, was woven by a princess from Rende, who has become the leading weaver today in Sumba. The four-sided geometric symbol is associated with royalty.

The tie and dye technique involves covering the part of the thread that should not be dyed with plastic (previously leaves). The threads are then dyed, and so the part that is wrapped is not dyed with that colour. The weaver must imagine the pattern and then weave the threads together till the pattern appears on the cloth in its full glory. The finer the tie and dye technique, the finer the pattern. This is achieved through practice and collective effort, since the more weavers there are, the better the quality of the dyeing and weaving.

Both of us wanted to collect the pieces, preferably directly from the villages, since modern clothing has been fast replacing these tribal clothings—and in many regions, only the old still weave. Since 1994, we have travelled up and down the islands of Nusantara and the Moluccas, bargaining with dealers and weavers alike. These pieces are treasures with memories of ties and kinship that are stories in and of themselves.

WEAVING AS THE FABRIC OF SOCIETY

In many traditional societies, weaving is not merely a craft, but an esteemed—almost venerated—practice. It represents art, identity, status, skills and communal knowledge. Among the Iban and Dayak tribes of Borneo, the best weavers were often women of high status—chieftains' wives or spiritual leaders who held deep knowledge of tribal rituals and traditions.

The *pua kumbu*, a ceremonial blanket or shawl, is one of the most iconic of Iban textiles. Used in rituals, weddings and funerals, these pieces are imbued with spiritual significance. The motifs often depict mythological scenes, protective symbols or ancestral stories. Similarly, in Sumba, the finest textiles were woven by the royal family, with certain designs reserved exclusively for nobility.

Before Western clothing became widespread, *ikat* fabrics were worn daily and during special ceremonies. The smaller pieces were sewn together as a sarong, while the better pieces had their borders embroidered with special motifs or designs.

ORIGINS IN SARAWAK: THE BEGINNING OF OUR COLLECTION

Our fascination with *ikat* began in Kuching, Sarawak, when Andrew encountered a majestic *pua kumbu* while visiting the bazaar. The deep reds, intricate patterns and cultural weight of these textiles were captivating, and he immediately recognised the artistic and cultural significance of this dying art so treasured by its communities. The small girl's sarong and *ikat* shawl or blanket were so beautifully designed that he immediately bought them back for Suan Poh, who fell in love with each piece, and formed an immediate and emotional tie to the Iban people's homage to their community pride, nature and the spirit world.

We collected more during several memorable trips to Kuching and Sibu until we were posted to Washington DC in 1989. On our return to Hong Kong in 1993, we immediately hopped on a plane to Bali, where we encountered with amazement and awe the whole range of *ikat* textiles from the exotic islands of Nusantara. Each differed dramatically from village to village, island to island; the different motifs and designs favoured by different communities set them uniquely apart.

SUMBA: WHERE ROYALTY WEAVES HISTORY

The island of Sumba was one of our first calls, since *ikat* is a regal tradition there. The best royal textiles were symbols of wealth and status, with large pieces used in ceremonial functions, including funerals. Sumbanese *ikat* is renowned for its bold, figurative designs—horses, skull trees and ancestral spirits—woven in rich indigo, rust and ivory.

These motifs come from not only Sumba's encounter with Portuguese and Dutch colonists, but were also influenced by Indian textiles and designs. Beyond being decorative, these textiles are visual narratives of Sumba's animist beliefs and social hierarchy,

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CAPTIONS

6. Kisar Island in the Moluccas is famous for high-quality textiles with brilliant reds and extremely fine ikats. This is a Homnon (sarong) for noble women, with wide ikat bands and human figures with raised arms, typical of Kisar textiles.

7. Ile Api *Ikat*—characterised by sharp, angular designs, often representing fire or spiritual protection.

8. From Tanimbar, the most westerly island, with highly linear indigo sarongs with fish designs.

9. Manta Ra *Ikat*—inspired by the ocean, these textiles feature flowing, organic patterns resembling manta rays in motion.

and reflect the confluence of cultures with Chinese motifs (dragons), Indian floral patola central panels, and horses and pageantry from Portuguese and Dutch influences.

FLORES: THE MANTA RAY AND ILE API *IKAT*

The island of Flores (Portuguese for "flower") is one of the most beautiful islands in the world, with stunning white beaches and still smoking volcanoes at the water's edge. At the western end, are the Komodo and Rinca islands, famous for their Komodo dragons. In the centre, was found the archaeological legacy of Flores Man, an extinct species of archaic humans which some call hobbits because they were so small. Then, there are the textiles from Ende, many woven with commercial cotton, but rich in patterns and designs that vary from village to village.

At the eastern end, are the famous Lembata textiles, renowned for their rich indigo and burgundy red hues. Lembata is an island off eastern Flores, famous for its Lamaholot people. In the Atadei village, they weave large Kewatek sarongs, usually with handspun cotton, with motifs of stingrays that end in small tumpal (triangular) patterns and eight-pointed stars. The Lembata textiles are famous for their dark morinda red, created by indigo overdyed with morinda in a process called *belapit,* creating a very dark tone similar to the colour of eggplant.

On Lembata island, the practice of whaling still exists, and their Ile Api (isle of fire) textiles are treasured for their linear design beauty, almost like coded lines of text which no one can decipher today.

On the east side of Flores, is the former kingdom of Larantuka, with the volcano Ili Mandiri nearby. The area is famous for their tubular sarong called *kreot beloge,* dyed in indigo blue or morinda red. The sarongs are used in ceremonies, especially for bridal purposes where the family of the bride must offer nine textiles to the groom, including one of high value. These sarongs are adorned with small clusters of cowrie-shell beads, a unique feature of Ili Mandiri textiles.

The contrast between these styles reflects the island's diverse cultural influences, from coastal livelihoods to mountainous traditions.

TIMOR AND THE OUTER ISLANDS: THE HEART OF MY COLLECTION

The bulk of our collection comes from Timor and the islands around the Ambon sea—Tanimbar, Kisar and the Timor archipelago itself. East of Tanimbar is the large island of New Guinea, where locals still wear clothes made of bark. The cotton tradition seems to have stopped just before Papua, very much like the Wallace Line, which divides the tropical fauna and flora of Asia from the drier, semi-desert weather of Australasia. Timorese *ikat* is among the most sophisticated, done with intricate geometric and anthropomorphic designs.

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PUAN SRI LIM SUAN POH has a doctorate in social psychology and was a lecturer at the University of Malaya, also co-author of Nyonya Ware and Kitchen Ching (Oxford University Press).

TAN SRI ANDREW SHENG is a former central banker and financial regulator, currently Chairman of George Town Institute of Open and Advanced Studies, Wawasan Open University, Penang.

WEST TIMOR: EARTHY TONES AND MYTHICAL BEINGS

Here, *ikat* textiles are dominated by deep indigos, browns and creams. Humanoid figures, known as *atu roi* (ancestral spirits), are common, symbolising the connection between the living and the dead.

EAST TIMOR: A BURST OF COLOUR

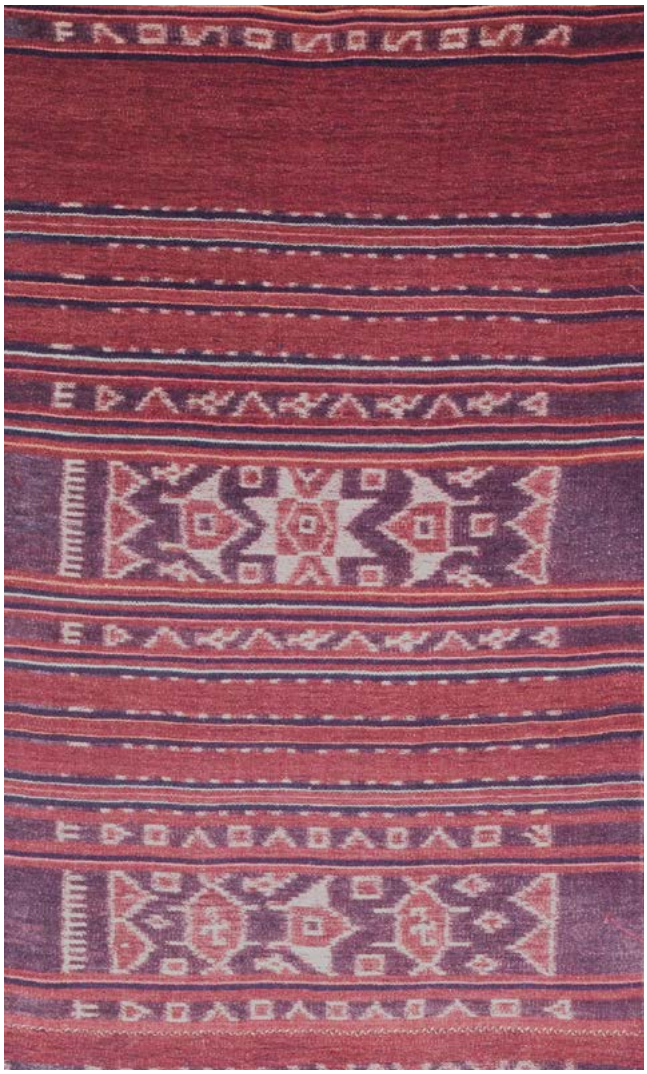
In contrast, East Timorese *ikat* is vibrant, with bright reds, yellows and greens. The motifs are dynamic, often depicting warriors, animals and cosmic symbols. These textiles were historically used in trade, and as symbols of wealth and power.

IKAT AS A LIVING TRADITION

Collecting *ikat* has been more than an aesthetic pursuit—it has been a journey through cultures, histories and human creativity. Each textile in our collection is a testament to the weavers' skill, patience and cultural pride.

In a world of mass-produced fabrics, *ikat* stands as a reminder of the beauty of handmade artistry. It is not just cloth; it is the fabric of society, woven with stories, beliefs and identities. As long as there are weavers keeping these traditions alive, *ikat* will continue to be a vibrant link between the past and the future.

***Note:** *The authors are grateful to Jillian Ng for her meticulous and dedicated research for this article. All photos here are the authors' copyright. The opinions expressed are solely those of the authors.*



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THREADS IN TRANSITION: HELPING MALAYSIAN TEXTILES EVOLVE

BY JOANNE NATHANIEL

HAVING SPENT MUCH of my recent years exploring Malaysia's textile landscape and learning from craft communities across Asia, I have observed a poignant and recurring theme: an intergenerational worry about how these rich traditions will endure.

Communities fear the loss of their art forms as they watch younger generations shy away from this work, citing long hours, low pay and the rising irrelevance of the skills involved.

Yet, in contrast, I have witnessed a rising wave of curiosity and pride in the young, especially in Malaysia. From heritage textile exhibitions to Gen Z-led batik brands blending tradition with contemporary flair, to conversations around preservation and sustainable innovation, these topics fill their speech bubbles. Furthermore, the momentum is rising.

Still, navigating this space means encountering both meaningful revivals and superficial appropriations. During a walk through Kuching old town early this year, I saw rows of shops selling mass-produced polyester T-shirts and sarongs digitally printed with Pua Kumbu motifs. It was disheartening to see a sacred textile reduced to a mere commodity.

Most artisans I've met recognise that adaptation is necessary to keep these traditions alive. But there are also those who uphold a reverence for keeping things "pure". The question is: how can we weave a future that satisfies both? To explore this, I spoke to a few people whose work sits at this very intersection.

INNOVATION VS. INTEGRITY: THE EVOLVING CRAFT ECONOMY

Traditional textiles like *songket* demand immense time, skill and patience to produce. A single piece can take months to complete, with costly materials like gold thread contributing to its lofty prices. This makes it challenging for both aspiring artisans and entrepreneurs.

To preserve these traditions, some are modifying their techniques for efficiency and accessibility. Digital printing has become a common adaptation.

During our Zoom conversation, John Ang, an American-born art historian and textile collector who moved to Malaysia in 2018 to deepen his research on Malay textiles shared: "Local designers are returning to their roots, often incorporating traditional motifs through digital printing. I sell digital batik prints on cotton too. It's not what I really want to sell—they lack the soul of hand-drawn batik, but it takes time to build appreciation for batik *tulis*. The digital ones are beautiful, and they bring in money. We have to survive, right?"

John expressed excitement about local labels like Tom Abang Saufi (TAS) and Behati, who are reinterpreting traditional textiles. TAS's Raya 2024 collection features Pua motifs from the Iban community, adapted for contemporary wear. Behati, though sometimes polarising, merges traditional materials and silhouettes with bold, avant-garde flair.

Beyond digital print, reimagining the application of traditional textiles is essential. *Songket,* once reserved for ceremonial use, has now been assigned a prominent place in handbags, shoes, framed art and even minimalist accessories like bookmarks and brooches, offering accessible entry points into heritage that can spark deeper appreciation and be a long-term investment.

In a morning call from Terengganu, *telepuk* artisan Azwarin Ahmed explained that the art form requires mastery of four distinct skills: weaving, carving, brushing and stamping. While complex and time-consuming, he believes simplification—such as using fewer motifs—can make the craft more accessible without compromising its identity.

MATERIALS MATTER: RECLAIMING SUSTAINABILITY IN CRAFT

Mass-produced batik carries significant environmental and social costs, from the use of synthetic dyes and chemical processes that pollute waterways and harm ecosystems to exploitative labour practices that undervalue workers and traditional artisans.

Ummi Junid of Dunia Motif addresses this by using natural dyes from food waste like onion skins, pomegranate rinds, mangosteen peels and botanical waste to create vibrant hues in her batik explorations.

In Sarawak, Diana Rose pioneered the use of *linut,* a sago-based starch, as a biodegradable, eco-friendly alternative to wax in batik-making, tapping into the region's rich sago resources.

Given that fabric waste makes up 432,901 metric tonnes (approximately 31%) of total waste in Malaysia in 2021, it is indeed time to rethink recycling possibilities on that front. Instead of relying solely on new resources to create traditional textiles, we could incorporate waste into the process, using off-cuts and discarded fabrics as canvases for techniques like natural dyeing, embroidery, *telepuk* or batik.

John Ang remarked, "We've got too much heritage textiles that are going to waste. It's generating a lot of garbage that's retarding our ecosystem. It's pushing us to find creative ways to reuse them. I like the idea of giving old textiles new life through contemporary silhouettes."

Waste from other industries can also be repurposed. For example, Indonesian brand Mercado Anyam reimagines traditional market bags using LDPE plastic waste, transformed into long strips of "yarn" and woven by artisan communities in Bali and Java into beautiful, functional pieces.

DESIGN SHIFTS: TRADITION MEETS CONTEMPORARY EXPRESSION

Traditional textiles are being re-envisioned for contemporary clients. Some designers are paring down intricate motifs into abstract or geometric shapes, appealing to modern minimalist aesthetics. Others are expanding colour palettes beyond traditional schemes, using neon, monochrome, pastels or colour gradients to stand out.

Motifs and prints on textiles have always told stories. Today, they increasingly reflect themes from pop culture, activism and lived experiences.

In 2024, multi-disciplinary artist and traditional textile advocate, Nini Marini Ramlan, collaborated with ManekNya, a platform reimagining Peranakan heritage, on "Batik Sarong Painting with Beads". This striking artwork fused Nyonya beading with acrylic painting on canvas, interweaving generational and contemporary narratives through symbolic motifs drawn from traditional crafts and attire.

DIGITAL BRIDGES: WHERE TRADITION MEETS TECHNOLOGY

Beyond digital printing, technology also plays a role in preserving and reimagining traditional textiles in more advanced ways.

When asked about innovations she finds exciting, Nini Marini shared her curiosity around how AI and machine learning might help archive and interpret the vast array of traditional motifs, an overwhelming task to do manually.

She also pointed to emerging tools and mechanisms that ease artisans' work, such as jacquard looms with digital patterning capabilities, ergonomic weaving setups and dyeing tools that reduce water and chemical usage. Heritage-focused Intellectual Property Organisations (IPOs) are also being explored to protect traditional knowledge and ensure artisans receive proper recognition and compensation.

Still, innovation must be approached with care. Azwarin, when asked about introducing new motifs or uses for *telepuk* art, noted that it is not yet ready for commercial reinvention. Public education and cultural awareness must come first before innovation can responsibly follow.

WEAVING THE WAY FORWARD: A CALL TO COLLECTIVE CARE

Reimagining Malaysian textiles for our times isn't just about motifs and methods; it's about reconnecting with the people and stories behind them. To truly move forward, we must centre the artisans and cultural stewards who have long safeguarded these traditions, along with the histories and values they embody.

As John Ang put it "Education is key. I want the younger generation to know the history of these textiles and be proud of them. Right now, education here is still very myopic. Parents have a role to play in sparking curiosity."

Nini Marini echoed the call for a broader shift: "It takes an entire ecosystem. Everyone needs to play their part. I think it's also about changing our collective taste—what do we value? The more we see people actually wearing and embracing these traditions, the more appealing they become. Change is going to take time. Are you in it for the long haul? Because I am."

As the Malay proverb goes, *tak kenal maka tak cinta* (to know is to love), we are far more likely to protect it, adapt it with care and evolve it in ways that honour its roots when we understand the history of our textiles.

JOANNE NATHANIEL is a multidisciplinary creative and community organiser who explores clothing and textiles as living narratives of belonging, resistance and tradition. Through @stories.we.wear, she facilitates creative workshops, curates immersive conversations and co-creates impactful, community-driven programmes and narratives.

FROM FORGOTTEN CRAFT TO LIVING TRADITION

NI SIAP

1

IN THE MANGROVE-FRINGED fishing village of Kuala Sangga, an elderly man leaned on his walking stick, and dipped his finger into the dye bath I had prepared from mangrove bark. He squinted at me and asked, "Whose daughter are you? Are you from Sepetang or Matang?" I smiled gently. I wasn't from either. I was a graduate student from Penang, here to collect data for my doctoral research.

BY ONG KE SHIN

At an environmental camp organised by Look Port Weld, an NGO, I watched as the children eagerly dipped plain cloth into bubbling bark dye. The earthy, herbal scent, like a Chinese medicinal tonic soup, hung thick in the air. One of the ladies, who swore she'd watched her elders doing so since childhood, declared, "Boil? No need. Just soak the bark, dip the cloth, and dry it under the sun. That is *Ni Siap*.[1] Our colour was much nicer then."

Her confidence intrigued me. Maybe it was her defiance, or maybe my own stubbornness. Either way, I decided to investigate. I applied for a grant, rolled up my sleeves, and began like most academics do—with a literature review.

What I discovered amazed me. Mangrove-based dyes have a long history across the world. Records point to their use from South America,[2] India, Okinawa and Indonesia[3] to Sabah by the Bajau and the Iranun ethnic groups[4]; the practice was once widespread. The science was clear too: the colour comes from tannins, phenolic compounds in mangrove bark that help deter herbivores and, when used as a dye, impart lasting durability to the materials they colour.[5] Most sources suggest heat treatment was necessary to extract the tannin, but every person I spoke to in Sepetang said the same thing—no boiling.

So, I tried it their way—cold soaking. The result? Disastrous. The colour was weak, the texture was wrong. Weeks of trial and error yielded only frustration. I began doubting myself. To be exact, I started doubting their memories. After all, *Ni Siap* hadn't been practised since the 1970s or 1980s.

One bright afternoon, something changed. The dull samples I'd left under the sun deepened in tone. Slowly, the reddish-brown hue emerged.

The magic lay in time and sunlight.

The tannins needed time to ferment, and the sunlight acted as a natural fixer. Wait, didn't the aunty say to dry it under the sun? I had heard her words, but I hadn't truly listened.

THE RETURN— AND THE REALITY CHECK

Excited by my "breakthrough", I returned to Sepetang with the dyed fabrics in hand, expecting applause. Instead, the same uncle who had shared his memories of *Ni Siap* with me frowned and said, "You made this? But nobody uses this anymore. Why go *terbalik* (backwards)? You went to university. Aren't you supposed to invent something new, like a real scientist?"

His words stung. Just as I started spiralling into self-pity, I remembered the golden rule I'd just learnt: "Listen." I returned to the stories, now with different ears. Unlike the luxurious fancy purple dyes worn by royalty,[6] *Ni Siap* represented labour. Fishermen, woodcutters and charcoal kiln workers wore it. The tannins made fabric water-resistant and long-lasting, a kind of protective layer against sun, sea and sweat.

Lim Kwe Siew, now in his 70s, recalled: "When I was 10, I went fishing in open boats—no roof, no cover. My mother made me clothes dyed with *Ni Siap*. On cold mornings and rainy days, it kept me warm, like a raincoat. Under the sun, it protected me from burns."

In the same way, the Malay villagers call this dye *getah bakau*, and have long used it to *samak* (tan) cotton flour sacks for making *baju air*, the durable workwear of fishermen and charcoal workers. Pak Wahab explained: "*Baju dan pukat... rendam dengan ini, jadikan dia kelat, kuat lagi. Memang tahan! Kalau tidak, baju kita kena selut, kena air, cepat koyak.*"[7] *Ni Siap* was gritty, brown and tough—like the people who wore it.

With the arrival of synthetic fibres, nylon nets and cheap mass-produced clothing, its use has declined—dismissed as outdated, regarded as old-fashioned. Reclaiming its value means questioning and disrupting these entrenched narratives. So, I began teaching it in local schools, under the guise of *kelas seni* (art class) or *kokurikulum* (co-curricular activities). At the end of each session, I told my

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students to "go home and ask your grandparents for stories".

One day, the same uncle who once called me *terbalik* showed up, grinning like a proud grandfather. His grandchildren had returned from school with a *Ni Siap*-dyed handkerchief, and he told them, "I'm the one who taught this to your teacher."

No great change, but small conversations began—and that, to me, was enough. But the most transformative story wasn't mine. It belonged to Yin.

YIN: THE TRUE DAUGHTER OF SEPETANG

Tian Yin is a fourth-generation, true daughter of Kuala Sepetang. Yet, growing up, she had never heard of *Ni Siap*. Her father had worn it, dyed by her grandmother, but it was never mentioned. Like many others, it had quietly vanished from her family's memory. Through Look Port Weld, Yin encountered *Ni Siap* for the first time. "Why did this tradition skip me?" she wondered.

In 2019, after participating in a local art market, Yin began experimenting—making soft toys, accessories and paintings using the dye. Yet, for her, it was never just about the product. "It's about sharing stories—and inviting people to visit Sepetang." Like the dye, Yin herself became a medium—connecting people, memories and the place.

Today, with a group of local women under the nurturing wing of Look Port Weld, Yin returned to the dye pots—just as generations before her had—but now with a renewed sense of purpose. She was on a mission to revive *Ni Siap* as a vibrant tradition woven into the daily lives and identities of her community.

In 2024, their group made waves at the Village Vision Pitching Competition[8] when it won the Outstanding Award, and secured grants to document the oral histories surrounding *Ni Siap*. With every interview and memory shared, the roots of their project grew stronger. Forgotten stories resurfaced, and they were carefully stitched back into the fabric of the present.

One of the most heartwarming, memorable moments is the fashion show in Sepetang—an event dreamed up, organised and brought to life by the community itself. Teenagers and grandmothers alike walked the runway, proudly wearing *Ni Siap* apparel. No longer just a rusty brown dye; *Ni Siap* is fashion!

THE "SLOW" RETURN OF *NI SIAP*

Yin reflects that the "generations before were so much more environmentally friendly. They knew how to use what was around them. I want to revive that—slowly. It should happen naturally, not forced."

I soon realised that Yin had mastered the true essence of *Ni Siap*: to flow with nature, with her people and with time. Like the dye, it must ferment slowly before revealing its richest colour.

Looking back on nearly a decade of *Ni Siap* under the care of Look Port Weld, what was done was more than the revival of a dye. It is about mending broken links and bridging the past with the present. It is about reclaiming identity and reimagining the future.

As for me, the outsider, the disrupter, I have since left the village and have learnt to listen better.

7

CAPTIONS

1. At the charcoal kiln in Kuala Sepetang, the factory headman carefully debarks mangrove logs to improve the burning process and ensure high-quality charcoal production. (Photo by Okui Lala)

2. Fabric dyed with *Ni Siap*. Under the sun, the colour transforms into a rich, saturated brown hue. (Photo by Thum Chia Chieh)

3. *Baju air*, also known as *baju hutan gandum*, made from repurposed flour sacks. After dyeing with tannins, the fabric becomes water-resistant and more durable. (Photo by Thum Chia Chieh)

4. *Ni Siap* evokes childhood memories for Lim Kwe Siew, who went fishing from the tender age of 10, wearing as protection the durable, water-resistant garments made by his mother. (Photo by Okui Lala)

5. The tannin fills the pores in fabric fibers, creating a denser, less porous surface that makes the fabric water-resistant.

6. With the arrival and widespread availability of nylon nets, *Ni Siap* was no longer needed to dye and strengthen cotton fishing nets. (Photo by Okui Lala)

7. The Ni Siap fashion show in Sepetang brings together the young and old, who proudly celebrate their heritage in a contemporary way.

ONG KE SHIN is a biologist-turned-geographer who finds joy in experimenting with food and cherishing the diverse wildlife that rhythmically visits her home garden.

FOOTNOTES

[1] In Teowchew and Hokkien, *Ni* means dye, and *Siap* means gritty, or stringent. Nī Siàp was the name for the natural reddish-brown dye made from mangrove bark – once common in the village.

[2] Bandaranayake, W.M. (1998) Traditional and Medicinal Uses of Mangroves. Mangroves and Salt Marshes, 2, 133-148. https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1009988607044org/10.1023/A:1009988607044

[3] Baba, S., Chan, H. T., & Aksornkoae, S. (2013). Useful products from mangrove and other coastal plants. *ISME mangrove educational book series,* 3, 45-47.

[4] Baeren, E. J., & Jusilin, H. (2019). Eksplorasi zat warna alami batik dalam konteks warna tradisi etnik di Sabah: Exploration natural batik color in context of color ethnic tradition in Sabah. Jurnal Kinabalu, 25, 71–87. https://doi.org/10.51200/ejk.v25i.2089

[5] Heemsoth, A. (2020, June 23). Mangrove tannin: What is it? Khaled bin Sultan Living Oceans Foundation. https://www.livingoceansfoundation.org/mangrove-tannin-what-is-it/

[6] Tyrian purple, made from the mucus of sea snails, was notoriously expensive to produce and was therefore reserved for the wealthiest classes, including emperors and nobles. See: Carnegie Museum of Natural History, "Born to the Purple," https://carnegiemnh.org/born-to-the-purple/

[7] Translation: "Clothes and nets... soak them with this, it makes them less absorbent, and even stronger. Truly durable! Otherwise, our clothes get covered in mud, get wet, and tears easily."

[8] https://www.villagevisionmy.com/vvpc2022

TENUN PAHANG DIRAJA: HEADING FOR THE GLOBAL MARKET

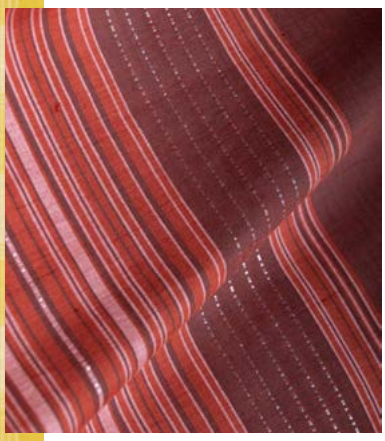
BY RACHEL YEOH

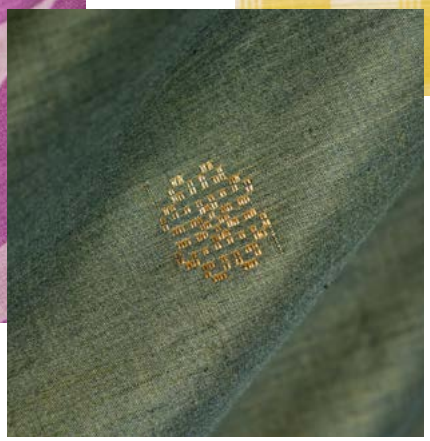
THE PINK SHEEN held my attention; I asked myself, "Should I make this purchase?" I looked at it again, took off the clear plastic wrap and felt the slight groove of the gold motif with my index finger. I looked at one of my travelling companions. "Of course you should get it. It is beautiful, and there is only one of these in the world," she said. I looked at her with a slight grin—who needs enemies when you have an enabler for your impulsive shopping habits.

I made the purchase.

Looking back a decade later—though it might not be a well-thought purchase (I do not encourage spending almost RM400 when earning just above minimum wage on a pink Tenun Pahang Diraja *selendang)*—I have no regrets.

My prized *selendang* was formed in one of the looms at Kampung Pulau Keladi in Pekan, Pahang, the birthplace of Tenun Pahang DiRaja (Royal Pahang Silk). The silk threads of my *selendang* were coloured with natural dyes before being woven strand by strand, interlacing between the warp and weft.[1] A singular motif known as *colek*[2] is simultaneously dotted sparsely over the fabric.





FROM MAKASSAR TO PAHANG

Before the Dutch came to Sulawesi, its peoples were already known for shipbuilding and shipping. They were also one of the largest producers of fabric with many families owning a weaving loom. When the Dutch invaded the Port of Makassar over 300 years ago, where the majority of the population of Sulawesi resided, many locals took flight.[3]

One of the many who escaped was a skilled weaver named Tok Tuan, and he arrived in Pekan, Pahang in 1722. There, he shared his weaving knowledge and skills with his family members and the locals until he passed. After 11 generations, family members and relatives of Tok Tuan still live in the same village, continuing the tradition. Many believe that instead of introducing Makassar's weaving to the people in Pekan, Tok Tuan had improved on the existing weaving methods; after all, weaving activities had already existed in Pahang before his arrival.[4]

Today, fabric weaving is part and parcel of Makassar's cultural heritage, and if one were to visit, one might spot fabrics with checkered patterns similar to the Tenun Pahang DiRaja, known as Tennun Sabbe.[5]

Meanwhile, weaving in Pekan evolved. Using spun silk scattered with *bunga colek*, this came to be known as the Tenun Pahang. The Sultan Abu Bakar Museum in Pekan currently holds more than 100 pieces of Tenun Pahang, some of which are over 200 years old.

REVIVAL OF THE TENUN PAHANG

Originating from a small village, Tenun Pahang was worn by royalty, nobles or the chief of state. It later became the gift of choice for guests of the palace, whether they were locals or from abroad.

In the early 1950s, the British government invited Hajjah Selema Sulaiman, a descendant of Tok Tuan, to exhibit her woven goods in London. Although she couldn't attend due to poor health, she was honoured with the title "Tenun Pahang Exemplary Weaver" for her skill before her death in 1958.[6]

In 1963, the Rural Industrial Development Authority (now MARA) got involved in the silk-weaving industry and contributed to its growing popularity. This led to the 1964 opening of the Pulau Keladi Silk Weaving Centre in Pekan, Pahang. A decade later, Tun Abdul Razak, Malaysia's second Prime Minister tasked other government bodies, like the Development Authority for Pahang Tenggara (DARA), with revitalising the industry. In the early 1980s, the Malaysian Handicraft Development Corporation (Kraftangan Malaysia) helped develop weaving training programmes to attract younger people to the craft.[7]

From 1998 to 2000, the Pahang State Muzium began to look into the creation of Tenun Pahang more seriously as a cultural and heritage product. They decided to train more locals to learn the craft. Experts like Nortipah Abd Kadir and Azman Zakaria were roped in to impart the knowledge of traditional weaving to the next generation. By the turn of the millennium, the Tenun Pahang industry saw the growth of several new weaving centres such as those in Felda Chini in Rompin and the Tenun Pahang Development Centre in Kampung Sungai Soi, Kuantan.

The bestowal of the title "DiRaja" (Royal) upon Tenun Pahang was carried out in 2006 by Al-Sultan Abdullah when he was the Tengku Mahkota of Pahang.[8] This reflects the earnest commitment of the Pahang palace to advance the Tenun Pahang industry, while also preserving Tenun Pahang's status as part of the royal attire.[9]

Photo credit: Cheminahsayang

FOOTNOTES

[1] Sulaiman Abdul Ghani, translated from Tenun Pahang Diraja: Warisan, Tradisi & Falsafah by Ahmad Farid bin Abdul Jalal

[2] Small floral dotted ornament on fabric.

[3] Azizah Aminah Maimunah Iskandariah binti Sultan Iskandar Alhaj (Crown Princess of Pahang), Ahmad Farid Abd. Jalal, Tenun Pahang Diraja: A Fashion Tradition, pg. 85, 2017, Pahang State Museum Corporation

[4] Ibid.

[5] https://www.researchgate.net/publication/342246501_SILK_WEAVING_AS_A_CULTURAL_HERITAGE_IN_THE_INFORMAL_ENTREPRENEURSHIP_EDUCATION_PERSPECTIVE

[6] Azizah Aminah Maimunah Iskandariah binti Sultan Iskandar Alhaj (Crown Princess of Pahang), Ahmad Farid Abd. Jalal, Tenun Pahang Diraja: A Fashion Tradition, pg. 87, 2017, Pahang State Museum Corporation

[7] Ibid.

[8] https://www.nst.com.my/news/nation/2019/06/495228/tenun-pahang-di-raja-queen-special-request/

[9] Sulaiman Abdul Ghani, translated from Tenun Pahang Diraja: Warisan, Tradisi & Falsafah by Ahmad Farid bin Abdul Jalal, pg 84.

[10] Abdul Jabbar, H., Hamidon, N. A., Ab Kadir, M. I., & Abdul Jabbar, A. R. (2019). KAIN TENUN PAHANG DAN KAIN TENUN SULAWESI: SATU KAJIAN PERBANDINGAN AWAL. Jurnal Pengajian Melayu, 30(1), 53–70. https://doi.org/10.22452/jomas.vol30no1.3

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

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE TENUN PAHANG DIRAJA

The current Tengku Ampuan (Queen Consort) of Pahang and former Queen of Malaysia, Tunku Azizah Aminah Maimunah Iskandariah established Cheminahsayang, to drive the commercialisation of the fabric.

I spoke to Zulhani Abdul Kadir, the textile designer for Cheminahsayang, and he explained that Tenun Pahang DiRaja must fulfil three criteria:

1. It needs to be woven in Pahang.
2. Everything must be handwoven without the use of machines.
3. It must meet specific design characteristics, e.g. horizontal and vertical lines or checkered.

Most local fabrics consist of the head (*kepala kain*), the body (*badan kain*) and the foot (*kaki kain*). It is likened to the human body. However, for the Tenun Pahang DiRaja (and all other Tenun Pahang that do not meet the "DiRaja" criteria), there's an additional part called the *sepit udang*, which allows the wearer to don the fabric from both directions, top and bottom.

The Tenun is crafted using a series of intricate processes. Each fabric has to be designed first. In this case, Zulhani carefully drafts the patterns and determines the colours to be used to reflect contemporary tastes while displaying traditional elements. He will have to provide the calculations and numbers so that those who prepare the weave will be able to apply the known formula on the loom (which they call *kek*).

There are usually 10 steps to make Tenun Pahang DiRaja:

1. *Melikas* (cleaning the silk): The silk threads are detangled, soaked overnight and cleaned to remove excess starch.
2. *Mewarna* (colouring): Threads are coloured using natural or synthetic dye. Synthetic dye provides a wider range of colours and consistent shade.
3. *Menerau* (spinning or spooling the silk): Threads are transferred to the weaver's spools. Yarns of various colours are spooled according to the required design.
4. *Mengani* (pattern arrangement): Pellets are arranged in the pattern needed by the customer. Threads are then pulled in the exact quantity, following required design.
5. *Menyusuk* (inserting the thread into the reed): 10 threads are inserted into the reed and pulled through using a tool called *penyusuk*.
6. *Menggulung* (winding): Threads are wound and stretched using a rolling mechanism. This extends the threads to reach a maximum length of 20m.
7. *Menghubung* (connecting warp yarns): The new warp yarns are attached to the heddle eye and placed on the *kek*. The thread must be manually attached, one by one.
8. *Meneguh* (firming): Warp yarns are placed on the loom, and each thread is firmed and checked to remove tangles as threads must not break during the weaving process.
9. *Menenun* (weaving): The master weaver will then create the masterpiece.
10. *Menggerus* (polishing): Though it is not so common now, polishing using beeswax or resin gives the fabric a nice sheen.

Colek is used to enhance the design, and to give it a touch of luxury; it was usually woven using gold threads. Currently, they are popular amongst those seeking a special attire, especially when it comes to bridal couture. Among the more popular traditional *colek* still used are the Bunga Cendawan, Bunga Bintang and Bunga Cengkih.

Each *colek* is accompanied by two "tails" located at the beginning and end of a motif.[10] Zulhani shared that this "tail" was introduced because in the past, many would take the Tenun Pahang and try to pass it off as a *songket* (although the motifs on the Tenun are smaller and more scattered), in order to sell it at a higher price.

ENSURING SUCCESSFUL TRANSMISSION

The Institut Kemahiran Tenun Pahang DiRaja today actively runs two-year courses to encourage locals to pick up weaving. The Institute also supports students by providing food, lodging and a monthly stipend of RM300-400, funded by the Tengku Ampuan herself.

Inmates completing their sentences in Bentong and Penoh prisons are also taught to weave. There are currently approximately 100 to 200 weavers in the prisons. Once completed, the prison department will sell the masterpieces and the inmates will be paid a minimal amount for their work.

According to Zulhani, Cheminahsayang currently hires 15 weavers, of whom three were former inmates. "It is a rehabilitation programme for them; when they are released from prison, they can get hired because they already have the skill."

Every piece of Tenun Pahang DiRaja is a labour of love; each is custom-made and truly one-of-a-kind. The process to make a 4.5m-long fabric can take more than three months, depending on the complexity of the design. "The weft *ikat* process is exceptionally tedious, requiring weavers to meticulously arrange and rearrange individual threads before they even reach the loom. That stage alone can take a month, and we pay our workers minimum wage every month. Some other companies pay only after the fabric is completed."

A 4.5m piece of Tenun Pahang DiRaja can fetch prices starting from RM1,800 for simpler designs to RM6,000 for more intricate patterns.

APPROACHING THE GLOBAL MARKET

Tenun Pahang DiRaja was showcased during London Craft Week 2022 and received good feedback, especially from parties who desired to use the Tenun to make upholstery. However, Zulhani explained that there are systems that need to be corrected and innovations that need to be introduced before the fabric can go international.

"What we use for the fabric is spun silk, but in places like the UK, fabrics have to be fire retardant. We are currently doing R&D on different materials and are trying to make the operations more systematic. If we want to start marketing our fabric overseas, the colours need to be consistent too. My concern is on how we can achieve consistency," Zulhani said.

Currently, the looms can only manage 30m, but for furnishings, orders might come in for 60m to 100m per order. Therefore, they are looking at upgrading their looms to produce longer fabrics at a faster pace. Zulhani is eager to conduct tests on colour fastness and fire retardancy to get an ISO before starting another round of marketing overseas.

The older looms are called *kek* Melayu, which are used to make *songket*. "The modern looms we have now are specially designed by carpenters for Tenun Pahang DiRaja, and the mechanism is inspired by *kek* Siam," Zulhani explained.

When it comes to fabric bought to be worn, Zulhani admitted that very few understand the value in these fabrics. "Knowing how much it costs, I know many would prefer to buy branded luxury items instead. But there are those who know how exclusive it is, and will pay to uphold our handicrafts in a world where you can get everything instantly."

HOW TO BE A MUSIC MILLIONAIRE

BY MOE NASRUL

MAKING MONEY MATTERS—and parents only disapprove of their children's dreams for fear that they might end up a poor vagabond.

With music, as with anything else, if you don't build a solid business structure around your passion, you won't make money. You could've invented the computer, but without the right business plan, you'd still be renting a small room, instead of running a multi-billion-dollar empire.

Here's the truth: turning music into a business takes the same grit as starting a Ramly Burger stall.

Here's the thing: Knowing when to switch between business and creativity is a soft skill that could be worth millions. It makes you a rarity in a world where most artists fail to understand the power of negotiation, contracts and business development. The art and the hustle don't have to be at odds with each other."

STEP ONE: THINK LIKE A BUSINESS

Turn *yourself* into a legitimate business and you'll start seeing music not just as a creative outlet, but a business operation. You'd be surprised at how effective you (and your bandmates) can become when you start treating it that way.

Let's clear up a common misunderstanding: any management or agent cut is a *commission*—not a share. Shares are for investors, whether that's real money or capital. For bandmates, that capital comes in the form of sweat equity—the hours spent rehearsing, recording or performing.

You put a value to it by assigning monetary value to your time. Let's say every band member's time is worth RM300 per hour—you may not have liquid cash yet, but now the entity (your company) owes each member money.

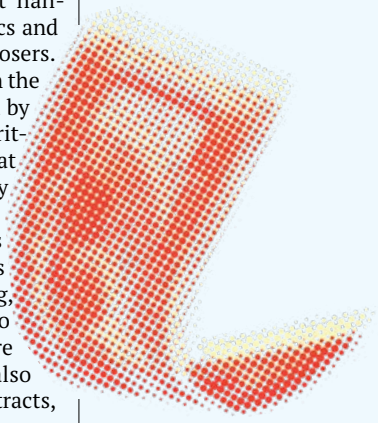
This *debt* is then paid in shares.

That's why agents and managers (unless they're part of the grind) should only earn *commissions*, not shares. You could even offer your crew sweat equity—shares in exchange for their effort, time and loyalty. Then, formalise your structure: file your paperwork with SSM.

As a collective company of shareholders, you should consider how to increase the value of your shares. These shareholders can cash in or pull out from ownership of the company (bandmates, shareholders, or if they fulfill two roles). I call them FFF (Friends, Family and Fools). It means that every company starts off as an idea that only friends, family and the one-in-a-million foolish dreamer who believes in your end goal without historical data would invest in. By the end of this stage, you should have already figured out how to increase the value of your shares and your FFF investors can get their money back (maybe even profits).

STEP TWO: INCREASE THE VALUE OF YOUR SHARES

The music industry is actually made up of three distinct industries. Each plays a unique role in shaping the careers of artists and how music reaches audiences around the world.



First, there's the publishing industry. It handles the rights to the songs—the melodies, lyrics and compositions created by songwriters and composers. Publishers ensure that when songs are played on the radio, streamed online, used in movies, covered by other artists or performed publicly, the songwriters get paid royalties. It is the invisible engine that protects and monetises the intellectual property behind every hit.

Next, is the record industry—this branch is all about the sound recordings (the actual tracks you listen to). Record labels invest in recording, producing, marketing and distributing music to turn an artist's song into a polished product before reaching the ears of fans worldwide. This is also where the business side can get tricky with contracts, advances and royalties.

Lastly, the musical performance industry—often called the live music sector. This covers concerts, festivals, tours and live shows, where artists perform in front of audiences. It's a huge revenue generator—not just for artists, but also for venues, promoters, booking agents and touring crews. Live music is also where many musicians earn the large proportion of their income, especially in the streaming era, where recorded music revenue has shifted.

Understanding how these three industries interact is key to navigating a successful path as an artist, songwriter or music entrepreneur.

THE MONEY TRAIL

Each part of the music industry has its own royalty streams, and they're paid out to different people depending on their role.

1. **Publishing Royalties (Songwriters & Composers)**

- Performance Royalties: Paid when a song is played on radio, TV, in public venues or streamed. In Malaysia, this is collected by the Music Authors' Copyright Protection (MACP).
- Mechanical Royalties: Paid when a song is physically or digitally reproduced (CDs, downloads, streaming). In Malaysia, mechanical rights are handled by the Public Performance Malaysia (PPM) for sound recordings, but song reproduction rights also fall under MACP.
- Sync Fees: License for use in movies, TV shows, ads or video games. These are negotiated directly by publishers or rights holders in Malaysia.

2. **Recording Royalties (Performing Artists & Labels)**

- Artist Royalties: Paid to the performing artist based on record sales or streaming. Usually, local record labels in Malaysia manage this, such as those under the Recording Industry Association of Malaysia (RIM).
- Master Royalties: Paid to the owner of the recording (usually the label). Streaming platforms like Spotify and YouTube in Malaysia pay out to rights holders via distribution partners or labels.
- Neighbouring Rights: In Malaysia, these are collected by PPM, which represents recording companies when their recordings are played publicly (e.g. radio stations, cafés, malls).

3. **Live Performance Revenue (Performers & Touring Team)**

- Ticket Sales: The biggest chunk goes to the artist (after paying venue fees, promoters and expenses). In Malaysia, there are live promoters such as PR Worldwide and Star Planet.
- Merchandise Sales: 100% profit minus production costs, but venues in Malaysia may take a small cut.
- Performance Fees: Paid upfront by promoters or venues, especially for festivals or corporate gigs.
- Touring Crew: Musicians, sound engineers, lighting technicians and crew are typically paid fixed wages per show or tour.

Malaysian musicians and songwriters can tap into these royalties by applying at any of the Malaysian or international bodies. They also can join foreign performing rights organisations (PROs) like the American Society of Composers, Authors and Publishers (ASCAP), Broadcast Music, Inc (BMI) or Performing Right Society (PRS). You don't have to be a US or UK citizen to register with them. Many Malaysian artists who aim to reach audiences overseas, especially in markets like North America, Europe or Australia, take this step to collect royalties from those regions more effectively. Here's why you should do it:

1. **Better global royalty collection**
   If your songs are streaming well or get radio play in the US, UK or Europe, joining a foreign PRO can sometimes ensure faster and more accurate royalty payments. International PROs like ASCAP and PRS have extensive systems and quicker pipelines for collecting royalties globally.

2. **More opportunities for sync licensing (Film/TV/Games)**
   Organisations like ASCAP, BMI and PRS often have stronger networks in the sync licensing world, helping your music get placed in Hollywood films, Netflix series, video games or big ad campaigns.

3. **Industry events and networking**
   Get access to their workshops, showcases and conferences, as these can be golden networking opportunities for collaboration with international producers, songwriters or even land you a publishing deal.

4. **Build credibility internationally**
   Adds credibility when negotiating with labels, publishers or sync agents abroad.

5. **Direct payments in foreign currencies**
   Some artists prefer to get paid directly in USD (from ASCAP/BMI) or GBP (from PRS).

STEP THREE: INCREASING YOUR "MARKET SHARE"

Nominate yourself in the running for a Grammy!

You might not make the top nominees this year, but once you're in the running, you're officially playing on the same field as some of your favorite artists.

The Grammys are run by the Recording Academy. To qualify as a member:

1. You need at least two commercially released songs (on Spotify, Apple Music, etc.)
2. If you're a producer, songwriter or engineer, you need 6+ credits.

It costs about USD100 a year to become a voting member, and this actually gets you in front of Grammy voters. Apply directly at: recordingacademy.com/membership. Then, submit your music during Grammy season (which usually opens for submissions around July or August every year).

Plus, your music doesn't need to have millions of streams. It just needs to meet their basic rules about release dates and quality standards. Every year, unknown names pop up on the ballots because they played this right.

After that, you can campaign for votes. Here's the strategy:

1. Contact Academy members and ask them to consider your song.
2. Host listening parties (online works too) and invite Academy voters.
3. Network at Academy events (either in Los Angeles, New York or the virtual rooms).

As soon as your submission is accepted, you're officially in the running. That makes you a Grammy-considered artist. And that title alone is powerful for marketing.

STEP FOUR: MANAGEMENT AND AGENTS

In my experience, getting through the door of a record label and securing a deal is often dependent on whether or not you have a manager or agent in the room. A label would rather talk to a business-minded manager or agent than with an artist because label execs have been burned by passionate musicians who often lack the business acumen to navigate the industry professionally.

The music industry is tough. It's full of emotional highs and lows, and labels have learned over time that working with someone who understands the business side of things makes their lives easier. They don't want to chase down an artist for payments or to discuss contract terms.

If you're able to handle both sides—the creative and the business—you're already ahead. When word gets out that you're not just an artist but a business-minded musician, people will take you seriously. You won't need someone else to speak for you.

Here's the thing: knowing when to switch between business and creativity is a soft skill that could be worth millions. It makes you a rarity in a world where most artists fail to understand the power of negotiation, contracts and business development. The art and the hustle don't have to be at odds with each other.

If you have the resources, bringing someone in with a proven track record can give you the extra leverage you need to secure deals and continue scaling—but you are still in control. The moment you become the one steering your ship, you're no longer just another musician trying to be heard above the noise.

MOE NASRUL is a former Artist Manager and Record Label Executive with 13 years of experience in the entertainment and music industry. He was the agent or manager for Dato' Siti Nurhaliza, Kyoto Protocal, Sashi C Loco and De Fam. He is currently the Chairman of Penang Hidden Gems.

GREENING PENANG RULES

BY
MATT BENSON
AND
STUART MACDONALD

IF PENANG WANTS to maintain its status as one of the most liveable cities in the region, investing in quality green spaces is a given path to take—they have multiple co-benefits, from acting as places of respite to encouraging physical activity, while offering natural habitats for other living things. It is also well established that proximity to nature has a positive effect on mental health; one study suggests that a 90-minute nature walk reduces depression.[1] One other benefit that is gaining attention is the impact of greening on climate-induced urban heat, which is becoming a growing concern in Malaysia.

There are multiple international and local benchmarks to decide the appropriate level of green space. These include standards such as dedicating 10% of total area into green space based on square metres per capita. The benchmark for green space per capita in Malaysia (set by PlanMalaysia) is 20m² per person. In Penang, this figure is 8.3m² per person. In 2021, Cecil Konijnendijk from the Nature Based Solutions Institute[2] proposed the 3-30-300 rule, which states:

> "Everybody should be able to see three large trees from their home, live in a neighbourhood with at least 30% tree canopy (or vegetation) cover and be no more than 300 metres from the nearest public green space that allows for multiple recreational activities."

Who can disagree with this as an aspiration? As a metric, this captures the mental health, physical health and climate values of urban green space, while retaining a level of simplicity that anyone can understand and relate to. It also moves us beyond an aggregated measure (e.g. square metres per person) to a more localised view, which considers real life experiences in different neighbourhoods in different parts of a given district.

While the premise is simple, trying to measure if a place meets this rule is not a walk in the park. Firstly, there are a host of definitional issues to address. It may sound silly, but how do we define a "tree", how do we define a "neighbourhood" and what counts as an "urban green space"? Does a green roundabout count? Probably not.

The next challenge is the quality of the data—calculating this metric for individual buildings for a whole city is not straightforward; quantifying sightlines from individual buildings to trees, at scale, is quite a computational task. At what point do you consider a tree too far away to be in "view"? So, should this be a goal that Penang should aspire to achieve? Can we measure it? If so, how far are we from meeting the target?

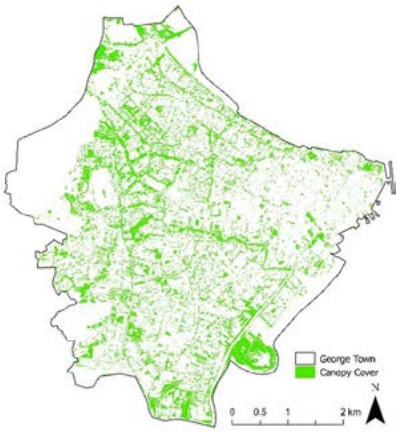


Figure 1: George Town Canopy Coverage Estimate

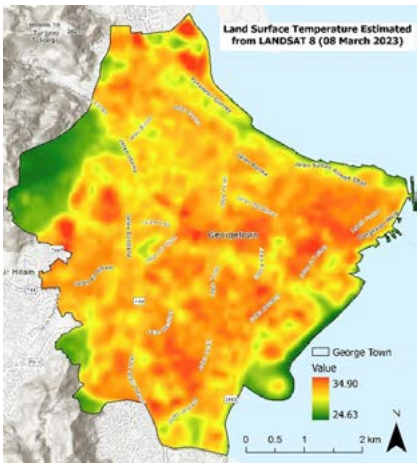


Figure 2: Surface Temperature of George Town

THREE LARGE TREES

According to Merriam-Webster, a tree is "a woody perennial plant having a single usually elongated main stem generally with few or no branches on its lower part." Brandon Bennett[3] suggests that even such definitions are imprecise and vague. Which species count as trees? Is a palm tree a tree? We need to offer contextualised definitions of what qualities suffice for a plant to be termed a tree. The City Council of Penang Island (MBPP) has been attempting this. It has established the Penang Tree Inventory System (PeTIS) to catalogue data on trees. This, in combination with Penang Smart Island Digital Twin (SmIDaT), is moving in the right direction towards having the ability to run urban simulations that can support improved planning (and greening) strategies.

30% TREE CANOPY

Canopy coverage (determined by extracting the lower bandwidth of surface temperature data) and its relationship to heat is abundantly evident (see Figures 1 & 2). We can readily feel the cooler tree-lined streets in Pulau Tikus and along Sungai Pinang.

We calculate that George Town has a 27% canopy coverage, close to reaching Konijnendijk's rule. However, this aggregate for the city masks the neighbourhood variations—the George Town World Heritage Site canopy coverage is less than 12%.

300M FROM PUBLIC GREEN SPACE

There are 925ha of public open space in Penang. Overlaid with residential land use, we conclude that 56.2% of residential premises are within 300m of a public open space, which increases to 60% when forests are included. However, this aggregated figure hides marked differences between the island and mainland, with 79.8% of residential areas meeting the criteria on Penang Island, compared to just 47.4% in Seberang Perai (see Figure 3).

A USEFUL RULE?

Measuring the 3-30-300 rule is not simple, but not impossible; after all, our tools and data sets are developing rapidly. Croeser et al. (2024)[4] attempted to measure the rule for eight cities (Amsterdam, Buenos Aires, Seattle, Denver, New York, Singapore, Melbourne and Sydney), and experienced similar data challenges. Most buildings fail the 3-30-300 rule due to them having inadequate tree canopy, and while the "3" standard was met more often, achievement of the "300" standard was patchy.

Whether Penang should adopt (or even firmly quantify) the 3-30-300 rule is open for debate. However, it does serve as a useful starting point for a conversation around the value of urban green space. The Penang Nature-Based Climate Adaptation Programme and Green Connectors Initiative, being delivered by UN-Habitat, Think City, MBPP and the Department of Drainage and Irrigation, for example, is working to build climate resilience through initiatives such as urban greening.

MBPP is currently finalising plans for a major greening initiative of Lebuh Pantai and Pengkalan Weld, while Think City is offering grants to green buildings and façades, and is working to create a network of green connectors, converting rivers into blue corridors with recreational amenities, and greening streets and coastal parklands. A similar initiative is proposed for the mainland where street trees and parklands are much needed.

Greenery is one of Penang's premier attributes. It is important that what we have is protected and enhanced to multiply its beneficial effects on lifestyle—and property prices. Without doubt, the urban heat island effect, now exacerbated by climate change, has to be addressed, achieving, along the way, the positive physical and psychological health benefits that proximity to nature brings.

DR. MATT BENSON is a Senior Director at Think City. He is a geographer specialising in the challenges of urbanisation.

STUART MACDONALD is a Technical Director at Think City and also an urban geographer.

> **"Greenery is one of Penang's premier attributes. It is important that what we have is protected and enhanced to multiply its beneficial effects on lifestyle—and property prices."**

FOOTNOTES

[1] G.N. Bratman,J.P. Hamilton,K.S. Hahn,G.C. Daily,& J.J. Gross, Nature experience reduces rumination and subgenual prefrontal cortex activation, Proc. Natl. Acad. Sci. U.S.A. 112 (28) 8567-8572, https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1510459112 (2015).

[2] https://nbsi.eu/

[3] Bennett, B. What is a Forest? On the Vagueness of Certain Geographic Concepts, Topoi 20: 189–201, 2001

[4] Croeser, T., Sharma, R., Weisser, W.W. et al. Acute canopy deficits in global cities exposed by the 3-30-300 benchmark for urban nature. Nat Commun 15, 9333 (2024). https://doi.org/10.1038/s41467-024-53402-2

	PUBLIC OPEN SPACE (HECTARES)	PERCENTAGE OF RESIDENTIAL WITH 300M	PERCENTAGE OF RESIDENTIAL WITH 300M (INC FOREST)
Penang Island	299	79.8%	89.0%
Seberang Perai	626	47.4%	49.7%
Total	925	56.2%	60.4%

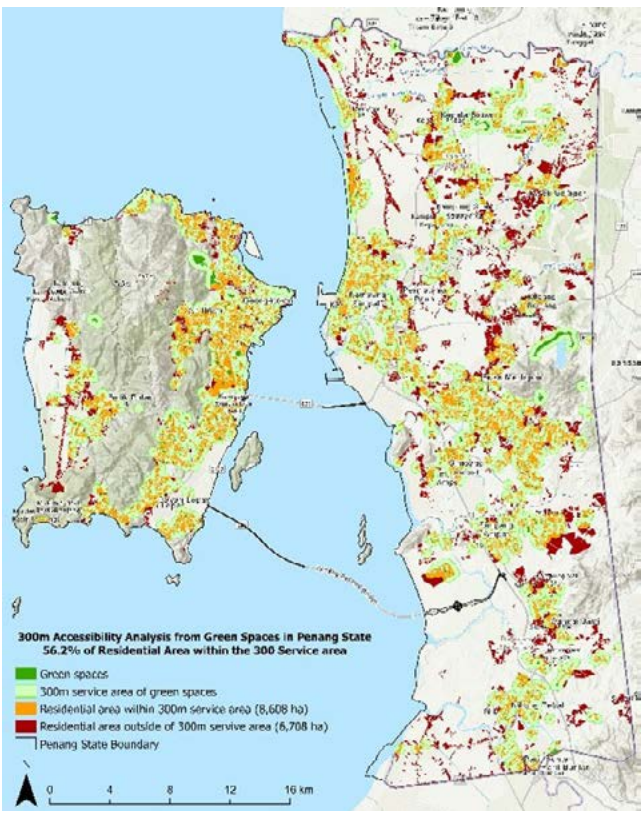
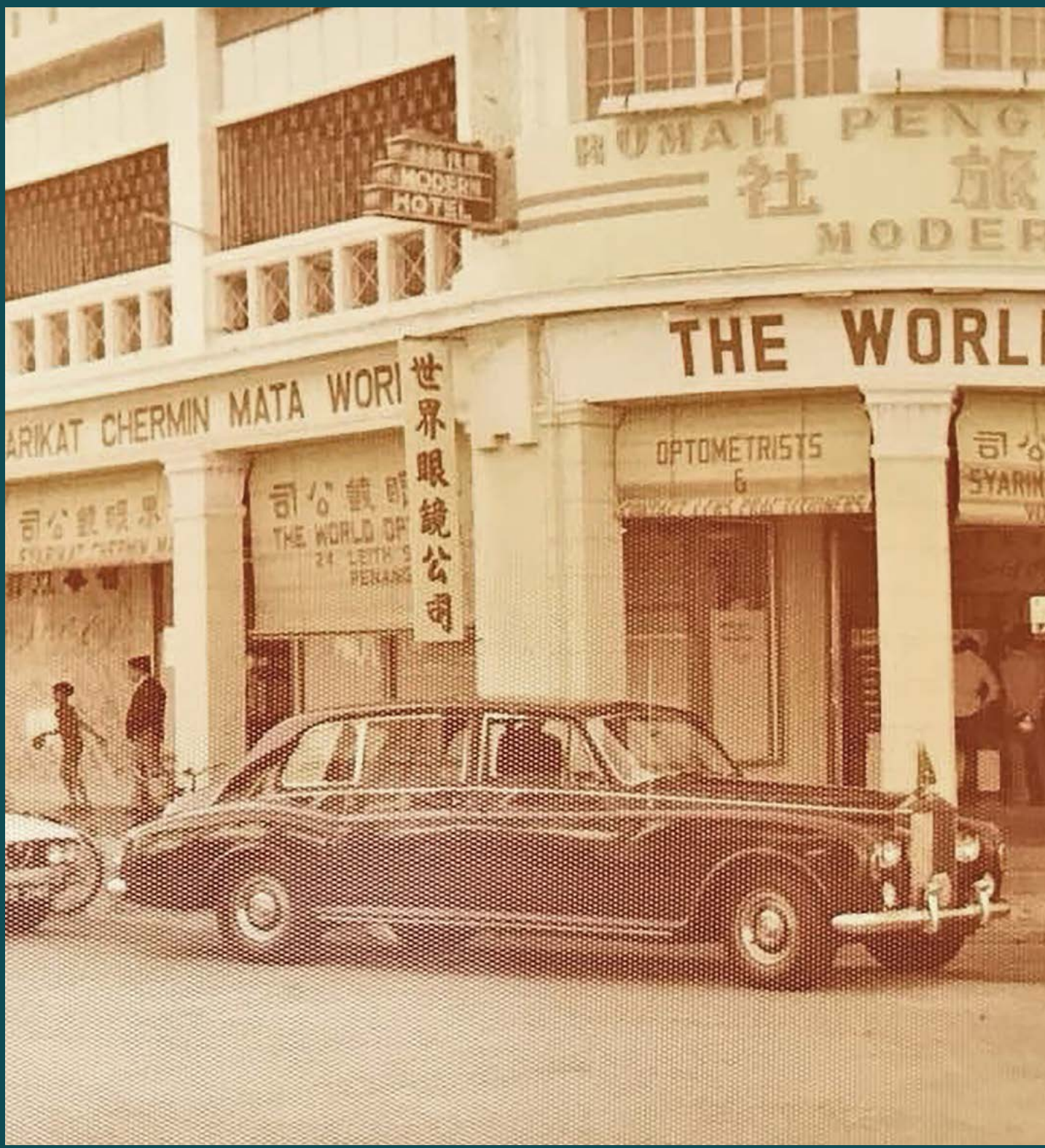


Figure 3: Analysis of Residences' Accessibility to Public Open Space (300m)


RUMAH PENG
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&
SYARIK

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THROUGH THE LENS OF TIME
A FAMILY'S CENTURY OF OPTICAL CRAFTSMANSHIP

BY IYLIA DE SILVA

FOUNDED ON LEITH STREET on 1 September 1934, The World Optical began as a modest optometry practice with a simple mission—help people see the world more clearly. Its founder, Johnson Lam Chih Yeah, was an optics expert and a devoted practitioner of traditional Chinese medicine. His scientific knowledge and holistic care quickly earned him a reputation for precision, compassion and dedication within the community.

Today, The World Optical continues to thrive under Stanley Lam and his mother, Mrs. Lam. "My grandfather's values—integrity, compassion and innovation—are the guiding principles of our work," Stanley shares, reflecting on the preservation by his father, Lam Pin Lik, of the company's ideals.

When an eviction notice came in 2018, forcing the company to relocate, the family uncovered a trove of vintage optical equipment while packing—forgotten treasures tucked away for decades. This discovery inspired Stanley to begin documenting and preserving the company's history.

2

THE GRINDING LAB: WHERE CRAFTSMANSHIP BEGAN

In the 1930s, crafting optical lenses was a labour-intensive process. Each pair of glasses was hand-ground and polished in The World Optical's lens grinding lab, custom-made for each client.

Back then, lenses were crafted from glass—durable and resistant to scratches, but they also broke easier. "In those days, you could only grind and polish maybe two pieces in an entire day," Stanley explains. Today, lenses are typically made from plastic, making them safer, lighter and more flexible, though they tend to scratch more easily without proper coatings.

As one of the leading optical shops of the day, The World Optical soon attracted a prestigious clientele, including the 27th Sultan of Kedah, Sultan Sir Badlishah, in 1947, followed by the 28th Sultan of Kedah, Sultan Abdul Halim Mu'adzam Shah, who graced the shop during his tenure as Agong in 1974/75. The shop also served the country's first Prime Minister, Tunku Abdul Rahman, in 1985, and attended to Mahathir Mohamad in the early 1980s. Some of these figures sought private consultations, while others returned regularly for personalised care.

3

THE EVOLUTION OF OPTICAL TECHNOLOGY

As the optical industry went through significant changes, The World Optical kept pace. Advanced tools like digital refraction systems, optical coherence tomography (OCT) and automated lens edging machines now allow for quicker, more precise eye examinations, while maintaining the quality of service for which the business is known.

The company's product offerings have also expanded to include progressive lenses, anti-reflective coatings, blue light filters and photochromic lenses. Customers now have a wide range of choices for the design of their glasses, from classic styles to designer frames that combine function with fashion.

In the past, spectacle frames were crafted from luxurious but now-obsolete materials such as tortoiseshell, hawksbill beak and bull horn—now prohibited for ethical and legal reasons. Today, eco-friendly alternatives and recyclable packaging reflect the company's commitment to sustainability.

Soft contact lenses, made from breathable hydrogels or silicone hydrogels, have replaced the older hard lenses, offering

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greater comfort and convenience for daily wear. Digital record-keeping has streamlined operations, allowing easy access to patient data while reducing paper waste.

Despite these upgrades, The World Optical continues to value its original, vintage optical equipment. The team occasionally uses the 1934 refraction tools to demonstrate the craft's early techniques and share the company's long history with staff and customers.

PRESERVING HISTORY FOR FUTURE GENERATIONS

The discovery of vintage equipment during the 2018 move sparked a personal mission for Stanley Lam to preserve his family's optical heritage. Inspired by the trove of heirlooms, he expanded the collection through research and outreach to former customers and employees—determined to document their legacy and share it with the public.

Some pieces are now displayed in-store, but Stanley envisions a dedicated museum to showcase his full collection. He has consulted historians, museum professionals and organisations like George Town World Heritage Incorporated (GTWHI) to ensure proper preservation. His goal is not only to honour the past, but to educate future generations on the evolution of optometry.

5

A FAMILY BUSINESS BUILT ON VALUES

Stanley fondly recalls weekends spent at the shop as a child. "When I was in kindergarten, I used to come in with my brother. I'd play with the sample lenses—hammering thicker plastic ones to see how they broke, or bending frames just to see what would happen." That early exposure and curiosity soon grew into a deep interest in the craft.

Managing a multi-generational business comes with its challenges, especially when balancing family dynamics with the need for innovation. Open communication and shared decision-making have been key in navigating these differences.

To Stanley, The World Optical is more than just a business—it represents a commitment to excellence. "As I grew older, I began to appreciate the profound impact that my grandfather, and later my family, had on people's lives," he reflects.

The planned museum will be a tangible expression of these values, offering visitors a look at the evolution of vision care through one family's dedication. Meanwhile, their doors remain open to those interested in both purchasing new glasses and viewing these historical pieces. The World Optical occasionally also offers free vision screenings and educational workshops, and has partnered with schools to promote eye health awareness.

By preserving its legacy and embracing modern advancements, the business remains committed to helping future generations see the world.

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CAPTIONS

1. (Cover spread) The World Optical on Leith Street.

2. Stanley Lam and his mother, Mrs. Lam.

3. The vision testing room.

4. Vintage Sunglass and Clear Lens, circa 1934.

5. Lam Pin Lik was presented with the GTWHI Heritage Recognition Lifetime Achievement Award.

6. Ophthalmometer by F.A. Handy & Co., circa 1934.

7. Ophthalmoscope by Carl Zeiss Jena (Gullstrand model), circa 1934.

8. Custom-made glass lens grinding and polishing machine table, in use since 1934.

9. A keratometer, used to test eyesight, by Bausch & Lomb, circa 1968.

10. Optical workshop tools, circa 1930s–1980s.

11. A letter of appreciation from the Sultan of Kedah, dated 16 August 1947.

12. Vintage eyeglass care kits and lens cleaning supplies on display.

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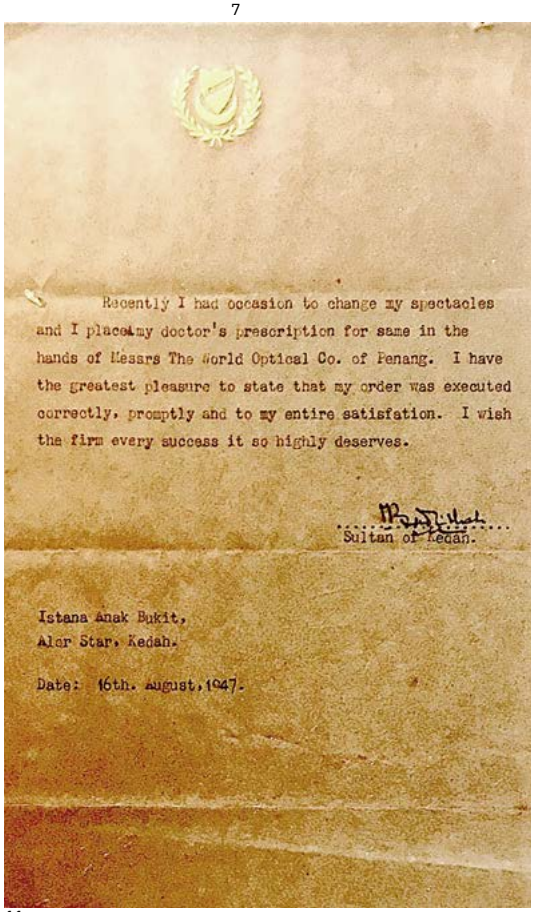

Recently I had occasion to change my spectacles and I place my doctor's prescription for same in the hands of Messrs The World Optical Co. of Penang. I have the greatest pleasure to state that my order was executed correctly, promptly and to my entire satisfation. I wish the firm every success it so highly deserves.

Sultan of Kedah.

Istana Anak Bukit,
Alor Star, Kedah.

Date: 16th. August, 1947.

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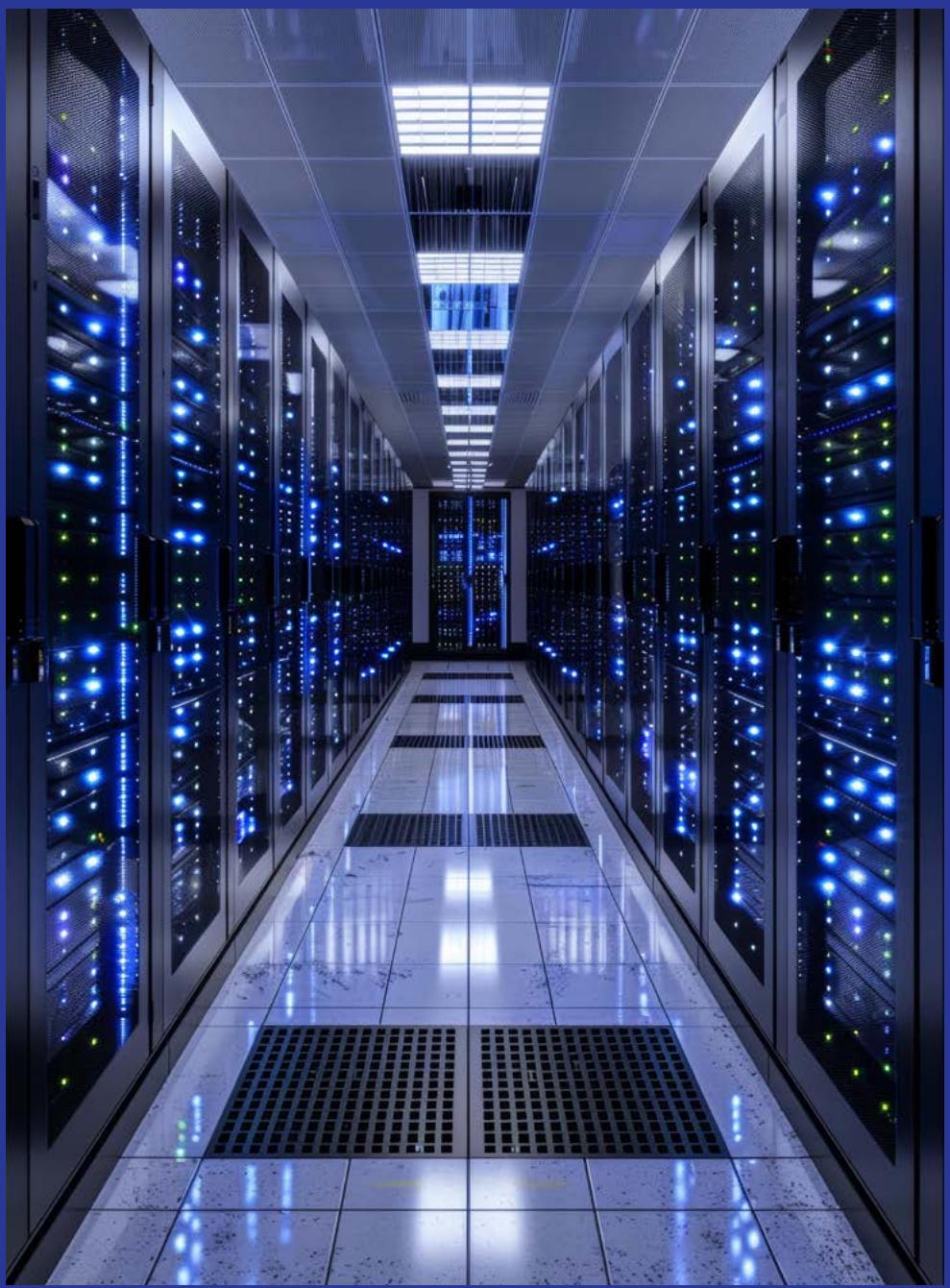
IYLIA DE SILVA is a law graduate from the University of London. Balancing work and play, she savours every moment by indulging in her passion for food, languages, music and engaging with people from diverse cultures.

AI DATA CENTRES: HOW MANY DO WE NEED?

BY ELIZABETH SU

TODAY, THERE ARE 11,800 data centres in the world.[1]

According to March 2024 statistics, the US is home to 5,381 data centres, followed by Germany (521), the UK (514), China (449), Canada (336), France (315) and Australia (307). Southeast Asian countries in the top 25 ranking include Singapore, ranked #19 with 99 data centres, and Indonesia, ranked #22 with 79 data centres.



ELIZABETH SU is a Harvard Mason Fellow (Class of '97). She is very curious about people and the world around her, and believes that asking questions is a great way to learn. Elizabeth teaches, writes and loves storytelling.

On 24 December 2024, the Malaysian Investment Development Authority (MIDA) announced that Malaysia had strengthened its position as Southeast Asia's leading digital hub, attracting a total of RM141.72bil in digital investments during the first 10 months of the year, a threefold increase from the RM46.2bil achieved in 2023.[2] Malaysia once again ranked first in its SEA-5 Data Centre Opportunity Index, having recorded a significant annual take-up of 429 megawatts (MW) to outperform regional peers.

As of the end of 2024, Malaysia hosts 54 operational data centres (including two in Penang) offering a 504.8MW capacity, with Johor leading in IT capacity and Klang Valley remaining a core market. Emerging hubs included Sarawak, Negeri Sembilan and Kedah.

Recently, Malaysia launched the region's first sovereign, full-stack AI infrastructure,[3] "Strategic AI Infrastructure: Trusted, Sovereign and Global", empowering government, businesses and universities to leverage AI in improving services, boosting productivity and driving innovation.[4] Malaysia's investment in data centres aligns with its digitalisation strategy and global trends in the use of AI, which requires the resource-intensive power of data centres to support its data processing.

MALAYSIA'S DIGITAL STRATEGY

In August 2020, the Malaysia Digital Economy Corporation (MDEC), was tasked with overseeing the digitalisation of the nation and the implementation of the Malaysia 5.0 vision, a key aspect of which is building Malaysia's digital infrastructure with a "Unity Alliance", an economic coalition comprising government and private enterprises to support Malaysia's digital aspirations.[5] On 23 April 2021, MIDA and MDEC jointly established a Digital Investment Office to play a vital role in positioning Malaysia as the preferred digital hub, firmly establishing Malaysia as the "Heart of Digital ASEAN" in Southeast Asia.

Between 2021 and 2024, Malaysia attracted an estimated RM278bil in digital investments, of which about RM184.7bil has gone into cloud infrastructure and data centre projects.[6] Amazon Web Services was the first to launch its Malaysian cloud region in August 2024, with plans to invest RM29.2bil through 2038, while Google committed to developing its first data centre and the establishment of a cloud region in Malaysia with a RM9.3bil investment.[7]

Microsoft announced last year that it would invest RM10.2bil over the next four years to support Malaysia's digital transformation, the single largest investment in its 32-year history in the country.[8] On 20 March 2025, Microsoft announced its plan to launch its first three data centres in Malaysia, by mid-2025, known as the Malaysia West cloud.[9]

"Between 2021 and 2024, Malaysia attracted an estimated RM278bil in digital investments, of which about RM184.7bil have gone into cloud infrastructure and data centre projects."

All eyes seem to be on us. At the end of 2024, UVCell Solar and IOZELA Data Center announced a strategic collaboration to develop state-of-the-art data centres in Penang and Pahang.[10] Penang would serve as the location for a highly advanced data centre complex with a green plantation farm to support Malaysia's Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG) goals, while Pahang would become the site for a comprehensive renewable energy hub, including a solar farm and a biomass farm, designed to generate between 300 and 500MW of clean power. This facility is expected to power both the Penang data centres and other surrounding infrastructure with renewable energy.

ELECTRICITY FOR DATA

A *Guardian* analysis from 2020 to 2022 revealed that the real emissions from "in-house" or company-owned data centres of Google, Meta and Apple are probably about 7.62 times higher than officially reported, essentially compromising some of their sustainability targets. Technology firms are increasingly turning to nuclear sources of energy to supply the electricity used by the huge data centres that drive AI.

According to the International Energy Agency (IEA), about 1.5% of the world's electricity is currently used to power data centres.[11] An April 2025 IEA report projects data centres, driven by AI, will use double the electricity by 2030. In Australia, Morgan Stanley estimates data centres are expected to use 8% of the electricity on the country's power grid by 2030.[12]

With Malaysians having to manage higher electricity costs, what with the base electricity tariff in Peninsular Malaysia being raised by 14.2% to 45.62 sen per kilowatt-hour (sen/kWh), compared to 39.95 sen/kWh between 2022 and 2024,[13] I wonder if it makes sense for Malaysia to go all-out to further develop data centres.

WATER FOR DATA

Many data centres also consume large amounts of water to cool the servers. Due to the high resource needs of AI workloads, AI models need AI data centres—which means re-engineering data centres to meet the needs of AI: this means higher rack densities, innovative and hybrid cooling, and a greater need for power.[14]

In 2024, Sydney experienced concerns that its data centres were straining the area's water supply. [15] Increasing tensions over water usage between AI data centres and local communities could be exacerbated by the nature of AI data centres being water guzzlers. It is obvious that managing energy and water use will become more challenging for data centres in a changing climate, especially for data centres located in regions with extreme heat days. What more can we say for countries like Malaysia that lie on the tropical belt?

Eventually, policymakers in Malaysia will have to accept some hard truths about AI and data centres, and make some strategic decisions with regard to aligning the country's digital transformation with the growth of AI data centres.

FOOTNOTES

[1] https://www.visualcapitalist.com/ranked-the-top-25-countries-with-the-most-data-centers/ - 21 January 2025

[2] https://www.mida.gov.my/mida-news/malaysia-ranked-first-in-sea-5-data-centre-opportunity-index/ - 24 Deecember 2024

[3] Full-stack infrastructure is a comprehensive solution that has all the needed components to develop, deploy and operate applications and services. Sovereign AI is the nation's ability to develop and deploy full-stack AI using its own resources.

[4] https://www.bernama.com/en/news.php?id=2424455 - Malaysia launches region's first sovereign full-stack AI infrastructure - 20 may 2025

[5] https://mdec.my/blog/malaysia-5-0-unity-alliance - 6 August 2020

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[7] https://theedgemalaysia.com/node/736787 - "The rise and rise of the Malaysian data centre hub", 6 December 2024

[8] https://news.microsoft.com/apac/2024/05/02/microsoft-announces-us2-2-billion-investment-to-fuel-malaysias-cloud-and-ai-transformation/

[9] https://www.reuters.com/technology/microsoft-malaysia-launch-three-data-centres-q2-2025-2025-03-20/

[10] https://uvcellsolar.com/news/sustainable-data-center-development-in-penang-and-pahang/

[11] https://www.iea.org/reports/energy-and-ai

[12] https://www.abc.net.au/news/2025-05-20/data-centre-growth-energy-water-internet-future/105089876

[13] https://www.tnb.com.my/assets/newsclip/27122024c.pdf - Base electricity tariff to rise 14.2% starting July, 27 December 2025

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LUBNA JUMABHOY

A GLOBAL CITIZEN OF PENANG

1

IF ANYONE HAS led a truly multicultural life, it would be Lubna Jumabhoy. The long-time resident of Penang is a global citizen in every sense of the phrase.

Born in Bombay and growing up in Karachi before moving to Malaysia (then Malaya), she is a teacher of the Japanese floral art *ikebana,* and is France's representative in Penang. Lubna's life has been a borderless one that has witnessed important events of the 20th century, like the founding of India, Pakistan, Malaysia and Singapore as modern nation-states.

The retired octogenarian has lived a varied life as a wife, mother, sister, daughter, teacher, artist and diplomat; she is proof that one need not be born in Penang to contribute to its betterment, which she has done for the past 60 years.

BY LIM WAN PHING

CHILDHOOD IN BRITISH INDIA

Lubna was born in 1937 in Bombay (Mumbai) to Muslim parents, Nazer and Kamartaj Mooraj. Her family had originally been from Kutch in the western state of Gujarat. In 1947, when India gained independence, her family relocated to Karachi in Pakistan, settling on Britto Road.

As the eldest of four children, Lubna remembers standing in line waiting for the founder of Pakistan Muhammad Ali Jinnah's cortege to pass by—he died a year after the nation's inception.

Her childhood in Karachi was a happy and active one; she fondly recalls her schooling years at St. Joseph's Convent as a prefect and girl guide, and living next to the school—therefore able to jump over the wall to attend classes.

At age 17, she went to Sir J.J. School of Arts in Mumbai for art classes while waiting to study architecture in London. However, after meeting her future husband Mustafa Jumabhoy there, her plans changed, and two years later they were married. Aged 19, she set off for Singapore, where his family lived, and ran R. Jumabhoy & Sons.

A year later, the young couple was tasked to run the liner and cargo shipping business in Penang. That was how they ended up on the island in April 1957.

2

MOVING TO MALAYA

In the late 1950s and throughout the 1960s, the Jumabhoys shuttled between Penang, Singapore, Karachi and Mumbai. In Penang, they moved from Caunter Hall to Green Hall and then to Jesselton Heights, where they still live today. Their residence would go on to host global dignitaries after Lubna took on the role of France's Consul-General.

But before the age of 40, she had put her family first, raising three sons Anwar, Faez and Saleem, while travelling extensively with the family. But she was not one for a domesticated life occupied solely by housework and cooking.

The artist and the extrovert in her had been springing up over the years, with stints in modelling ("I had to carry a baby to promote an infant formula"), and learning *ikebana* from the late Kazue Kim, who started the Sogetsu school of *ikebana* in Singapore in 1966.

3

It was *ikebana* that led her to an even more active social life. She co-founded the Penang Sogetsu Association and became its vice-president, organising charity drives and teaching the art in Penang, KL and Karachi after qualifying as a Grade A instructor. This she faithfully did until 1982, when she stopped to focus on being Consul-General.

REPRESENTING FRANCE IN MALAYSIA

In 1978, she was appointed France's first female honorary consul in Penang, taking over from British national, J.S.H. Cunyngham-Brown. Besides the embassy in KL, France has three Honorary Consuls—in Penang, Kuching and Penampang. An honorary consul's job is to assist French citizens and foster diplomatic, cultural and economic ties in their designated region.

"The opportunity with the consulate came at the right time when I needed to do something for myself," recalls Lubna. "My children had all grown up, and I didn't want to just be someone's wife, mother or daughter, but my own person." It was Cunyngham-Brown who asked her to join Alliance Francaise to learn the French language in 1972.

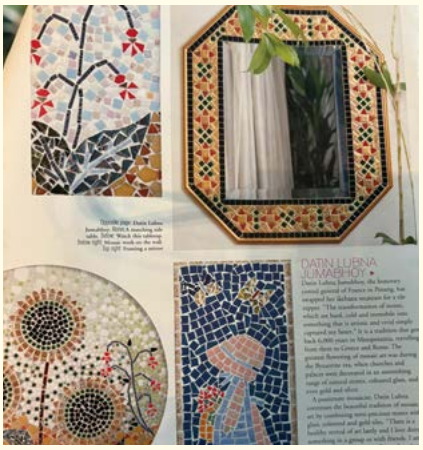
She quickly immersed herself in French culture, taking cooking lessons and picking up French again, having learnt the language from the St. Joseph nuns of her childhood and being an active member in Alliance Française.

The job fitted her well, as it entailed courtesy calls, hosting Hari Raya and French National Day events, arranging business meetings, and solving tourist problems, like visas and medical emergencies. "There were 12 or so honorary consuls living in Penang at the time, and I was the only female," she says, recalling meeting Princess Margaret, Fidel Castro and David Marshall. Decades later, she would be honoured with France's L'ordre national du Mérite in 1992 and Légion d'Honneur in 2003.

TRANSCENDING TIME AND GEOGRAPHY

"It has been a very rewarding 30 years," says Lubna, who retired from her diplomatic career in 2008 at age 70. The Penang State awarded her an Honorary Datukship in 2004, as she and her husband had mooted for Little India's creation in the 1960s and had funded the Datuk Mustafa Jumabhoy Scholarship for Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) students since the '90s.

With three children, seven grandchildren and five great-grandchildren, Lubna has led a fulfilling life. As a British national who grew up in India and Pakistan, and a faithful Muslim educated in Christian missionary schools, she only asks that the younger generation to "be united and don't squabble".



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In her free time, she now goes back to her love of art; her Jesselton home is decorated with her *ikebana*, glass paintings, copper tooling, jewellery designs and mosaic pieces. She is currently crocheting a bedcover for her youngest great-grandchild, and keeps in touch daily with her sister in Karachi.

Lubna's life has been one that transcends nationalities, languages and cultures. She is indeed a citizen of the world, with Penang as her home and in her heart.

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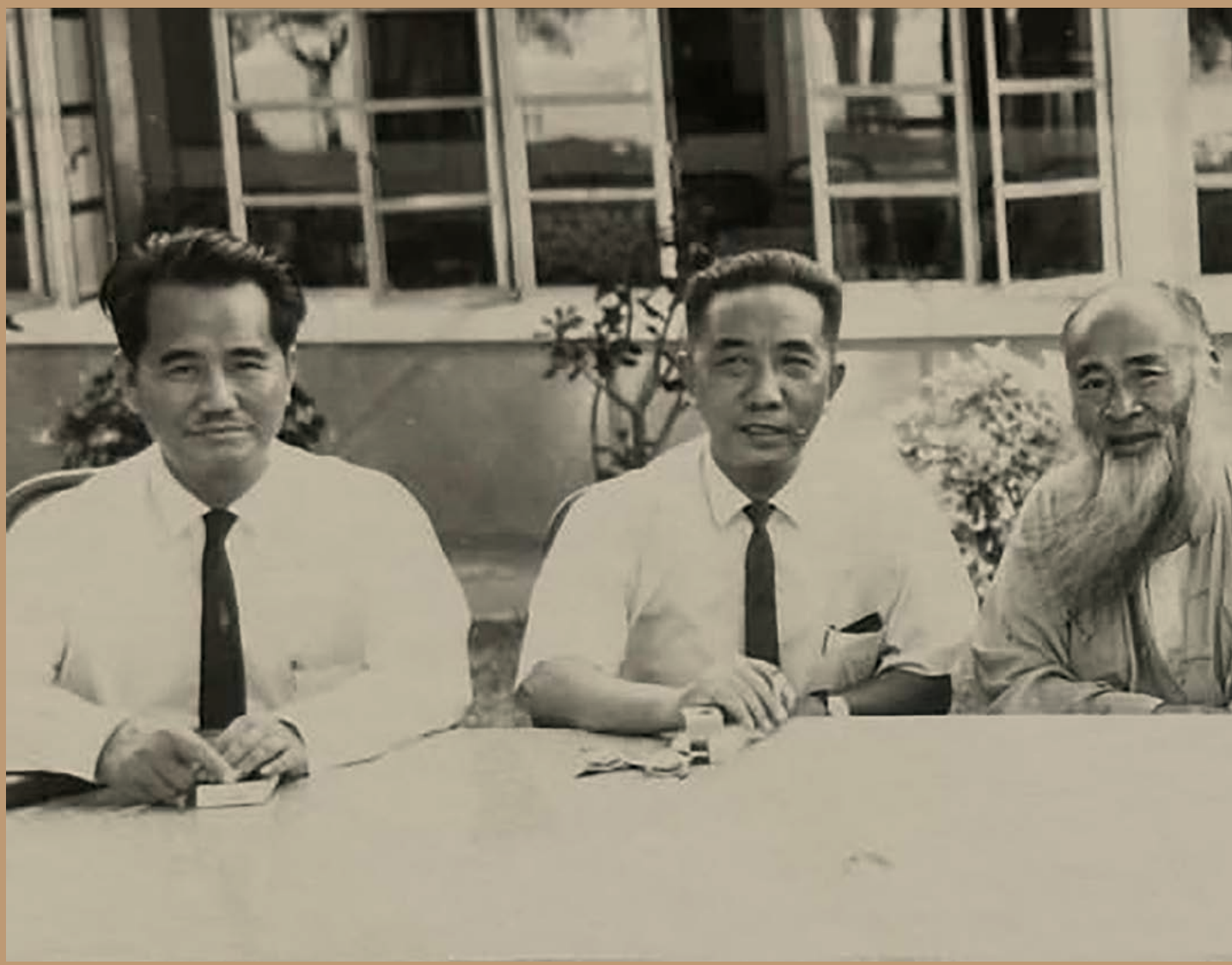
CAPTIONS

1. A young Lubna.
2. Lubna with her second decoration.
3. One of Lubna's *ikebana* designs.
4. Her mosaic artefacts.
5. A *Malaysia Tatler* feature of Lubna with her mosaic art pieces.

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.

TSUE TA TEE'S CALLIGRAPHY LEGACY IN PENANG



BY PAN YI CHIEH

IN MALAYSIA, Chinese calligraphy is commonly found—from the carved signs on shop fronts and buildings to red strips of auspicious couplets hung on walls indoors. Tsue Ta Tee (崔大地) was one of the prominent calligraphers active in Penang and the region in the 1950s and '60s, who helped to leave this important legacy on Penang's cityscape.

From 30 March to 3 April this year, an exhibition was held in the Dewan Undangan Negeri to commemorate his artistic achievement. The Tsue Ta Tee Calligraphy Exhibition, supported by the Penang Calligraphy Association among others, showcased the late calligrapher's art pieces, which had been collected by his disciples, alongside their research.

Based on an interview with Lee Soo Chee, an assistant professor at the Institute of Chinese Studies at Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman (UTAR), who draws his insights from the research done by Tsue's disciples in Singapore and Malaysia, this article explores the calligrapher's life and works.[1]

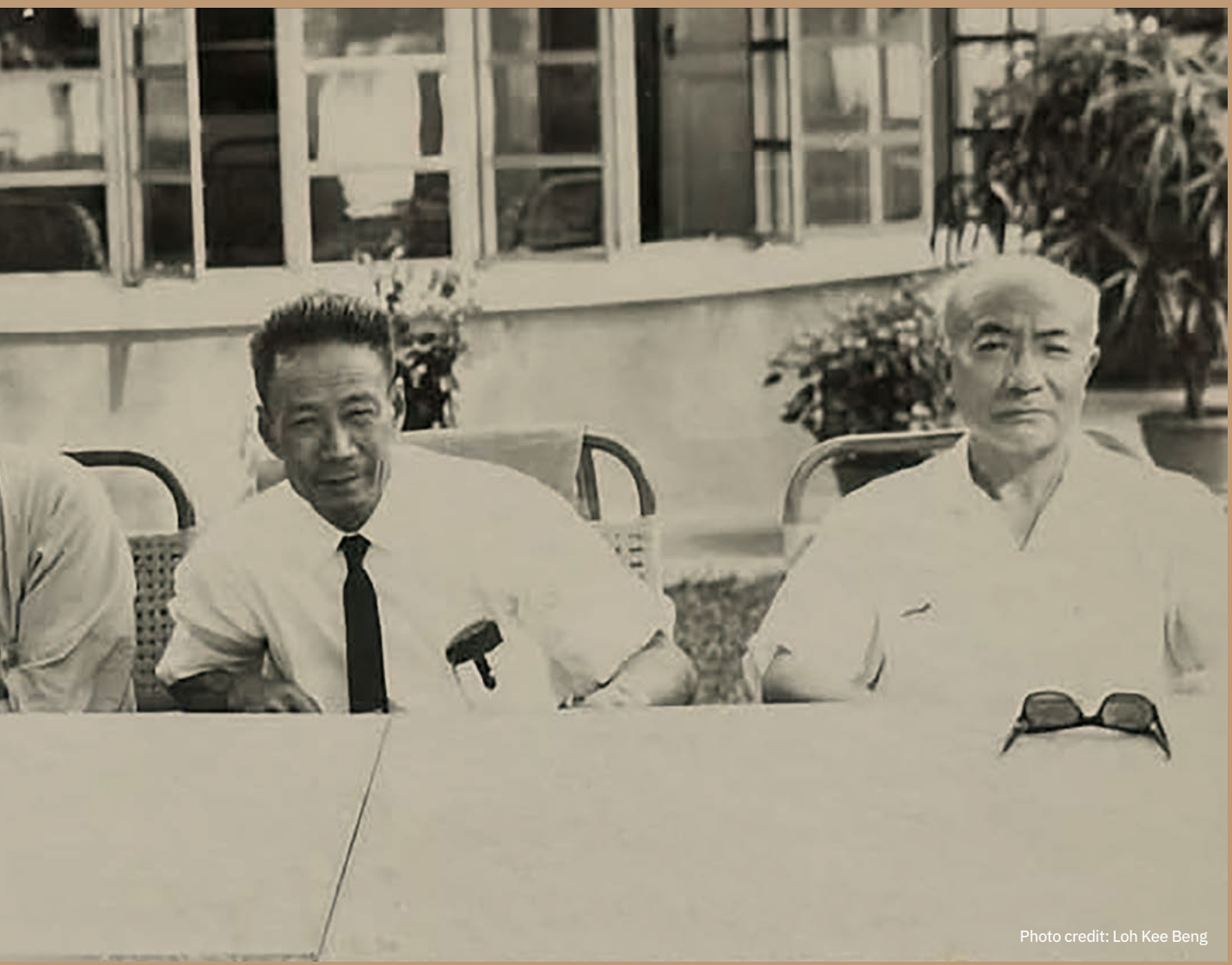


Photo credit: Loh Kee Beng

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TSUE TA TEE (1903-1974): AN ARTIST MIGRATES SOUTH

More likely than not, in Penang, you would have frequently encountered Tsue Ta Tee's calligraphy without realising it. His work graces the buildings of many Chinese associations, including a masterpiece at the Hui An Association. It also appears in temples such as Kek Lok Si, where his "Namo Amituofo" inscription is displayed, in Chinese schools, on signages for traditional businesses, clubs like the Mor Hun Club (once a gathering place for Teochew businessmen living in Northern Malaysia), hotels as well as organisations.

Born in early 20th-century Beijing, Tsue, who lost his parents when he was young, was profoundly shaped by the political upheaval and revolutionary ideas of the time. Records suggest he was either an educator or a soldier fighting Japanese forces. By 1931, he was in Northeast China and in 1937, as the Japanese invasion intensified, he moved south to Hebei province with anti-Japanese troops. Tsue likely lost his family during the Japanese Occupation, forcing him to continue his journey south alone.

His name, Tsue Ta Tee, is suggested to have been a pseudonym to evade wartime capture. Ta Tee, meaning "earth", aptly reflects his subsequent migratory lifestyle and his unwavering commitment to calligraphy, even as he roamed the world.

In 1943, at 40, Tsue travelled to Guangdong, then Macau. Some accounts even suggest he had walked from Southern China to Vietnam (Annam), and stayed there for a year. He then continued his journey to Southeast Asia, where he lived until his death in Singapore in 1974. Widely recognised in Singapore and Malaysia as a first-generation calligraphy artist, he tirelessly nurtured generations of students over the decades, profoundly influencing the art of Chinese calligraphy in both countries.

COMING TO PENANG

While travelling solo in Southeast Asia, Tsue brought only a few calligraphy brushes with him. His talent, once discovered by the locals, connected him with many individuals who would support his career. In 1945, after World War II, a prominent figure based in Thailand but from Penang helped him organise a calligraphy exhibition. A year later, he met Huang Man Shi (黃曼氏), an influential art collector and Chinese community leader in Singapore, who suggested he move to Penang.

Huang's connections led Tsue Ta Tee to Loh Cheng Chuan (骆清泉), a major art patron and a leading figure in Penang's Chinese community. Loh was highly influential, and generously supported many Chinese artists who visited Penang. Living only a few doors from Tsue, Loh and his family cared for and supported him. Their patronage was especially important; Chinese associations were central to Chinese art and cultural activities at the time. A notable member of the Hui An Association, Loh recommended that Tsue undertake the crafting of the association's signboard. This work, meticulously supervised by Loh to ensure its proper inscription, became one of Tsue's masterpieces in Penang.

Without a formal job here, Tsue relied entirely on his calligraphy for income—though he was known to charge his services very modestly. Older residents who had met him during that period recalled his initial fascination with the city; in his first few days in George Town, he eagerly hired a

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trishaw to show him around, observing the streetscapes and shops there.

Aside from Loh and his family, Ingrid Zhou, a Malaysian and Tsue's long-time disciple, was a critical figure in his life. She accompanied him for years in both Penang and Singapore, and was indispensable in preserving and researching his work after his death. Zhou remembered the calligrapher's daily life in Penang: he earned about two dollars, spending six cents on a newspaper and the rest on food. This incredibly simple, almost austere, existence was a testament to his profound mental discipline, and allowed him endless hours for his artistic pursuits.

While Tsue's calligraphy, often seen on signboards, was mostly written in the Han clerical script (汉隶), showcasing both stillness and dynamism, its foundation lay firmly in Han Dynasty steles (汉碑). For years, he diligently mastered a wide range of styles, including Oracle Bone Script and Wei Stele calligraphy. Crucially, his unique style blends elements of Zhangcao (章草) and Jincao (今草), incorporating their brushwork and creative intent to create a harmonious mix of static and moving elements. Tsue's calligraphy embodies five key characteristics: grandeur, thickness, weight, stability and profundity. In his time, his style was considered very unique and distinctive among Chinese calligraphers in the region.

From 1953 to 1955, Tsue embarked on a significant trip to England. This journey opened his eyes to the British Museum's collection of oracle bone inscriptions, allowing him to examine original artifacts firsthand. This immersive experience profoundly influenced his calligraphy. His oracle bone brushwork, particularly its "knife-like" energy, visibly improved after this trip, elevating his calligraphic techniques to a new level through diligent study.

Upon returning to Penang, Tsue remained there until 1965, when he moved to Singapore. During this period, he was incredibly prolific, holding several exhibitions across Malaysia. He actively engaged with Penang's literary and art circles, leaving behind many valuable pieces still visible today. Penang was a profoundly significant stop for the calligrapher before he finally settled in Singapore, where he focused on both artistic creation and calligraphy education until his passing in 1974.

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PRESERVING TSUE'S LEGACY

Tsue Ta Tee's influence extends beyond his artistic creations. After his passing, the first generation of his disciples—among them Tan Gian Seng and Ingrid Zhou—diligently worked to preserve and research his legacy, a continuation Lee Soo Chee, a second-generation disciple, expresses profound gratitude for.

Tsue's decade-long residence in Penang significantly shaped his calligraphic heritage. More than just a master calligrapher, his commitment to art education ensured that his legacy would inspire future generations. This recent exhibition in Penang and ongoing research efforts are the result of immense dedication from his students and from researchers in both Malaysia and Singapore, all collectively striving to safeguard Tsue's calligraphy as an intangible cultural heritage.

While his works are an undeniably powerful artistic expression, a deeper study of his works and the people he interacted with reveals a much broader narrative—these seemingly small and scattered encounters contributed to building a "micro-history" of Penang that, when combined, forms a complete and vibrant "macro-history" of the city. Tsue's life and his connections and interactions with the locals are crucial in reconstructing the everyday lives of ordinary Penangites in the 1950s and '60s, particularly highlighting the journeys and contributions of these "southern migrants"—artists and writers who left indelible marks on the city.

CAPTIONS

1. (Cover spread) Pictured from left to right are Tsue Ta Tee alongside the notable literati and artists of his era, both those based in Penang and those who visited: Seow Yeoh Thian, Zhou Man Sha, Chang Dai-chien, Loh Cheng Chuan and Tsue Ta Tee.
2. Tan Gian Seng (left) and Lee Soo Chee (right), who are both Tsue Ta Tee's students, helped to curate the exhibition.
3. The Shih Chung Branch School signage written by Tsue.
4. The Mor Hun Club signage written by Tsue.
5. Tsue's calligraphy on Yang Sheng leather shop.
6. Tsue's signboard for Hui An Association became one of his masterpieces.
7. Peking Hotel, written by Tsue Ta Tee in 1956.
8. Tong Shan School signange, also written by Tsue.

FOOTNOTE

[1] See also: Calligraphy by Tsue Ta Tee, ed. Tan Gian Seng (陈健诚), Lee Soo Chee (李树枝) and Tan Chee Lay (陈志锐) (Noble Cultural Hub PLT, 2025).

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

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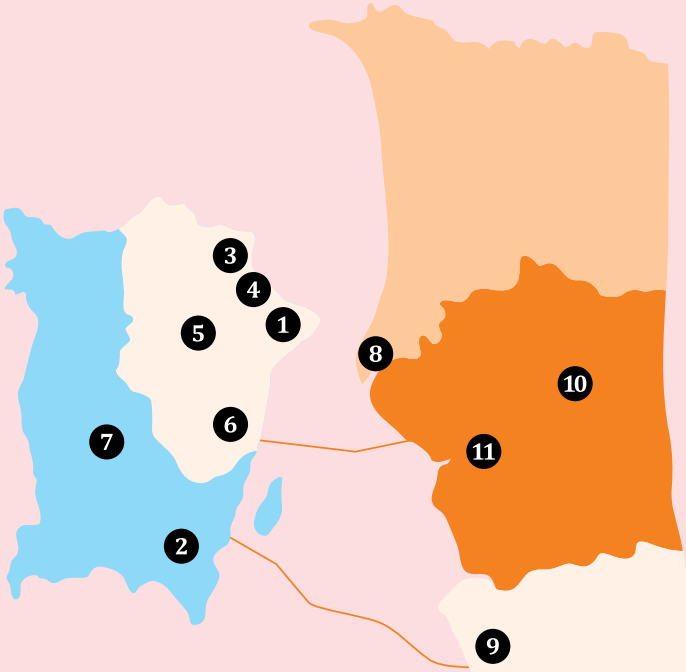

PICK-UP SPOTS
KL/SELANGOR

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)
Spices by Yin's
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)

9 Batu Kawan
IKEA Batu Kawan

10 Bukit Mertajam
Seberang Perai City Council

11 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 Butterworth
Artichoke Café

9 Batu Kawan
Peninsula College

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