

PENANG MONTHLY

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FEATURE
THE GEOGRAPHY OF AMBITION:
BUILDING MEANINGFUL
WORK BEYOND THE CITY

SMALL TOWNS OF MALAYSIA

FOR ARTS' SAKE
ONE OF MALAYSIA'S
FEW FEMALE SILVERSMITHS
REINVENTS THE CRAFT





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

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SMALL TOWNS OF MALAYSIA

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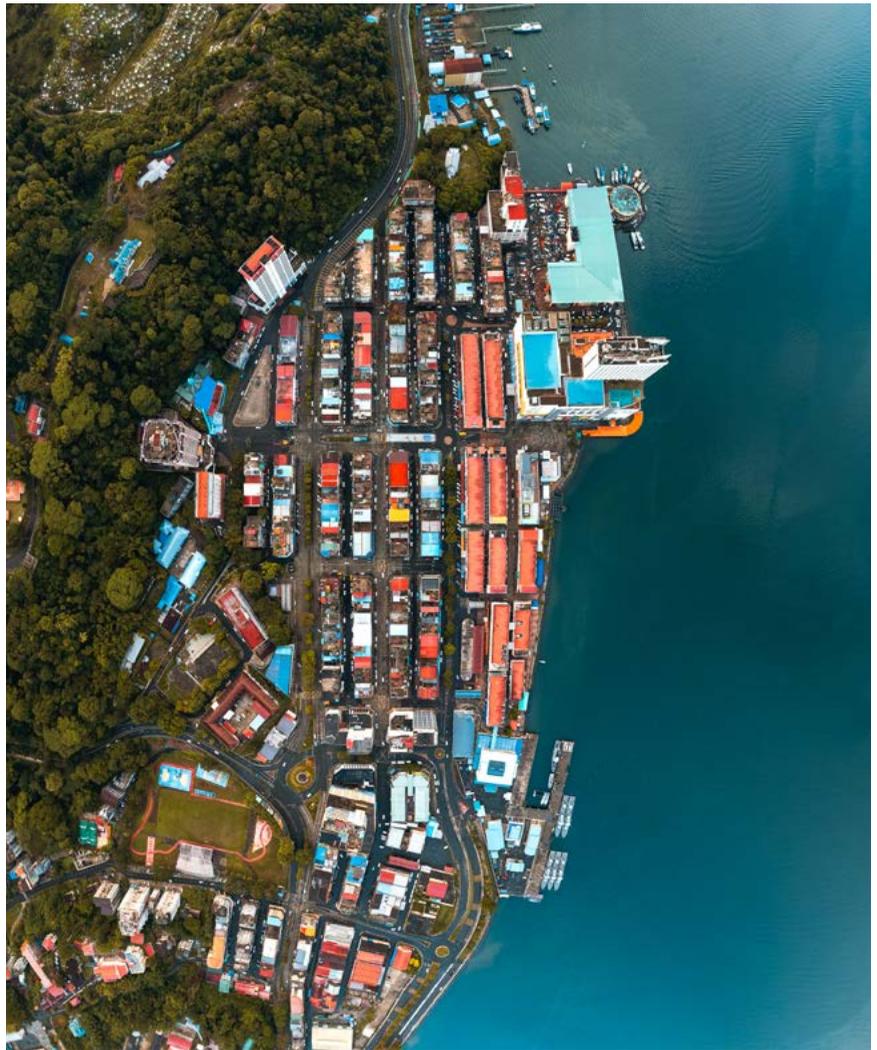
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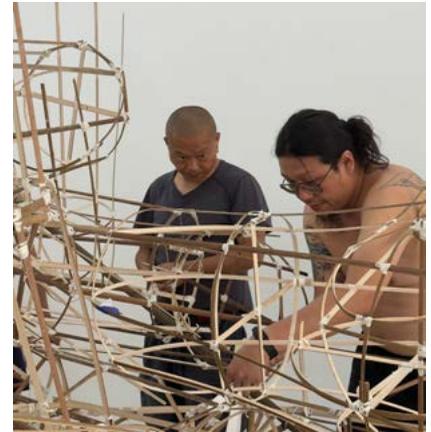
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THE GEOGRAPHY OF AMBITION

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THE STORY OF NORTHAM ROAD



MERCHANTS, MILLIONAIRES AND THEIR MANSIONS

“
 The geography of ambition is
 not limited to skyscrapers or
 crowded streets. It can be charted
 in forests, cafés by the sea, family-
 run spaces and quiet studios alike,
 unfolding without spectacle while
 becoming deeply rooted.

—AQ'ILLA LATIFF IN
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ONE OF MALAYSIA'S FEW FEMALE SILVERSMITHS REINVENTS THE CRAFT







STAYING SANE BY ACKNOWLEDGING OUR RURAL SOUL

BY OOI KEE BENG

IN THE ENGLISH language, a “hamlet” or “colony” connotes a place of untainted being. Nature is close by, human warmth is at hand and social changes are slow enough to be embraced. But the rural, in practice, is often messy, starting with the domestic and half-tamed animals littering the path. There are ducklings in marching formation and panicky chickens. Then come the wild ones that have learned to follow the pace and patterns of village life, including crows, rats, centipedes and cockroaches. One could go on and on.

Yet an idealised version of the country remains fundamental to many Malaysians’ sense of being, as a physical aspect of our history. Generally, we think of history as the past captured in words. However, when revisiting one’s home village, the past exists in concrete form, aided by strong memories and familiar names knotted in place. The thoroughfare most frequented by all, the knolls and hills filled with exciting stories told by grandmothers, the rivers safe to swim and banks safe to dive from, the fruit trees that nobody owns, the best spots to hide from the midday sun, the playmates now grown but back for the weekend, the weathered but kind looks of their parents...

And of course, the pattern of stars not seen anywhere else.

This strong affinity to our place of birth—or more correctly, the place where we grew up—is hugely interesting. No one argues about any Malaysian’s need to *balik kampung*, to return to the village. This need is one of the few aspects common to Malay-

sia’s main cultures, which hints at a shared historical trait: a diasporic relationship to the world, one that is essentially itinerant rather than characterised by fixity or timelessness. The Chinese, in particular, use *fan xiang* (返乡, lit. *balik kampung*) to describe this search for homeliness. They also have an interesting maxim, “*luò yè guī gēn* (落叶归根, lit. falling leaves return to their roots). This reflects a realisation that emigrants cannot but ultimately wish to reconnect with the authenticity of childhood.

This idealisation of the rural, the country, may also be a symptom of how the urban has become the default mode of living for many Malaysians. Cities, where a multitude of rules have to be followed, are the realm of the Freudian ego and superego. Village or small-town life, in contrast, is where the id has a larger say. We could argue that global-scale urbanisation demanded by late modernity has added to the need for recent city-dwellers to return to a setting where social ties are warm, familiar and more spontaneous; where nature smells pure, even if tinged with the scent of rot, mud and animal waste.

This sense of a pre-urban, or at least less urbanised, lifestyle lingers among those who have moved to cities—such as the author of this month’s cover story on exploring Malaysia’s small towns—or even among those a generation or two removed from the country. City-dwellers, whether in Penang or elsewhere, may very well wish to also remain small-town locals. This should be possible in well-planned cities, which

are, in essence, agglomerations of smaller settlements whose residents try their best to feel at home. Sadly, urban residential estates only offer a diluted version of this sense, despite their planners’ intuitive appreciation of city-dwellers’ longing for lost intimacy and comfort. Consequently, economic niches cater to this need in specialised ways. In Sweden, for example, the *sommarstuga*, the ubiquitous summer cottage, remains a haven for urban-dwellers seeking to lower their frustrations, recognize a closeness to nature and relive distance from social pressures. In a way, this is damage control; these are also sites for renewal and reinvention of the self.

I end this month’s ramblings by sharing three terms from Chinese philosophy that cogently express the individual’s psychological span. Similarly to the Freudian triplets, Chinese thinking outlines the quintessential Dao, Li and Fa. These are the key notions upon which Daoism, Confucianism and Legalism are built.

Dao is the impulse to follow natural order, Li denotes patterns in social order and Fa commands obedience of state rules.

One starts life as a child, following Dao. Then one becomes a social being, seeing the world as a stage, and recognises submission to the exercise of power. Along the way, one needs to vent and *balik kampung*. With some luck, one learns to age closer to nature, regain the spontaneity of childhood and leave behind the anxieties that have plagued us for decades.



IN
DEFENCE
OF
S L O W
T O W N S

A JOURNEY
THROUGH
MALAYSIA'S
SMALL
TOWNS


 An aerial photograph of a rural landscape in Malaysia. The image shows a patchwork of green agricultural fields, some with distinct rows of crops. A network of roads and paths crisscrosses the area. Several small buildings, some with red roofs, are scattered throughout. The lighting suggests late afternoon or early morning, with long shadows and a warm glow.

SS

BY
ASH
RAJA

HAVING GROWN UP in a small town, I find it hard to be in the city for long. The shopping malls and constant barrage of stimuli are exciting, but they cannot compare with the slow life of small towns and villages. One of the best things that these settlements offer is simply permission to exist without a “ringgit sign” hanging above your head, indicating a potential customer or transaction. Whether in a *sulap*, *warung*, or *kopitiam*, or even the outdoors, you can sit around chatting away for hours. There is no rush or pressure to meet key performance indicators. More subtly, there is a sense of being part of a community, without needing the justification of a shared activity or paid membership.

This sense of belonging is something that we—my partner Jonathan Dexter and I—tried to capture and convey through our social media project, “Small Towns Malaysia”. But our goal of creating something lasting to disrupt the throwaway nature of our social media feeds encountered some resistance. Even when we were producing content for state and federal tourism boards, many people commented that our videos were too boring. But we persisted and somehow built a significant following of people who also loved small towns and the intentional pace of life offered there.

Malaysia’s hundreds of small towns and villages rarely feature on typical travel itineraries. Many sit discreetly between larger cities, or are overshadowed by famous islands, highlands and national parks. But for those who take the time to explore, these sites often reveal some of the most memorable experiences the country has to offer. Over our last four years in operation, we are fortunate to have visited many of them. Here are some of my personal favourites from our journeys across all 13 states of West and East Malaysia.



2

KAKI BUKIT, PERLIS

Near the northern edge of Peninsular Malaysia, just a short drive from the Thai border, sits Kaki Bukit. Deeply rooted in its past, wooden houses line the roads, many raised on stilts, their aging timber walls weathered by decades' worth of exposure to tropical sun and rain. There is a striking sense of community, with many residents having lived here all their lives. It shows in the familiar way that people greet each other, their conversations flowing easily in the kopitiam and roadside stalls. It does not take long before you begin feeling that you too have also become part of the local rhythm. The surrounding landscape makes Kaki Bukit particularly special: limestone hills rise dramatically from flat countryside, housing caves that have long fascinated explorers and locals alike. Caves like Gua Kelam are some of the most impressive in the region, with chambers stretching deep into the hills. Lodging in a homestay is one of the best ways to experience Kaki Bukit. Mornings begin with mist often shrouding the surrounding hills, and evenings at the Wang Kelian viewpoint offer a peaceful panorama of the countryside fading into the horizon. Two days here feel just right: long enough to explore its caves, hills and streets.



3



4

CAPTIONS

1. (Cover spread) A drone snapshot of Tok Bali, a coastal town in Kelantan.
2. Kaki Bukit is a charming small town that acts as a gateway to Gua Kelam.
3. Kuala Nerang is a town in Padang Terap, Kedah, known for its surrounding greenery and community markets.
4. Not to be mistaken with Tanjung Penaga, the old-time name of George Town, Penaga offers a glimpse into the traditional Malay village life in Penang.
5. Cruising Lenggong's Dragon Lake (Tasik Cenderoh).

KUALA NERANG, KEDAH

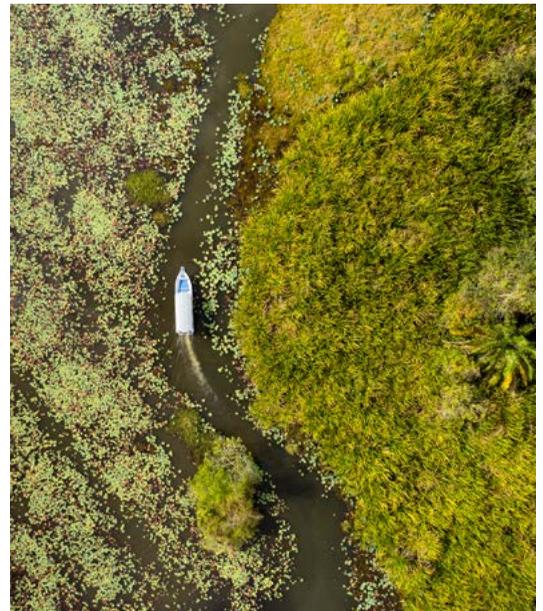
Down south lies Kuala Nerang, where three days can pass quickly without ever feeling rushed. Surrounded by lush hills, cascading waterfalls and forests, the town serves as a gateway to several rewarding natural attractions. These include the remarkable cloud carpet at Ahning, where layers of early-morning mist roll across the valleys. Standing above them as the sun rises, the illusion of an endless sea of clouds emerges. Not far from town sits the vast Tasik Pedu. Spending a night on a houseboat, fishing in this calm and expansive lake, results in a sense of peace that is hard to replicate elsewhere. The town's warmth also comes from its local eateries, serving simple but satisfying dishes, having been cooked the same way for years. On Saturdays, the Pekan Nat weekly market fills the quiet streets with sudden conversation and laughter, with local families strolling through to buy fresh produce, traditional snacks and household goods.

LENGGONG, PERAK

Lenggong is part of a UNESCO Global Geopark and one of the most historically significant sites in Malaysia. After all, it was here that the remains of the Perak Man, one of the oldest and most complete human skeletons in Southeast Asia, were discovered. Such archaeological finds have helped researchers better understand what early human settlement looked like. But Lenggong is not defined only by its distant past. It holds a special place in our hearts partly because of the people whom we met there. One visit came at the invitation of the team behind the Rumah Tiang 16 guesthouse, who hosted and introduced us to the town's daily rhythms. We tasted dishes prepared using techniques passed down through generations, and heard stories that imparted deeper meaning upon the landscape. The reflective surrounding lakes are stunning, especially during sunrise and sunset, small boats drifting across their calm waters. Lenggong is also rich in waterfalls, caves and forest trails waiting to be explored, enough for a five- to seven-day stay.

PENAGA, PENANG

Located on the northern side of Penang's mainland, a few days in Penaga allows visitors to explore both the natural beauty of its mangrove forests and the lively rhythms of the town itself. Penaga is also becoming one of Malaysia's most remarkable bird-watching spots. The mangroves provide a vital stopover for migratory shorebirds, staggering numbers of which appear during migration seasons. Thousands upon thousands fill the skies and mudflats in a surreal spectacle. One of my favourite memories from Penaga was during a sunset on a small boat, just off the mangroves. We watched waves of birds flying overhead, their silhouettes vividly cast against the fading orange sky. As for Penaga's own local charm, there is the Pekan Ahad market. Held every Sunday, it is one of the area's liveliest, attracting visitors from all over the country for its fresh seafood, vegetables, snacks and local delicacies.



5

KUALA KUBU BHARU, SELANGOR

Just a short drive from Kuala Lumpur sits Kuala Kubu Bharu, which feels surprisingly distant despite its proximity to the capital. Its colonial charm comes across through the old buildings of this “garden city”, while hiking trails in the nearby hills attract urban nature-lovers and day-trippers wanting a quick escape. One magical experience happens after dark at the nearby Sungai Selangor Dam, when the night sky opens up dramatically. Stargazing here can be a peaceful and humbling experience. Food is another highlight: the town is known for its local eateries, and during the durian season, it becomes especially lively.



6

REMBAU, NEGERI SEMBILAN

A strong Minangkabau heritage intertwines beautifully with its present, whether in the structures of kampong houses or local cuisine. The bold, hearty flavours of Salai, Masak Lemak and nasi lemak are often enjoyed in simple eateries that focus on flavour rather than presentation. For hikers, Gunung Datuk offers a rewarding challenge, culminating in vistas of the surrounding countryside. Back in town, the timeless character of its streets, lined with older buildings, is complemented by the harmonious mix of cultures and communities that call Rembau home.



7

MERLIMAU, MELAKA

Although not as famous as the state’s namesake capital—which boasts a shared UNESCO World Heritage Site status with George Town—Merlimau hosts many historic sites in its own right. One is the Demang Abdul Ghani Gallery, while landmarks such as Makam Tun Teja and the Portuguese Well connect the town to broader historical narratives. The Merlimau Eco Park offers a refreshing escape into nature, while nearby fishing villages provide glimpses into a coastal life that has changed little over the years. Yet its vibrant living community continues to evolve, with new businesses and local entrepreneurs moving in.



8



9

CAPTIONS

6. Colourful shophouses in the Kuala Kubu Bahru town centre.
7. Merlimau's historic town offers a blend of rich local history and natural attractions.
8. Kuala Lipis was once the capital of Pahang. Seen here is Sungai Lipis.
9. Pulau Aur in Johor is one of the two furthest islands from mainland Peninsular Malaysia.
10. Aerial view of the Rembau township.



10

PULAU AUR, JOHOR

Far off the east coast of Johor lies Pulau Aur, one of the most remote islands in Peninsular Malaysia. But once you arrive, the first and most striking detail is the colour of its surrounding waters. Their mesmerising shades of blue are some of the most vibrant in the country. Pulau Aur is also a paradise for divers. Its reefs are alive with marine life, offering clear underwater scenes rivaling some of the best dive sites in the region. Despite its beauty, Pulau Aur remains a relatively unknown world of its own and requires effort getting to. There is a small kampong and a few modest resorts provide accommodation for visitors seeking solitude. A four-day journey is sufficient to explore this village, chat with locals and spend long days by the sea.

KUALA LIPIS, PAHANG

Rising beside a river that winds gently past its heart, Kuala Lipis gradually reveals its charms. A delightful market happens every Friday night, when certain streets are closed to vehicles, turning the town centre into a lively night market filled with food stalls, snacks and vendors. Families gather, friends meet and the town feels organically festive. Kuala Lipis is also known for being clean and well-kept, as becomes apparent when you walk its streets. The surrounding area offers plenty of opportunities for exploration, with Merapoh's limestone landscapes not too far away. Spending three days here allows you to experience both the town's relaxed character and the surrounding natural beauty.



11

KIJAL, TERENGGANU

Kijal is the kind of seaside town that reminds you how peaceful coastal life can be. Empty stretches of beach are punctuated by fishermen preparing their boats, or locals enjoying the sea breeze. Fishing is central to life here, and spending time around the jetties gives visitors a glimpse into the daily routines of local fisherfolk. Meanwhile, its *warung* serve freshly cooked seafood and other traditional dishes. Kijal is also famous for Lemang, which many locals consider among the best in the state. Three days here feels like a proper reset from the rush of contemporary life.

TOK BALI, KELANTAN

Driving north to the Kelantan coast, fishing boats and paddy fields define the landscape. Fittingly, Tok Bali is known for Ikan Bakar—often freshly grilled and boasting bold local flavours—best enjoyed while listening to the sounds of the nearby sea. It also offers excellent, Thai-influenced cuisine, reflecting longstanding cultural connections criss-crossing the border. Despite its charms, Tok Bali remains relatively quiet, but visitors often find themselves welcomed warmly by locals, who are happy to share stories about life in town.

SANDAKAN, SABAH

Sabah's "Little Hong Kong" offers an incredible combination of culture, history and nature. Its markets and restaurants serve dishes reflecting the town's multicultural heritage and coastal geography. Seafood plays a big role in local cuisine, the markets filled with an impressive variety of fresh catch. But Sandakan's greatest treasures are perhaps its surrounding natural heritage, such as the Rainforest Discovery Centre. Elevated walkways allow you to move along the forest canopy, offering a perspective of Borneo that few places can match. The Sepilok Orang Utan Rehabilitation Centre and Bornean Sun Bear Conservation Centre provide opportunities to witness the conservation efforts vital for protecting these charismatic animals. Five days feel like the minimum time needed to fully appreciate Sandakan life.



12

CAPTIONS

11. Kijal town lines the Kijal Beach that stretches eight kilometres.

12. Tok Bali is located within the Pasir Puteh district in Kelantan, and is a popular destination among locals.

13. From seafood to wildlife, Sandakan is a rugged town to explore.

14. Long Iman is a 45-minute boat ride from Mulu.



13

LONG IMAN, SARAWAK

Deep in the interior, near Mulu's famous caves, lies the small village of Long Iman. Getting here often involves a propeller-powered flight from Miri, followed by a journey through beautiful landscapes. Many visitors simply pass through, en route to Mulu, but a stay in Long Iman offers a unique cultural experience. You can stay in longhouses or homestays and learn directly about Penan culture and traditions from community members themselves. Their art, such as weaving and music, reflects a deep connection to the forests, whose rivers and waterfalls add to their beauty. Some boat rides along these waterways feel almost otherworldly. Similarly, spending at least five days here enables an appreciation of its natural and cultural rhythms.



14



ASH RAJA is the co-founder of Small Towns Malaysia, a social media project documenting the country's culture, history and hidden stories of towns through short films and photography.

Each town and village that we passed through is unique, even if some themes recur: such as food and friendliness, natural and cultural heritage. But we were particularly struck by the increasingly rare, slow-paced life offered in these places. Conversations linger longer, sunsets feel more meaningful and everyday life unfolds in a way that reminds us to take time. Perhaps there lies the real magic of small towns: the most profound journeys are not necessarily to the furthest or most remote locations, but those which change our experience of time altogether.



TREASURES OF THE NORTH:

EXPLORING KAKI BUKIT & WANG KELIAN IN PERLIS

BY
PETER
ONG

I HAVE A fascination with maps. As a child, I was always intrigued by their furthestmost points, as well as shifting folds of terrain and demarcations of borders. When the opportunity came for me to explore the northernmost point of Peninsular Malaysia in 2020 to search out the elusive *beruk kento*—or the stump-tailed macaque, whose Malaysian population is only restricted to the ancient Nakawan Range—I knew that I had to seize this chance.

And it led me to discover the wonders of Wang Kelian and Kaki Bukit.

Located in Perlis, tucked against the border with Thailand, these quiet settlements are steeped in geological mystery, rich biodiversity and human stories spanning millennia. They might not be on every traveller's radar, but for those with a passion for nature and heritage, this region offers a singular blend of natural landscapes and human legacies. From lush limestone hills and dense forests, to prehistoric caves and lively *kampung* life, this corner of Malaysia is an evocative reminder that the world's edges can be as rich and captivating as its centres.



2

A GEOLOGICAL BACKBONE AND BIODIVERSITY HOTSPOT [1]

Stretching some 36km between Malaysia and Thailand's Satun Province, the stunning Nakawan Range is a karst limestone ridge forming one of the oldest geological features in the region. It includes the ancient Setul Formation, estimated to be roughly 480–500 million years old, making this range older than the rainforests that now cloak its slopes. The Range is the keystone of an ecosystem of extraordinary complexity. Its limestone bedrock has weathered into towering hills, deep caves and hidden valleys, creating microhabitats that support vast biodiversity. The porous rock also acts as a natural water filter, feeding springs and sustaining underground water tables that nurture the surrounding forests.

These dense, semi-deciduous forests fall within the Perlis State Park, which straddles the range and encompasses both the Mata Ayer and Wang Mu forest reserves. They are one of Malaysia's ecological treasures, hosting hundreds of species of flora and fauna, including many that are rare or seldom seen elsewhere in the peninsula. Birdwatchers will be especially rewarded by the range's ornithological richness. More than 170 species of birds have been recorded around Wang Kelian alone, including iconic residents like the white-crowned hornbill and dusky eagle-owl (Malaysia's largest owl species). Primates too find refuge here. Perlis is arguably the densest area in Malaysia for non-human primates, with seven species living within the Nakawan Range alone. They include not just the *beruk kentoi*, but also long-tailed macaques, endangered lar gibbons, Sunda slow lorises and Robinson's banded langurs, which make their homes

among the limestone outcrops and vine-tangled canopies of this forested world. These animals, with their varied behaviours and elusive habits, are treasures for wildlife lovers and researchers alike.

FROM KAKI BUKIT TO WANG KELIAN

Literally translating to “foothill” in Bahasa Malaysia, Kaki Bukit is a small town of roughly 1,000 people, situated about 26km north of the state capital, Kangar. Its location at the base of the Nakawan Range is no accident. At the turn of the twentieth century, many came to these foothills, which were abundant with a prized commodity: tin ore. At the height of its prosperity, Kaki Bukit recorded over 5,000



3

inhabitants, mostly tin miners from China who were drawn to the promise of wealth beneath these limestone walls. However, with the outbreak of the Second World War and a later fall in tin prices, Kaki Bukit has since receded into the background. Its reputation as a “Little Shanghai” in the 1920s has faded, leaving the village almost frozen in time.

Today, Kaki Bukit, with its wooden shophouses, friendly greetings from locals and markets bustling with local produce, greets visitors with a laidback aura. The rhythms of life are calm, where neighbourhood stalls offer local favourites like Kaya Puffs, Som Tam and Lo Mai Gai. A morning stroll towards the looming limestone



4

cliffs feels like stepping into a living picture postcard, painted not by human hands, but sculpted by millions of years of natural history. Just a short distance from Kaki Bukit lies Gua Kelam, literally the “Cave of Darkness”, which plunges travellers deep into the limestone heart of the Nakawan Range. Formed by subterranean streams carving through limestone, this long cavern offers a vivid illustration of both geological time and human history, sited at the intersection of nature, industry and migration.

Already known as a natural tunnel by generations of locals, the cave gained wider prominence in the early-twentieth century when tin-mining became a foundational industry in northern Malaya. An English engineer constructed a wooden suspension bridge through the heart of the cave to transport tin ore more easily from deep mines to nearby towns. Over time, the path transformed from a working thoroughfare into a tourist attraction adorned with lighting and interpretive signage. Remnants of tin mining, such as abandoned tools, rusted



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rails and old graffiti, lie alongside ancient geological formations, creating a tapestry of natural and cultural history.

A winding road from Kaki Bukit leads northwards into the forested hills, eventually reaching Wang Kelian, the Peninsula's northernmost settlement before the border with Thailand. This village captures the rustic charm of rural life while opening upon landscapes of remarkable biodiversity. Wang Kelian's heritage spans centuries of daily life amidst rugged terrain, where trade routes once snaked along jungle paths, villagers traversed difficult terrain to reach nearby markets and cultural exchange with neighbouring Siamese communities shaped the local language, cuisine and shared traditions. Today, the village serves as a gateway to both the Nakawan Range's wild heart and the Denai Warisan (Heritage Trail), a community-led trail winding through forest reserves and connecting heritage sites between Wang Kelian and Kaki Bukit. Designed for hikers and nature enthusiasts alike, it is a living celebration of local stewardship, indigenous stories and ecological wonder.



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ARCHAEOLOGICAL ECHOES FROM BENEATH THE FOREST FLOOR

Although much of Perlis' archaeological heritage remains beneath the forest litter and overgrown trails, echoes of ancient life resonate in every limestone cavern and river bend, inspiring wonder and research among scholars and visitors alike. Archaeological surveys have recovered tools, stone adzes and other prehistoric implements from nearby limestone regions, providing evidence of a human presence dating back thousands of years. Elsewhere in the state, sites like the Kota Kayang Museum, located about an hour away in Kuala Perlis, house artifacts that trace human settlement from the Neolithic era through later historic periods. Their collections include stone tools and archaeological findings that speak to early habitation and the long interaction between humans and their varied regional ecosystems.

While natural history often takes centre-stage here, the human story beneath the trees runs deep. Once a complete mystery

to me, this area, with its hills and valleys, has become extremely dear to my heart. Every trip back has led to priceless experiences. Marvelling at a truly dark sky, where the constellations and Milky Way beamed down upon us. Spotting the prehistoric *bogak*, an ancient plant that has remained unchanged for millions of years, clinging to limestone cliffs. Hearing the unmistakable singing of lar gibbons echoing off forested cliffs. Such experiences would also have been shared by the early human inhabitants of this landscape. All these, and so much more, are merely the tip of the iceberg of reasons why every Malaysian should consider making a trip up north.



8

CAPTIONS

1. Kaki Bukit, Perlis.
2. Wang Kelian sunrise view.
3. The Wang Kelian Viewpoint sits along a winding hill road at Kaki Bukit.
4. Boardwalk in Gua Kelam.
5. Dusky Eagle Owls.
6. Slow Loris.
7. Stump-tailed Macaque.
8. Many homes and shophouses in Kaki Bukit feature small doors.



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WHAT CHANGED IN 1996?



1

A PERSONAL HISTORY OF KULIM AND PERMATANG PAUH

BY NURUL NATASHA AMIR

DRIVING DOWN THE Butterworth–Kulim Expressway is a journey through a divide in history. On one side is Permatang Pauh in mainland Penang, a place that chose to build its identity around paddy ridges and university halls. On the other is Kulim in Kedah, a town that basically paved over its old agricultural estates to build a high-tech future. It is wild how spending my childhood in both small towns has helped me realise how similar, yet entirely different, these places are. Every time I return there, I experience the feeling of *balik kampung*, even if I did not exactly grow up in kampongs. In fact, visiting my grandparents in Kulim as a kid in the 2000s, the town felt enormous. So too did Permatang Pauh, where I lived then (and which is now my weekend home).

These small towns have experienced some major changes which started with blueprints drawn up in the 1990s, before I was born. By the time I was old enough to be staring out the car window, I was already looking at two towns that already led divergent lives, each leaning towards their respective visions of the future.

FROM JUNGLE HIDEOUT TO INDUSTRIAL TOWN

It is funny to think of Kulim as an industrial town now: it actually started as a jungle hideout. In the 1850s, tin miners fled the brutal triad wars in Perak, heading towards Penang. However, their plans fell short after they realised that the island was a busy British port at the time, and so they decided to settle down in Kulim. So long as there was no interference from the triads, the dense forests of southern Kedah were their sanctuary. With promising discoveries of tin ore in Kulim, it became a frontier town in every sense of the word. A civil war, the “Perang Kulim”, broke out among the chiefs of the tin mines in 1888, which actually started as a fight over the town’s most beautiful Chinese woman. This event’s other name, “Perang Nyonya Cantik”, tells you all you need to know.

By the 2000s, Kulim was already well-established and only getting busier. It had already experienced its first real industrial change in the 1980s, with the rise of the Kulim Industrial Area, where factories were established to manufacture machinery and metal parts. Industry was part of the personal stories of many residents: my mother, aged only 18, got her first real job at one of these factories. The opening of the Kulim Hi-Tech Park (KHTP) in 1996 brought a second wave of change. According to Kulim-born Yunus Yusof, the KHTP site was originally an oil palm plantation before it was gazetted as an industrial zone. Designed and built as a standalone township separate from the old town centre, complete with its own public amenities, it was imagined as a key component of Malaysia’s Vision 2020.

With its establishment, Kulim became a major commercial player in the north. It also made possible new ideas about what the good life looked like. For my mother, the houses in KHTP were always the nicer-looking homes in town. At that time, she assumed that the only people who could afford staying there were the chief executive officers and directors of the factories. Even now, Kulim is still expanding. Yunus mentioned how the town is bringing new satellite zones into the northern region, such as Kuala Ketil, which is now developing faster to cater to demands from KHTP. “A new Kulim International Airport is also being planned to boost the town’s economic growth,” he added.

AFTER THE STUDENTS ARRIVED

Before it became a student town, catering to students from Universiti Teknologi MARA’s (UiTM) Permatang Pauh campus and Politeknik Seberang Perai, Permatang Pauh was known for its strong local community and traditional Malay kampong atmosphere. Villagers mostly engaged in paddy farming and small-scale businesses, in a region historically known for its agricultural activity. A *permatang* is a small road that is slightly raised above its surroundings, and is commonly found in paddy fields. *Pauh* (or *mangga telur*), meanwhile, is a mango-like fruit, but slightly smaller in size. The town’s name therefore reflects its agricultural past.

1996 also marked a rupture for Permatang Pauh. A modest UiTM campus was established here, with 230 students enrolled in its first intake. Two years later, Politeknik Permatang Pauh (later Politeknik Seberang Perai) was established. Both campuses have since contributed to the town’s growth, creating an educational hub while allowing local cultural heritage to thrive.



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CAPTIONS

1. Kulim Hi-Tech Park. Image credit: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:Kulim_Hi-Tech_Park#/media/File:Kulimtechpark.jpg
2. The UiTM campus.

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NURUL NATASHA

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These include its iconic *rumah kampung* (kampong house) architecture and communal village life.

With the growing student population demanding more services, Permatang Pauh’s trajectory began looking like other once-quiet places across Malaysia that have since become university towns, such as Kampar and Semenyih. These include an expanding number of *warung*, printing shops and motorcycle repair services. When I was much younger, the most obvious sign of growth was traffic. My house was quite close to the Politeknik, and so the road leading home was always notoriously jammed with cars and motorcycles every time the semester commenced.

Today, I have noticed a string of hipster cafés opening in town, such as Puff Coffee, Always Sarah Café and Makan Pagi. We all know that Gen Z youths (myself included) love spending time in cafés, giving students and other patrons more places to hang out with their friends, without having to leave town for leisure. New condominiums, apartments and even neighbourhoods have started emerging on the local housing market. Students now mostly gravitate towards renting units in newer apartments like Pauh Armani or PRIMA Pauh Permai, cutting down their journeys to Permatang Pauh’s twin campuses to around two kilometres. Seeing their sleek profiles overlooking the same green paddy ridges that have been here for generations is jarring, but they do show that Permatang Pauh is moving beyond its reputation as a quiet academic suburb, and is becoming a more polished residential centre.

What does the future hold for the two towns, whose paths diverged three decades ago? With the growth of the higher education and industrial sectors, perhaps the route between Kulim and Permatang Pauh will be seeing a lot more traffic, cutting a deeper divide between them.



SINIWAN

A DEFIANT TOWN THAT TIME WON'T FORGET

BY LIANI MK

MOST TOWNS WITH a story to tell tend to announce themselves prominently. Although there is a decorative wooden archway that welcomes you to Siniawan, a heritage town in Sarawak, this place is not trying hard to impress. Nor is anybody really expecting you to be here, especially during a hot afternoon. For anyone who grew up in George Town before overdevelopment caught up with it, this old-town feeling is familiar. The difference is that Siniawan has no crowds, trishaw uncles or long coffee queues to disrupt your daily caffeine fix.

Two rows of unpainted timber shophouses flank its main street, while a serpentine, milky brown river—Sungai Sarawak Kanan—flows behind the town. Several shops bear Hakka names and there are some local shrines, including one dedicated to a local man, Liu Shan Bang. Siniawan initially appears unassuming, being small enough to walk through in under an hour, but its frontier history of sovereignty, resistance and eventual revitalisation goes back to the 1820s, intertwined with the rise and fall of the nearby settlement of “Maw San”.

WAWAN



2

A GOLD RUSH AND NEWFOUND SOVEREIGNTY

The old town lies 25km from Kuching city, along the upper reaches of the meandering Sungai Sarawak Kanan in Bau District. Two centuries ago, Liu Shan Bang led a group of fellow Hakka migrants from Guangdong away from Sambas, in Dutch-controlled West Kalimantan, to this part of Borneo.^[1] Having endured Dutch mistreatment and internal rivalry, they crossed the border and discovered rich deposits of gold and antimony in the hills of Bau. The Hakkas called their settlement “Maw San”, named for a nearby hat-shaped hill. At what is now colloquially known as the old Bau town, they established the “Twelve Kongsis”, a self-governing mining corporation, while Siniawan (新牙湾, “*Sin Ya Wan*”, Hakka for “new jetty”) emerged as Maw San’s river bazaar, being the natural supply point between the gold mines and the coast.^[2]

At its height, Maw San was effectively sovereign, boasting its own flag and currency. It had a diverse population of Bidayuh villagers from neighbouring areas and hills, Malay traders who moved goods downriver to Kuching and other Chinese merchants who built its commercial heart. While visiting Siniawan market in 1851, Spenser St John, later appointed the British consul-general in Brunei, was struck by the easy mixing of communities whom he met there.

Siniawan also inadvertently became part of the intellectual movements in modern colonial science. In 1855, the naturalist Alfred Russel Wallace spent time at a bungalow on nearby Bung Muan, or Mount Serembu. Here, he made observations of Bornean species that later contributed towards his formulation of the principles of natural selection independently of Charles Darwin.

RESISTANCE AT A COST

This era of autonomy ended when colonial forces arrived with a tax bill and other controls. James Brooke, having been appointed by the Sultan of Brunei as the first “White Rajah” of Sarawak in 1841, imposed head taxes on its miners, restricted exports of gold and antimony, and levied a tax upon

the *kongsis* to crack down on independent supply chains.^[3] For the Twelve Kongsis, this was not regulation, but a systematic dismantling of everything they had built in Bau.

Liu Shan Bang thus organised an uprising against the Brooke regime in 1857. On the night of 18 February, around 600 Hakka miners paddled downriver, passed through Siniawan, and eventually seized Brooke’s residence in Kuching. They held the town for three days, while Brooke only escaped by swimming across the river in the darkness. When retribution came, it was devastating for the community. Charles Brooke, the Rajah’s nephew, ordered the Iban and Malay forces under his command to pursue the retreating miners back to Bau, killing an estimated 3,000 to 3,500 people, combatants and civilians alike. These figures include families who sought shelter in the caves above the settlement.

Liu was shot dead at Jugan Hill, just outside Siniawan, on 24 February. Corpses were left unburied following the fighting, and the smell of death clung to the landscape for weeks. It said that the names of Bau (meaning “smelly”) and nearby Buso (meaning “rotten”) carry the memory of the aftermath to this day. Colonial accounts framed the event as the suppression of a rebellion. But the Sarawak government offered a different framing in 1993, when



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Liu was formally recognised as a freedom fighter and martyr at the Heroes' Monument in the Kuching Museum Garden. His spirit, in the local understanding, never left.

Liu has also been memorialised as the deity "Shin" or "Sin Wong" at the Shan Teck Temple on the edge of Siniawan. Every Qing Ming, the Chinese ancestral memorial festival, his shrine at Jugan Hill draws descendants who recognise him as the man who refused to be stripped of what he built.

THE STREET THAT ALMOST DISAPPEARED

Siniawan's main street was mostly built in the 1910s, during a second wave of Hakka settlement. Charles Brooke, now the Rajah, had reopened the Bau mines and recruited new workers from Guangdong. The architectural style of its shophouses is Javanese, rather than the Straits Eclectic vernacular familiar to Penang eyes. This was a practical decision: Javanese carpenters were easily available via Singapore and more

tide floodwaters reached the rooftops of the shophouses. The label of "ghost town" was, by then, not too far from the mark.

It was then that Siniawan's people did what their forebears had done: they organised. The Siniawan Heritage Conservation Committee was formed in 2009 to restore the town, working alongside the Sarawak Heritage Society. Restoration was led not by government agencies, but by the descendants of the original settlers themselves.

In 2010, the town's business community tried something different by organising a weekend food street. What began as a local experiment became a regular popular fixture. Returning here on Friday to Sunday evenings, the quiet town is barely the same place. Music fills the streets, where under the glow of red lanterns, Char Siu, glutinous rice steamed inside pitcher plants, Wild Boar Rendang and *paku* ferns with sambal are on the menu, served with sugarcane juice cold enough to staunch the heat. Meanwhile, the first Pesta Siniawan



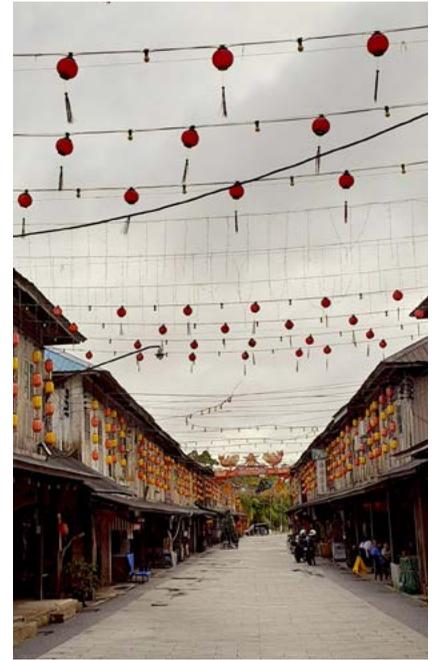
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affordable to hire. The buildings were never painted, and they remain that way. This stripped-down approach to heritage might surprise anyone accustomed to watching George Town's shophouses receiving carefully curated coats of "heritage" colour.

In the 1920s, Siniawan's lively main street ran the full range of amenities expected of a frontier mining town: a hotel, Chinese theatre, casino, brothel and opium den. But when the Japanese occupied the town from 1942 to 1945, that era came to a halt, and the town never quite recovered its footing. After the Second World War, political turbulence, the slow departure of younger generations to Kuching and the eventual exhaustion of the Bau mines drained life from the town. In 2008, king

in 2016 drew over 18,000 people, and the Country Music Festival pulls in a crowd of around 20,000 visitors a year.^[4] More recently, during the Lunar New Year celebrations, around RM100,000 was spent on decorations.^[5]

For Penang readers, a visit here recalls familiar elements: the smattering of Hakka that one hears in passing conversations, the pre-war timber shophouses, the community that rebuilt itself on its own terms and the tourism rebranding exercise. But Siniawan's charm is unique and hard to come by elsewhere; it exists for the people who live here, if not also for those passing through. There is much to learn from and to celebrate about its heritage. Visit now, while the town is still entirely theirs.



5

CAPTIONS

1. (Cover spread) The arch marking the entrance to the Siniawan Night Market.
2. Entrance gate to the historic Siniawan Heritage Town.
3. Morning scene at Siniawan.
4. Siniawan River.
5. The Main Street is always decked with many Chinese lanterns.

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THE TOWN & THE GOWN

**UNIVERSITIES
AND THE SHAPING
OF LOCAL GROWTH**

BY NADHIRAH ZAINUDDIN

CAPTION

1. "Tun Dr. Ling Liong Sik Hall (UTAR's Grand Hall)" by Jason Thien, CC BY 2.0.
<https://www.flickr.com/photos/thienzieyung/43612996915>



1

IN MANY OF Malaysia's small towns, economic change rarely arrives as a rupture. More often than not, it takes shape gradually, clustering around a single institution... like a university. But just how much can a university change a town? In contrast to top-down developments such as Bangi in Selangor, where urbanisation was planned around Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia and new industrial zones, what does a more organic version of this process look like? In places like Kampar and Semenyih, located in Perak and Selangor, respectively, these transformations can be quite profound.

FROM PERIPHERIES TO UNIVERSITY TOWNS

Kampar was once a bustling tin-mining hub. But when the global tin market collapsed in the late-20th century, so too did the town's economic fortunes. The completion of the North-South Expressway accelerated this slowdown. Travellers began bypassing Kampar in favour of quicker routes, exiting at Gopeng or Tapah instead. With reduced traffic came a decline in commercial activity, and many younger residents left in search of better opportunities in large cities such as Kuala Lumpur and Ipoh.

Over time, Kampar became known for its ageing charm, rows of pre-war shophouses, traditional coffee shops, goldsmiths and long-established retailers. But from 2002 onwards, the establishment of Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman (UTAR) transformed the town's socioeconomic landscape. This educational initiative led to spill-over effects, where student hostels emerged, eateries multiplied and new commercial activity mushroomed, albeit clustered around the campus at the northern outskirts of town. Kampar slowly repositioned itself: no longer merely a former mining town, it was now an emerging university hub.

Meanwhile, Semenyih, once a quiet rural enclave surrounded by plantations, has since been incorporated into the Greater Kuala Lumpur/Klang Valley (GKL/KV) metropolitan region. Its proximity to other urban centres such as Kajang, Bangi and Putrajaya—each of these boasting their own higher education institutions and significant numbers of students—means that Semenyih is strategically positioned within a rapidly expanding economic zone surrounding the federal capital.

The establishment of an international campus of the University of Nottingham in 2000 was part of this transformation. Combined with relatively affordable housing and improving infrastructure, Semenyih began attracting not just a new demographic of students and young families, but also various education-related services and new commercial centres. What was once a peripheral settlement gradually developed into a more vibrant one.

POPULATION INJECTION AND BUSINESS EXPANSION

In both towns, the most immediate impact of their respective universities' establishment was demographic change. The towns gained not merely a steady and predictable population base—something that many small towns elsewhere struggle to sustain—but experienced actual growth. Semenyih's population expanded dramatically within a decade, rising from just over 15,000 people in 1991 to more than 45,000 in 2000. By the mid-2020s, estimates suggest that the population is approaching 90,000 people. Kampar has also experienced a smaller, but still steady, population increase following UTAR's establishment. In both towns, streets

that were once quiet became busier and consumption patterns shifted. Houses were transformed into student hostels, and shop lots were renovated into cafés and laundrettes. Rental yields in Kampar's student areas often notched 5–8% increases, while neighbourhoods such as Taman Tasik Semenyih saw properties being adapted to accommodate growing student demand.

These enrolment figures gradually translated into everyday economic movement. Streets that were once quiet became busier and consumption patterns shifted. After all, universities generate a daily demand for food, printing services, convenience stores, transportation and cultural life. In Kampar, there has been a steady growth of student-oriented businesses that now form a modest but meaningful component of the local economy. In short, universities create stable—and sometimes growing—demand, which lowers business risks and encourages small-scale entrepreneurship.

In Semenyih, a conversation with a local restaurant owner illustrated this shift vividly. The restaurant, which opened in 2005, began modestly, but its growth would eventually parallel the town's general development. In its early days, few students were aware of the restaurant's existence and business was slow. A turning point came when the restaurant introduced a 30% discount for students if they could show their matriculation cards, thus encouraging repeat visits and customer loyalty. "Year by year, more students came, and our sales steadily increased," the owner shared.

HUMAN CAPITAL AND LONG-TERM SPILL-OVERS

Universities also accelerate talent growth, particularly once graduates enter the workforce and skills begin to accumulate within the region. The emerging human capital from UTAR can potentially spur the growth of the recently established Silver Valley Technology Park, located in neighbouring Kinta District. The Park aims to become a hub for high-technology industries, including artificial intelligence, robotics and advanced manufacturing. Its relative proximity to Kampar suggests opportunities to potentially leverage the presence of educated workers and, by extension, attract high-value regional investment.

A model for future growth can be taken from the Semenyih Integrated Industrial Park, where industrial expansion aligns with the town's rising skilled population and strategic location in the GKL/KV region. Access to graduates, infrastructure and regional networks strengthens its appeal to manufacturers and technology-oriented firms. After all, investors are not drawn to buildings alone. They are drawn to ecosystems: networks where talent is available, recruitment risks are lower and innovation feels possible.

The experiences of Kampar and Semenyih suggest that universities do not simply occupy space within towns, but fundamentally reshape them altogether. Through population growth, business establishment and the gradual accumulation of talent, such towns—whether newly established or finding ways to regenerate—can find new economic directions. Small- and medium-sized enterprises benefit from the presence of higher-skilled workers and a proximity to educational centres, while the towns generally develop a diversified and resilient economic base. In quiet but measurable ways, higher education is more than instruction, becoming the infrastructure for local transformation.



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THE GEOGRAPHY OF AMBITION



BUILDING MEANINGFUL WORK BEYOND THE CITY

BY AQ'ILLA LATIF

WHEN WE TALK about the pursuit of ambition, cities—from KL to George Town and Singapore—tend to dominate the conversation. The result is a “brain drain”, where talent departs smaller towns for the opportunities concentrated in urban centres. The success story is a familiar one: to grow and succeed, you need to leave home. But the reverse experiences of four young people complicate this narrative, whose moves away from cities were shaped by work and familial circumstances, whether deliberate or unexpected. In each case, their newfound careers in villages and small towns now offer them space to grow differently, quietly and intentionally.

CAPTIONS

1. Diyana Germani in Kampung Basung, Hulu Terengganu with her colleague (right) and her neighbours (far right).
2. Stu in the café that he opened at Cherating Beach. He named it Which Corner Shop.
3. Thanesh Kichi's handmade ceramics.
4. Diyana with her dogs. The brown dog is part of the K9 unit and the white dog is an adopted *kampung dog*.
- 5 & 6. Sherra in her previous line of work; running her fashion brand, Sekuntom.
7. Thanesh in his studio, Seramitha Studio in Balik Pulau.
8. Kenduri Town food court set up by Sheera.



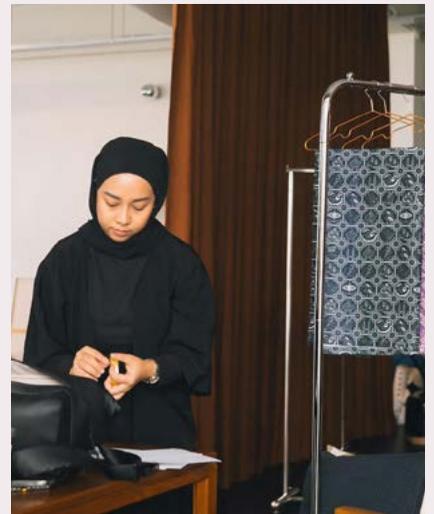
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KAMPUNG BASUNG, TERENGGANU

Diyana Germani moved to Kampung Basung when she was 28. Now in her early 30s, she works in wildcat conservation alongside a K9 unit. Her days are spent in the forest with Phiri, her animal partner, moving through dense undergrowth, up steep hills, along rivers and elephant trails. She laughed upon recalling the messiness of these treks. “Elephant dung, leech bites, more mud than I imagined—but it’s part of the process. You plan, adapt and move forward. Every day teaches [you] something new.”

She had previously spent years in the media industry after moving to Penang at 19. “It was fast-paced and demanding,” she recalled, “but I realised it wasn’t where I saw myself [in the] long-term.” Meanwhile, her connection to animals had always been part of her life. “My first dog came home when I was 11,” she recalled. “Over time, we had five dogs and three cats. All rescued. Caring for them wasn’t optional, it shaped my days and taught me responsibility.” When an opening for her current role appeared, life in a small village was not one

of the draws. Moving here meant that the nearest supermarket and veterinary clinic would be an hour away, with her family several hours distant. “There are moments you feel the distance,” she admitted. “But I’ve never really felt alone. Phiri keeps me company, and my colleagues share the same purpose. Being here gives me clarity.”

On moving to Kampung Basung, she reflected: “Decisions were never framed around leaving or staying in a particular place, but around where I felt I could do meaningful work. Only in hindsight do people interpret it as stepping away from opportunities. For me, the location followed the work, not the other way around.”

CHERATING, PAHANG

Shafiq, also known as Stu, found his own rhythm in Cherating. A trained engineer, he left his full-time job to explore the creative industry, specifically in modelling and acting. While freelancing, he started part-time work as a barista, moved up to managing a café, and now runs his own outfit, Which Corner Shop, near the beach.

His reason for moving? “Mainly because of surfing,” he said, “it has been my dream to have a small café by the beach.” He described the town simply as follows. “The place is a gem. Everyone lives a slow life.” Mornings begin with the sea breeze and coffee, afternoons with customers hanging out at the café and evenings with the melody of waves in the background. On leaving the city, he explained that, “I see it a bit differently. I feel like wherever you are, there’s always an opportunity. It’s more about how you choose to grow and contribute, rather than where you go.” The trade-offs were a greater distance from family and friends, but the town offers the pace and relationships he had hoped for. “People return. They linger. Growth isn’t always loud: sometimes it’s steady and quiet.”

I think about the patience involved in brewing a good cup of tea, by letting its flavours develop slowly. So too is Stu’s life in Cherating similarly measured, and tasted through small, meaningful moments.

BALING, KEDAH

Sheera, 33, had been running her fashion brand, Sekuntom, from Kuala Lumpur, but after her brother passed away, her priorities shifted. “I wanted to be closer to my parents [in Baling],” she said. “Family felt more urgent than anything else.”

She paused work on her brand, and started a local food court called Kenduri Town. “At first, it felt very different from fashion,” she admitted. “But managing people, building a space, it’s still about creating experiences.” This involved adapting to the market’s bustle, the aroma of local dishes and the way that

neighbours stop to chat. “It’s not glamorous, and it doesn’t try to be. But it feels honest and for where I am in life, it feels right,” she added.

The trade-offs were noticeable: less visibility, a slower pace and smaller market. But the move offered steadiness and connection she could not have found in the city. “I understand why people might see it [the move] as a loss. But my creativity, skills and experience didn’t disappear. They simply took a different form. Growth doesn’t always mean moving upwards or outwards; sometimes it means moving inwards and closer to home.”



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**BALIK PULAU, PENANG**

In Balik Pulau, ceramics artist Thanesh Kichi also found space to grow. Originally from Klang, he set up Seramitha Studio with support from Kraftangan Malaysia. “People worry when you move to a smaller town,” he said. “They think your opportunities will shrink.” He had those worries too at first, particularly around income, exposure and sustainability. But over time, the town’s calm pace became part of his artistic practice. “It allowed me to focus, to refine my work,” he said. The local community values his handmade ceramics, and costs are now more manageable.

From my visits to Balik Pulau, I remember soft sunlight over the hills, the scent of earth and sea mingling as well as small streets lined with fruit trees. Thanesh’s daily routine includes kneading clay, shaping forms and walking the surrounding countryside for inspiration, engaging in a quiet cycle of creation. Watching Thanesh work in this environment, it is clear how space and environment shape his craft and days. For him, leaving “depends very much on individual interests and personal goals. I chose to live far from my family because of my ambition to become a full-time artist. There were sacrifices, yes, but sometimes you have to let go of comforts to grow and pursue what truly matters.”

Having heard these four stories, it is clear that not every move to quieter environs is planned, and not every reset is a choice. Sometimes, life nudges people into change, with varying, and sometimes positive, results. Talent and opportunity do not automatically disappear when someone steps away from a city. They adjust to novel surroundings and find a new home.

The geography of ambition is not limited to skyscrapers or crowded streets. It can be charted in forests, cafés by the sea, family-run spaces and quiet studios alike, unfolding without spectacle while becoming deeply rooted.

**AQ'ILLA LATIF**

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DEEP TIME & NEW FUTURES

BY
MATT BENSON
&
RAJA NUR
HANANI RAJA
ABD RAHMAN

IN Lenggong, Perak



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AS YOU TURN off the North–South Expressway at Kuala Kangsar, the change in landscape is immediate. Your line of sight opens upon a broad valley framed by forested hills, its contours shaped by the steady flow of the Perak River. There is a palpable sense of age here, in a place that has had a far longer human presence than most of Malaysia.

Flowing from the Perak–Kelantan–Thailand border to the Strait of Malacca, the Perak River has carved out a lush valley over two million years. It has sustained settlements along its banks across deep time, accumulating layers of geological and human history that we are only now beginning to fully understand.

Some 40km upstream from Kuala Kangsar lies Lenggong itself, a modest town in the eponymous valley with an estimated population of 5,000 residents. Many Malaysians know Lenggong as the site where the Perak Man—an almost complete 11,000-year-old human skeleton—was found in a cave by Universiti Sains Malaysia researchers in 1991. But the complete Lenggong story stretches much further back, anchoring one of Southeast Asia’s most significant archaeological landscapes.

Scattered across the Lenggong Valley are stone tool assemblages and geological deposits indicating human, and possibly pre-human, activity spanning at least 200,000 years. These stratified layers of occupation led to the valley’s recognition as a UNESCO World Heritage Site, cited for its exceptional record of continuous human settlement.^[1] One extraordinary find is a stone axe preserved within meteoritic impact debris, suggesting a human presence dating as far back as 1.85 million years. This discovery alone would make Lenggong one of the most significant human archaeological sites outside Africa.

FROM ARCHAEOLOGY TO LIVING CULTURE

For all its significance, Lenggong has long remained under-visited and under-interpreted, being better known to scientists than the broader public. But in recent years, this perception has begun changing. A quiet but coordinated effort spanning government agencies, local communities and the private sector is repositioning Lenggong as both a heritage destination and thriving rural economy.

Central to this shift is a growing recognition that heritage, if properly managed, is not something to be merely preserved, but also treated as an economic asset. The challenge lies in unlocking potential value without compromising the integrity of a place or its unique local culture. The recently refurbished Lenggong Archaeological Gallery plays a key role in this effort, where the Perak Man takes centre-stage. More than a repository of artefacts, it reframes the valley within a coherent narrative, by making its deep (pre)history legible to visitors. Complemented by improved access to cave sites, geological interpretations and curated visitor experiences, Lenggong’s appeal extends beyond a single enclosed attraction.

Alongside these physical investments is a parallel focus on programme-led development. Think City, in collaboration with the Lenggong District Council and local stakeholders, has been implementing a culture-based regeneration programme as part of a broader “Archaeotourism Network” across northern Malaysia, with support from the Ministry of Finance and Yayasan Hasanah. This place-based development model transcends a focus on encouraging visits alone. Rather than imposing top-down tourism models, the programme

works with local communities to identify and develop assets, whether cultural, ecological or economic, that can support sustainable livelihoods. These include capacity-building and small enterprise development efforts for locals, while gradually layering visitor experiences.

Critically, this strategy links conservation with economic relevance. By demonstrating tangible value through increased visitation figures, local business activity and job-creation, a stronger case for the long-term protection of heritage assets is made. The result is a more tangible sense of culture, which is a critical ingredient in creating liveable and “sticky places” capable of attracting investment and talent. Consequently, there is greater community cohesion, which builds trust and enhances pride in place.

Early signs of a more diversified and resilient local economy are encouraging. Post-pandemic visitor numbers have rebounded, and there is growing interest from the private sector in supporting local tourism, judging from nascent investments in homestays and small-scale tourism products.

REFRAMING SMALL TOWNS IN THE CONTEXT OF REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Lenggong’s evolution also speaks to a broader policy question: what role can small towns play in achieving rural and regional development objectives? Places like Lenggong are often seen as peripheral, economically marginal and dependent on the existence of larger urban centres. But the Lenggong Valley suggests an alternative framing. Its value lies not in competing with cities, but by offering fundamentally different values: depth of history, environmental quality and cultural continuity.

The Lenggonng model shows how a shift in perspective has tangible developmental outcomes. Lenggonng can be seen less as an isolated town, but more of a node within a wider network of settlements shaped by geography, heritage and movement. Being positioned within the Perak River corridor and easily reachable from major transport routes, it can potentially serve as a niche destination in a broader regional economy that complements urban growth centres. This perspective aligns with emerging urban planning approaches within and without Malaysia, which increasingly emphasise polycentric development and the strategic activation of



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secondary towns. By leveraging distinctive local assets, in a broad sense, these towns can contribute to more balanced and inclusive regional growth.

For Lenggonng, the task ahead is to continue building this model carefully. Growth must be calibrated to avoid over-commercialisation, thus ensuring that increased visitation does not erode the very qualities that make the valley unique. This effort requires ongoing coordination between government, community and private actors, as well as a commitment to evidence-based planning. More importantly, the role of culture and heritage needs to be demonstrated in tangible ways to local communities.



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A VALLEY TO VISIT

Ultimately, Lenggonng’s appeal lies in its ability to be experienced, and not just observed.

For day-trippers, it offers an accessible escape to a quieter Malaysia. For hikers, cyclists and kayakers, the valley provides both terrain and tranquillity. For those drawn to natural heritage, it offers a rare opportunity to engage with an archaeologically and ecologically rich landscape. And everyone can enjoy Lenggonng’s unique cuisine. Flavoured by its environs, river fish dishes seasoned with forest produce (such as Ikan Pekasam) taste delightful. So too is Gulai Kemahang, a traditional curry made from wild yam.

Perhaps the most compelling experience, however, is the simplest. It is the opportunity to follow the contours of its river, and to recognise that other people have travelled, settled in and adapted to the same space for millennia. As you soak up the atmosphere, it is not hard to understand why.



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CAPTIONS

1. (Cover page)
The Perak River has sustained human settlement for millennia.
2. An aerial view of Lenggonng.
3. “Jejak Warisan”, a capacity-building programme tailored to raise awareness and capacity among Lenggonng’s local community.
4. A traditional Chinese medicine establishment in Lenggonng Town.
5. Fishing at Kampong Beng.
6. A lunch spread featuring local ingredients

ENDNOTE

1. ICOMOS. (2012). “Lenggonng Valley (Malaysia) No 1396.” <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1396/documents/>



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TAIPIING BEYOND THE LAKE GARDENS

BY SHERYL TEOH

IN THE COLLECTIVE imagination of Malaysians, Taiping is often reduced to a single, serene tableau: the Lake Gardens. Here, rain trees spread themselves with indolent authority over still, reflective waters, their great, shaggy canopies collapsing inwards at dusk like green lungs exhaling. To the casual observer, it is a placid, sleepy town. But for those who care to look closer, Taiping offers far more than a scenic pause. It is a town that has participated in the unfolding of history, a place where the past is etched in its nooks and crannies.

It is this depth of narrative that Liew Suet Fun, president of the Taiping Heritage Society, seeks to uncover. In collaboration with The Habitat Foundation (THF), she is attempting something far more ambitious than a simple tourism campaign—reacquainting the town with its own identity.

“Sustainable tourism is still a very new idea,” Liew remarked. “A lot of people can’t differentiate between nature tourism, sustainable tourism and ecotourism. But from a content standpoint, Taiping is the perfect place for it. We have history, cultural stories and natural heritage settings, like Maxwell Hill and the mangroves. It’s almost as if there’s a heritage space all around us that we have forgotten.”

Funded by the Ministry of Finance, this initiative aims to bridge the gap between

the town’s past and its future, showcasing how much lies beyond its placid lakes to locals and outsiders alike.

THE TOWN THAT TIN BUILT

To understand Taiping, one must begin with the gleaming allure of tin.

In the mid-19th century, the Larut District—where Taiping stands—was the stage for a grim, frenzied prosperity. The promise of wealth drew waves of Chinese migrants who organised themselves through rival secret societies, their allegiances tangled and dangerous. Competition over mining grounds erupted into the Larut Wars, a series of brutal conflicts between 1861 and 1874 that destabilised the Perak Sultanate and disrupted the lucrative tin trade, eventually prompting bureaucratic British intervention.

In 1874, the Pangkor Treaty installed a British resident in Perak, marking the beginning of formal colonial administration. Taiping—then the rough outpost of Klian Pauh—became the centre of this new order. Literally renamed *tài píng* (太平), meaning “great peace”, the town materially symbolised the end of the conflict and the forced restoration of stability. It was a peace carved from chaos.

What followed was one of the earliest experiments in colonial Malayan urban

**A NEW FUTURE
FOR AN OLD TOWN**

planning. By the late-19th century, Taiping had accumulated an extraordinary number of “firsts”. It was home to the first museum in Malaya, the Perak Museum. Established in 1883, this was effectively a cabinet of curiosities housing the passions of its founder, Hugh Low. The Taiping Lake Gardens, the country’s first public gardens, opened in 1880. And in 1885, the first railway line in what became the Federated Malay States connected Taiping to Port Weld, allowing tin to be transported efficiently to the coast: a metallic artery pumping the lifeblood of the region out to the world.

Even the most picturesque parts of Taiping carry the indelible imprint of this violent extraction. The Lake Gardens, often described as one of the most beautiful parks in Malaysia, were once abandoned tin mines—vast pits gouged from the earth during the industry’s heyday, left to fill with rain and groundwater when its veins ran dry.

Sitting on the western plain of the Bintang Range, Taiping receives some of the highest rainfall levels in Peninsular Malaysia. British planners responded by constructing an extensive drainage network, into which the Lake Gardens were incorporated, to channel the deluge away. More than a century later, the system still functions remarkably well. Despite frequent torrential downpours, Taiping rarely experiences the flash flooding that plagues other Malaysian towns.

“Taiping was one of the first places where the British tried to build a modern town in Malaya,” Liew noted. “Everything was structured and planned.”

REDISCOVERING LOCAL STORIES

While the physical remnants of history and heritage remain visible, the stories attached to them are forgotten, misremembered or neglected. Liew and THF are experimenting with ways to reconnect people with Taiping’s past. One recent initiative was Legasi, a heritage festival marrying art and performance to reinterpret familiar places. Instead of a conventional street carnival, the programme unfolded within historic spaces, by breathing life into silence.

At the Perak Museum, a group of sopranos led by ethnomusicologist Ang Mei Foong guided audiences through the galleries with song, transforming the dusty exhibits into part of a moving performance. At the foot of Maxwell Hill, the earthy, melodious tones of the *sape* and *seruling*—instruments crafted from bamboo and wood—merged with the natural acoustics of the forest. The festival concluded at the Taiping Public Library, where Taiping-born musicians returned to perform Malaysian classics alongside local youth. By activating these spaces through music and storytell-

ing, visitors could encounter them in a new way, stripping away familiarity to reveal strangeness and beauty underneath.

Building on this idea, the team later developed a series of guided routes known as the “Peace Trails”. This name echoes Taiping’s literal meaning, but the trails are less about symbolism than about connecting landscapes with their histories.

“It is very different from Penang, where you have a heritage area which is quite intact and concentrated,” Liew observed. “Our history is all over the town, so we are trying to build narratives around this [sprawl].”

One of the trails extends into the Matang Mangrove Forest Reserve, a vast coastal ecosystem that has supported local livelihoods for generations, by supplying timber and charcoal while also sustaining fisheries. Historically, the forest offered another resource as well. *Ni Siap* is a natural dye extracted from mangrove bark (see *Penang Monthly*, July 2025) used to colour fishing nets and fabrics. Taken together, these sites reveal how Taiping’s history extends beyond its streets and buildings, and into the foothills and tidal forests.

Unlike many tourism projects that rely on the cold illumination of cellphone apps or recorded guides, the Peace Trails are designed to be led by people. For Liew, this human touch is essential.

“For tourism to be sustainable, you have to create livelihood around it,” Liew explained. “We consult local tourist guides, build the narratives and give them the skills to build a business around them.”

What Liew and THF are doing in Taiping is important: creating meaningful economic opportunities while ensuring that knowledge remains within the community.

This urgency feels particularly sharp in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic. Liew has noticed a quiet migration, a return of young families seeking refuge in the town’s slower rhythms. “They are searching for places like Taiping, where they can have a better quality of life, where they can spend more time with their family and enjoy a lower cost of living.”

In Malaysia, small towns are often overshadowed by the rapid, blinding growth of larger cities. Their histories and idiosyncrasies risk fading as attention fixes on urban glitz and glamour. But Taiping suggests another way of experiencing life. Its past is not confined to museums or monuments; it lingers in the drainage system that the British built, in rain trees planted more than a century ago, in forests that still provide livelihoods for nearby communities.

“In small towns, cultivating a sense of pride in who you are and understanding what it truly means to live well is already winning half the battle,” Liew said.

This is a philosophy that redefines the very notion of a small town in modern Malaysia. It serves as a quiet, insistent reminder that true progress does not always manifest as concrete monoliths punctuating the skyline; it can also take the form of gradual, sustainable changes and vibrant, connected communities.

CAPTIONS

- 1. Taiping Lake Gardens. Courtesy of Liew Suet Fun.
- 2. Drone view of Taiping. Courtesy of SC Shekar.



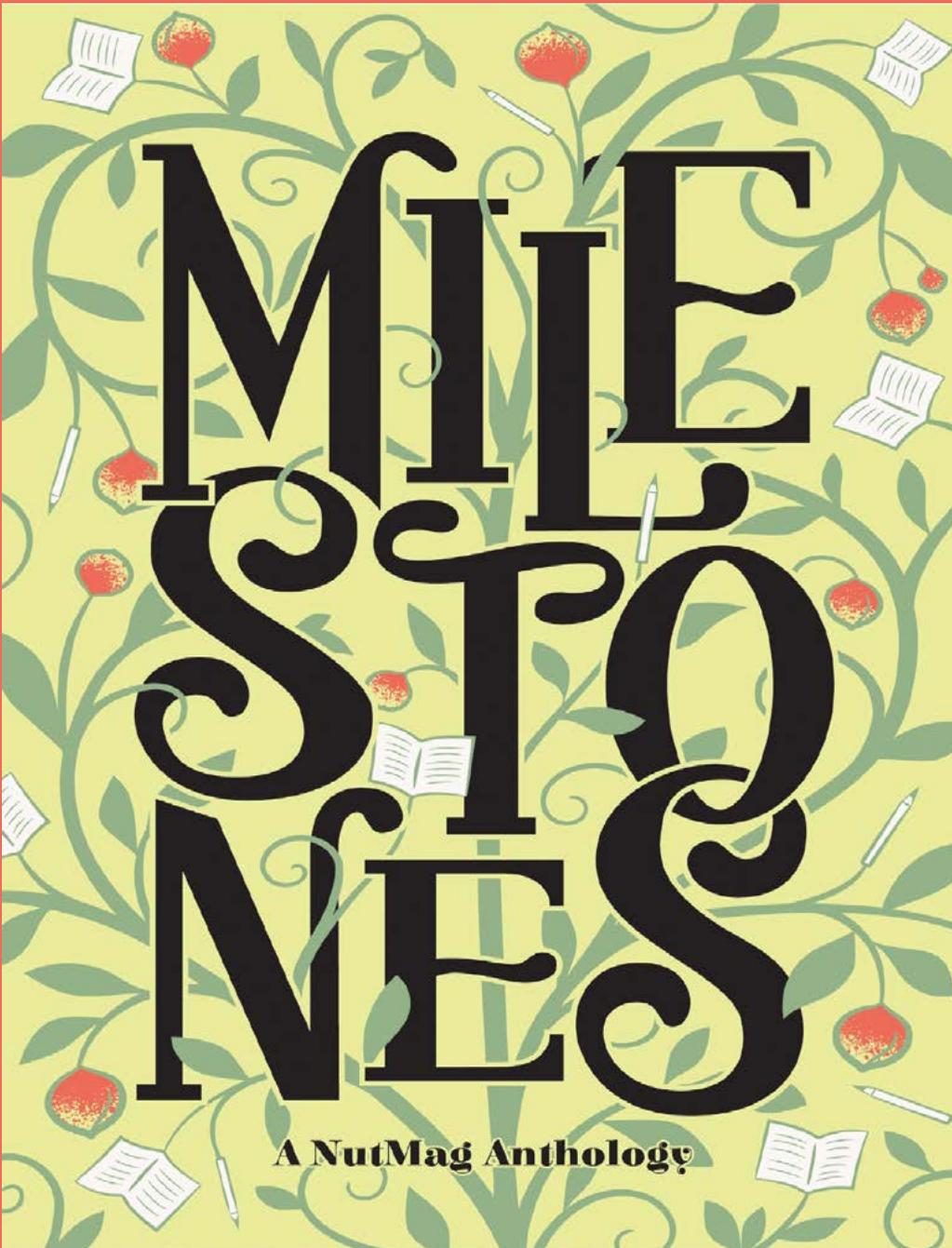
SHERYL TEOH holds a Bachelor of Arts degree from Linfield College, a liberal arts college in the United States, and majored in History with a focus on Classical Greece and Rome. Her interests include the study of philosophy as well as a range of humanities and socio-political issues.



MARKING TIME IN PENANG

**A REVIEW OF *MILESTONES:*
*A NUTMAG ANTHOLOGY***

**BY
IYLIA
DE
SILVA**



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.

WHEN ENCOUNTERING AN anthology titled *Milestones*, one would expect records of grand achievements: weddings, promotions and keys to first homes. What this collection offers instead is something quieter: moments of change, accumulation and realisation, often recognised only in hindsight.

Edited by MYWriters Penang, *Milestones* compiles nonfiction, short fiction and poetry by 24 contributors. Although published to mark 10 years of the *NutMag* zine's establishment, the anthology does not present itself as a commemorative showcase. The foreword frames milestones broadly, touching upon marriage, parenthood, creative persistence and relocation. The result reads like a cross-section of lives in motion—formed by places, relationships, ambitions and losses—with Penang serving as both setting and emotional anchor. Landmarks, kopitiam, bridges and neighbourhoods recur not as scenery but lived environments, as spaces where private experiences unfold. A reflective rather than celebratory tone is established early on, creating space for reflection rather than resolution.

FROM SMALL BEGINNINGS TO A GROWING LITERARY CIRCLE

The anthology opens with Wilson Khor W.H.'s "Of *NutMag*, Zines, and Chili Parathas", a personal account of *NutMag*'s beginnings in 2016, sparked by conversations over food in Little India. Wilson traces his early experiments with zines, *NutMag*'s eventual naming and the slow building of a local writing community through events and informal networks.

One concrete milestone appears quietly: two short stories from *NutMag*'s earlier anthology, *Home Groan*, have been selected for inclusion in the Sijil Tinggi Persekolahan Malaysia's (STPM) Literature syllabus, beginning this year. This event is mentioned without fanfare, but reminds us that independent publishing can gradually find institutional recognition.

Wilson's essay functions mainly to ground the anthology before it moves on to its central focus: individual voices responding to personal and collective change. Rather than foregrounding organisational success, it emphasises continuity and effort, framing *NutMag* less as a brand than an evolving creative space, sustained by people who simply show up.

LIVES WRITTEN INTO PENANG

Several standout pieces treat Penang not as a fixed identity, but as something continually sculpted by time and movement.

Joelynn Chin's poem "Buah Hati Saya" draws on the Malay proverb, *bagai pinang dibelah dua* (like an areca nut split in half), to reflect upon the relationship between

island and mainland. By pairing locations such as Tanjong and Seberang Perai, Bukit Bendera and Bukit Mertajam, the poem frames Penang as a relational space, defined by connection rather than separation. The language is spare but effective, allowing geography to carry emotional meaning.

In "Running Penang", Jasper Bui uses personal running routes to map his adjustment to life on the island. What begins as a practical response to humidity becomes an exploration of development, displacement and parenthood. Passing villages, schools and wildlife, he eventually reaches the Penang Bridge Marathon, where the bridge symbolises both physical challenge and emotional threshold. The essay closes with a reflection on raising children. Parents can accompany them for a while, before learning to release them, thus lending the piece a lingering poignancy.

Colleen Lean's short story, "The Last Sea Ham", centres on a long marriage that began with teenage attraction over Char Koay Teow. When the husband attempts to recreate this early romance, his wife resists nostalgia. Their kopitiam has changed, the cockles are smaller and even the hawkker is new. The story gently dismantles the idea that love depends on returning to beginnings, by suggesting instead that intimacy lies in recognising how time changes people and places alike.

Nadia Rose Noordin's poem, "Bunga Rampai", approaches transition through ritual. As the persona prepares fragrant flower mixtures—of pandan, patchouli and *limau purut*—she realises that she has stepped into the role once occupied by older relatives. The poem captures the familiar recognition of adulthood not through ceremony, but inheritance.

Then there is Ngo Tjer Hong's reflection on KOMTAR, which transforms Penang's most polarising landmark into a symbol of complicated belonging, a structure that holds ambition, disappointment and endurance together.

Taken collectively, these pieces represent Penang as an active participant in making personal histories, a place that evolves alongside its residents, shaping memory as much as memory shapes it.

AMBITION, DISTANCE AND HOMECOMING

While geography provides one thread of the anthology, personal transformation forms another.

Emily Goh's "Call Back Home" follows a young woman building a media career under a stage name after leaving Penang for Kuala Lumpur. Success arrives through emceeding gigs and online visibility, yet her first instinct after each achievement is to call her mother. As work-related travel increases, emotional distance grows, cul-

minating in the painful moment when she forgets her mother's birthday. Later, the Covid-19 pandemic disrupts her industry entirely, forcing yet another reinvention.

This story resonates because of its contemporary detail—branding, podcasts and roadshows—but remains grounded in the universal tension between pursuing independence while longing for home. It is also one of the anthology's clearest explorations of how professional milestones can coexist uneasily with personal guilt and loss.

Several poems echo similar concerns. These include Shumin Tan's "The Anatomy of Blooming", charting bodily and emotional shifts with precision, while Jaline Wellington's "Fifty Years Later" reflects on ageing as accumulation, rather than decline. Across these works, milestones are not dramatic turning points, but gradual recalibrations: identities form, expectations soften and priorities rearrange themselves.

UNFINISHED LIVES, QUIET RECKONINGS

The later sections of *Milestones* cycle through themes of return, vacancy, grief and endurance. Some linger on emotional emptiness and distance; others on acceptance and presence. The collection suggests, rather than declares, that life is sustained not by singular triumphs, but recurring, everyday moments of shared meals, routines and brief recognitions.

The illustrations that intersperse selected pieces offer visual pauses, reinforcing the sense that this is a mood-driven collection, as much as it is narrative-driven, allowing readers some moments of reflection before moving on.

What *Milestones* ultimately offers is not resolution, but recognition. Characters leave and return, relationships mature and cities transform. Penang itself continues to change, shaped by development and the passing of generations.

For readers familiar with the city, the anthology feels intimate without being sentimental. For those looking in from the outside, it offers something rarer than cultural shorthand: portraits of everyday lives negotiating time, ambition and belonging.

In marking *NutMag*'s 10-year presence, MYWriters Penang has assembled a thoughtful record of contemporary experience: one that values observation over declaration, and complexity over closure.

PLLACE

BRIDGING HERITAGE AND INNOVATION

BY
LAI WAN TENG

FOR PENANG'S CREATIVE GROWTH

AND
PAN YI CHIEH



WHAT IF A heritage city can innovate boldly without losing its cultural soul? What if research does not sit on a shelf, but moves productively through workshops, training rooms, policy dialogues and creative studios? These questions lie at the heart of the Penang Living Lab for Advancing the Creative Economy (PLLACE), a partnership between the United Kingdom (UK) and Malaysia to reimagine local creative innovation. The “Living Lab” approach is a real-time, collaborative ecosystem where entrepreneurs, policymakers, researchers, non-governmental organisations and citizens co-create, test, refine and scale-up solutions together.

It has great utility for strengthening and future-proofing Penang’s creative economy, especially within George Town’s UNESCO World Heritage Site. While the city’s creative industries contribute significantly to its cultural vibrancy and economic development, challenges remain. These include skill gaps among creative workers, fragmented policy frameworks and a limited understanding of how heritage can be transformed into innovative, market-ready products and services. PLLACE does not respond with abstract theory. More than a paper exercise, it applies UK expertise to revitalise Southeast Asia’s artistic traditions and creative ecosystems through modern innovation ecosystems and evidence-based policy. In the process, Penang is positioned as the regional testbed for sustainable and inclusive creative growth.

FROM RESEARCH TO ACTION

Funded by The British Academy, PLLACE is a dynamic, two-year collaborative research project. Having started in May 2024 and scheduled to end in May 2026, it has brought together researchers from Manchester Metropolitan University, University of Greenwich, Universiti Sains Malaysia and Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman. The project is structured around several main interconnected work packages targeting individuals, enterprises and the broader creative ecosystem. These are: reviewing and developing creative economy policy frameworks; providing upskilling and training intervention; conducting in-depth case studies on heritage-based innovation; and establishing Penang’s physical Living Lab space.

Over the past year, the project has reached significant milestones. Early activities included interviews with key sectoral voices, three policy workshops exploring future scenarios and a comprehensive skills survey of Penang’s creative community. Subsequent insights laid the foundation for the Penang Creative Industries Living Lab held last August, which attracted over 300 visitors, featured 25 speakers across six themed panels and engaged more than 150 co-creators in prototype, policy, training



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and curriculum co-creation. Participants included creative workers, entrepreneurs, students and academic experts, among others. Meanwhile, eight participating creative businesses benefited directly from real-time feedback and community engagement, thus demonstrating the power of collaborative innovation.

PLLACE's upskilling and training intervention has been particularly notable. Through 20 in-depth interviews with creative workers, entrepreneurs and researchers with expertise in creative education, arts and creative industries, and a survey of 166 creative workers and entrepreneurs, the team identified urgent skill gaps in entrepreneurship, career development and sector-specific competencies. In response, four tailored training curricula were co-created through the Living Lab approach. These practical, high-impact sessions (focusing on funding, branding, marketing and intellectual property protection, respectively) were piloted in four full-day training sessions from December 2025 to January 2026, each involving 20 to 25 creative workers and entrepreneurs. Their insights reinforced the need for sustained, long-term training and sectoral support to equip creative professionals with the essential tools to grow, protect and scale-up their work in both local and global markets.



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WHAT CAN PENANG LEARN FROM THE UK?

The UK offers one of the most mature and influential creative economy models in the world, where longstanding cultural traditions, strong innovation ecosystems and evidence-based policymaking collectively shape a thriving creative sector. Last November, PLLACE's Penang stakeholders participated in a UK study visit to understand London's world-leading creative industries ecosystem. It brought together a diverse group of stakeholders, including policymakers, creative entrepreneurs, cultural institutions, academic researchers and innovation experts engaged in the

development of the creative industries ecosystem, who shared their perspectives on creative policy and Living Labs.

The United Kingdom was the first country to formally introduce the concept of a creative industry in 1997. This definition honours individual creativity, skill and talent, while recognising the potential to generate jobs and wealth. The creative sector has since grown significantly, contributing approximately 5.5% of the UK's gross value added in 2024.^[1] To a large extent, the industry is built upon a deep-seated tradition of supporting and appreciating the arts, combined with a strong support system of innovation and experimentation.

This foundation is integrated into public infrastructure, from an education system that values culture and history to a vast network of galleries, art spaces and dedicated societies. The result is an accessible supporting system which provides opportunities to hone practitioners' specific areas of expertise. At the same time, there is a powerful emphasis on innovation and technology, with a robust ecosystem that helps creative businesses find investment and growth opportunities.

A major strength of the UK's support system is its all-round and dynamic approach to policymaking in a changing world. This approach is built on a strong



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research background, with the Creative Policy and Evidence Centre (Creative PEC) leading the way. Hosted by Newcastle University, this independent institute works to grow the creative sector through expert research and policy advice, working closely with partners like Newcastle University and the Royal Society of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce, a prestigious society that has promoted innovation for over 270 years. Creative PEC thus bridges industry leaders, politicians and researchers to design better strategies through empirical data gathered through real-world feedback. It also tackles urgent issues such as the role of migrants in the creative economy, artificial intelligence, intellectual property as well as skill- and talent-development.

Despite London's comprehensive support systems, the high cost of living has displaced many creators from Central London. In response, Cockpit was established in 1986 as a dedicated makerspace. Operating from a council-owned building, Cockpit provides artisans with affordable studios, a focused creative environment and direct market access. Through business coaching and workshops, it equips makers with the skills to scale-up their brands. The results are significant. As of 2025, it had grown to house 165 makers across 23 disciplines, primarily jewellery, textiles and ceramics. Cockpit makers generated £6.5 million in total annual sales through galleries, retail and global exports.^[2]

With George Town's World Heritage Site growing increasingly expensive for established artisans, London's experiences highlight the importance of protecting cultural heritage through a modern business support system, while providing space to work sustainably in a vibrant urban setting.

PLLACE'S PLACE IN THE FUTURE

At PLLACE's final conference in Penang on 9 April, research findings, policy recommendations and future collaboration pathways will be shared with stakeholders, creative communities and academic partners. But it has already made its mark on the world: researchers have presented their findings not just at local keynote engagements, but also major international forums, including the International Society for Professional Innovation Management conference in Norway and the Institute for Small Business and Entrepreneurship conference in Glasgow. These exchanges ensure that Penang's experiences contribute to global conversations on creative economy development, and vice versa. The essential lesson learned from two years of work is the need to integrate cultural heritage with entrepreneurship support and research-driven design. By fostering collaborations between government, industry and creative communities, Penang can transform its profound traditions into a modern creative economy rooted in its unique local identity.

Ultimately, PLLACE is a collaborative experiment in reimagining how heritage cities innovate. It is a bridge between universities and communities, policy and practice as well as tradition and transformation. There are further opportunities to strengthen UK-Malaysia partnerships while supporting the development of Penang's creative industries through global best practices. Most importantly, it offers a blueprint for how creative ecosystems across Asia and beyond can grow sustainably, inclusively and confidently in a rapidly changing world.

***Note:** PLLACE is funded by The British Academy's Official Development Assistance International Interdisciplinary Research Projects scheme, and is proudly supported by local research institutions and industry partners. These include Penang Institute, Penang Art District, Penang Women's Development Corporation, Digital Penang, Malaysia Digital Economy Corporation and Malaysia's Creativepreneurs Strategic Alliance.

Scan the QR code below to secure your free admission to the final conference on 9 April 2026, or visit cloudjoi.com/shows/5080-penang-creative-industries-conference-example.



CAPTIONS

1. The PLLACE Research Team (L-R): Toh Teong Chuan (UTAR), Lai Wan Teng (USM), Malgorzata Trelka (Manchester Metropolitan University), Katharina De Vita (Manchester Metropolitan University), Chan Jin Hooi (University of Greenwich) and Athena Piterou (University of Greenwich).
2. Experts share strategies for talent attraction, training needs and workforce readiness during the PLLACE Living Lab panel session.
3. Chan Jin Hooi, Malgorzata Trelka and Lean Hooi Hooi in discussion with Tan Shih Toe and Mei Chee Seong regarding new initiatives for the creative industry.
4. Participants and trainers celebrate the successful completion of the final upskilling session on "Intellectual Property: Protecting Your Creative Works".
5. A sharing session from Innovate UK (part of UK Research and Innovation) on commercialising new products and services to scale the creative economy.

All images courtesy of PLLACE.

ENDNOTES

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DR. LAI WAN TENG is a senior lecturer at the Centre for Research on Women and Gender (KANITA) at Universiti Sains Malaysia. She co-leads the work package on upskilling and training intervention, designed to drive skill development for Penang's creative workforce.



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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SHIFTS IN GERMAN GEO-ECONOMIC STRATEGY FAVOUR PENANG

BY CAROLYN KHOR

WHEN PEOPLE IN this part of the world think of Germany or its people, precision manufacturing often comes to mind. Penangites are no strangers to German industrial influence; after all, companies such as Bosch and B. Braun have been part of the state's Free Industrial Zone since 1972. Today, Germany is once again looking towards Penang and Malaysia, this time to source for chips, improve supply chain resilience and find talent. But what are the implications for Malaysia, and how can it leverage this broader shift?

CURRENT AND EMERGING GERMAN-MALAYSIAN LINKS

On 19 November 2025, Stefan Rouenhoff, the Bundestag (German parliament) state secretary at the Ministry for Economic Affairs and Energy, visited Penang as part of a German business delegation to forge closer ties with Malaysia's semiconductor industry. An economist and member of the Bundestag since 2017, Rouenhoff has previously worked on trade policy in Brussels, served as a ministry spokesperson and held leading roles in small and medium enterprise and international economic policy work. He stood out for his understated manner, arriving quietly without bodyguards and simply introducing himself as "Stefan".

The delegation toured Infineon's facilities in Kulim and Bayan Lepas, holding discussions on investment trends, upcom-

ing expansion and bilateral cooperation. According to Rouenhoff, Germany remains Malaysia's second-largest destination for foreign direct investment, after the US.^[1] Nearly 800 German companies employing more than 65,000 people operate in Malaysia. They are particularly represented in semiconductor manufacturing, alongside the significant presence of firms from other sectors, such as Allianz, BASF, SAP and Mercedes-Benz.

"We had an exchange about investments of the last few years and on those that are upcoming," he said during a gathering in Bayan Lepas, organised by the Malaysian-German Chamber of Commerce (MGCC) and the German Embassy. The visit concluded with a simple reception attended by Penang Deputy Chief Minister II Jagdeep Singh Deo and German industry leaders. During exchanges with German and Malaysian semiconductor players, the delegation discussed diversification, supply chain security and investment resilience.

There was also early discussion of a possible German-Malaysian memorandum of understanding for closer cooperation between governments and industries. "While the semiconductor sector has been the focal point, Germany sees potential for expanding partnerships into other industrial segments," said Rouenhoff, noting interest in two-way investment flows.

Beyond semiconductors, Germany is seeking partnerships in advanced manufacturing. A recently appointed special envoy for investment will streamline foreign direct investment engagement by serving as the single point of contact. Germany is also leveraging frameworks such as the Important Projects of Common European Interest, which provide financial incentives for technology and manufacturing investments across participating European Union member-states. A "German Accelerator" may also be established in Malaysia, potentially also in Penang. This programme supports German start-ups entering global markets and currently already operates in Boston, Tel Aviv, Silicon Valley and Singapore.

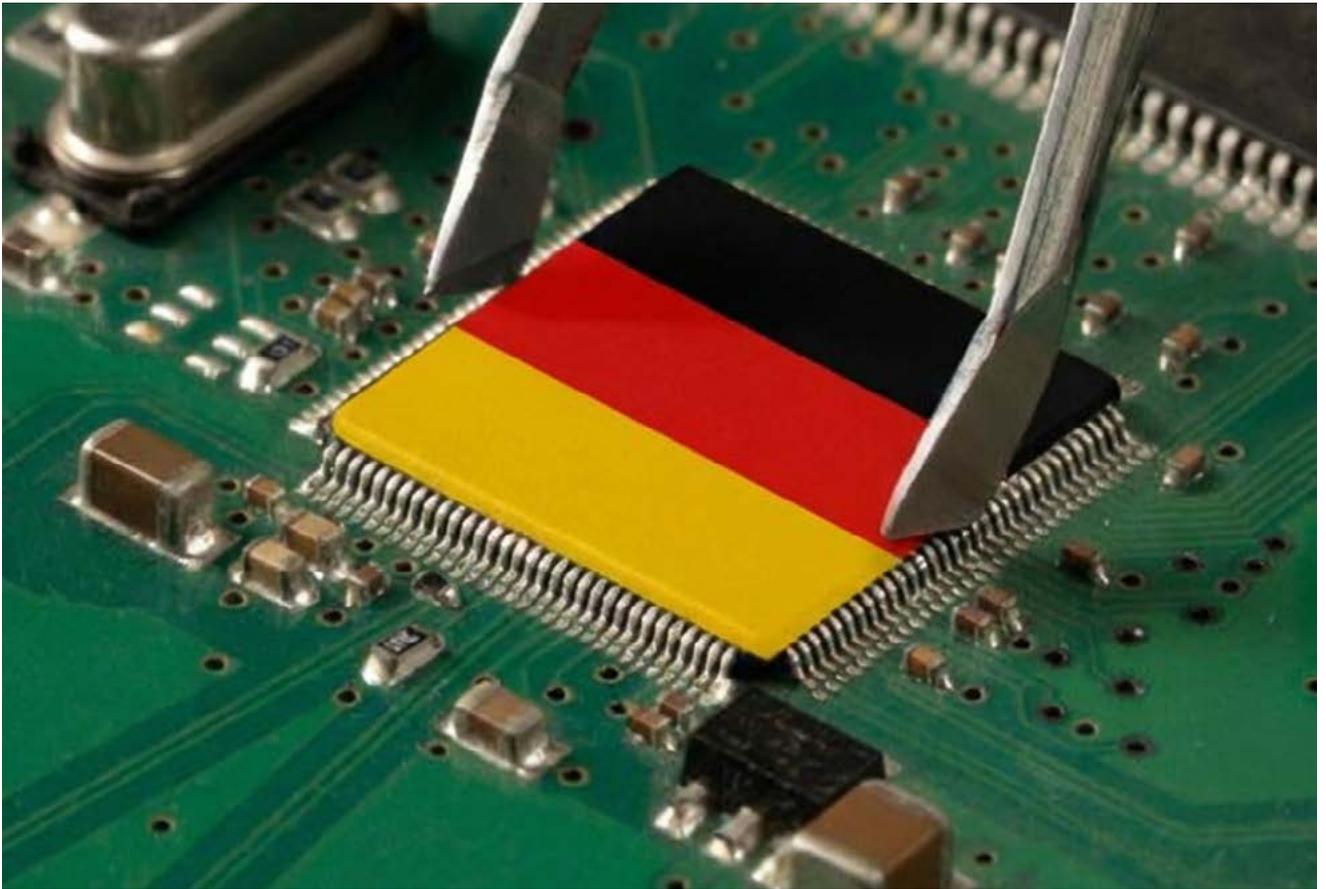
WHY GERMANY LOOKS TO PENANG AGAIN

For Rouenhoff, economic and political cooperation now carry equal weight, increasingly shaped by geopolitical tensions and supply chain risks, the effects of which have also been felt locally. A 2025 MGCC survey of 430 member firms found that 54% reported negative effects from recent US trade policy, while 46% saw no direct impact.^[2] Notably, 64% had no direct US business exposure, suggesting that risks are mainly felt through supply chain realignment.

Indeed, Germany's renewed interest in Penang stems largely from concerns over semiconductor supply chains. The Covid-19 pandemic exposed Europe's vulnerability when chip shortages forced German carmakers to slash production, which even fell to levels not seen since the mid-1970s. Its automotive industry alone lost an estimated USD210bil (approximately RM870bil) globally in 2021.

Structurally, Europe's share of global semiconductor production fell from 30% in 1990 to just 12% by 2019, leaving it heavily reliant on Asian manufacturing. The European Chips Act intends to reverse this trend and raise Europe's share to 20% by 2030, by generating EUR43bil (approximately RM206bil) in investments. However, the projected scale of production remains modest compared with China's semiconductor investments and Taiwan's entrenched dominance. Furthermore, Europe currently has no fabrication facilities capable of producing the advanced sub-7nm chips used for artificial intelligence systems, high-performance computing and next-generation automobiles. These chips are manufactured almost exclusively by the Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Company and South Korea's Samsung.

In this context, Germany's renewed engagement with Malaysia forms part of a broader strategy to diversify supply chains beyond Taiwan and China. It is also entangled in a wider global trade slowdown,



which Ooi Kee Beng, Penang Institute's executive director and founder-editor of *Penang Monthly*, sees as "a necessary stage in decolonisation".^[3] There is an ongoing geopolitical shift away from Western-centric supply chains, making way for an emergent multipolar world.

AN EQUITABLE PARTNERSHIP, OR NOT?

For Southeast Asia, this shift opens room to manoeuvre. From a business perspective, Germany is ticking the right boxes by choosing to invest in Malaysia, which presents itself as a pragmatic partner: neutral, stable and deeply embedded in the semiconductor value chain. Indeed, Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim has repeatedly marketed Malaysia as a neutral, non-aligned location for semiconductor production, thus hedging against instability in Taiwan or China.

Yet beneath the diplomatic enthusiasm lies a harder question. Is Malaysia gaining genuine strategic leverage, or does it remain one option among many? Malaysia may account for about 13% of the global semiconductor assembly, testing and packaging market, but these are less profitable back-end segments. The issue is not the scale of assembly and testing in Malaysia per se, but rather, how little surplus value is retained domestically. Meanwhile, greater profit margins and potential gains

from intellectual property sit upstream. Thus, Malaysia must now respond by moving up the value chain and differentiating itself from substitute investment destinations. Its National Semiconductor Strategy (NSS) specifically aims to move upstream into integrated circuit design and advanced packaging, by envisioning the creation of 10 companies with revenues exceeding USD1bil (approximately RM4.7bil) and another 100 semiconductor-related local companies with revenues approaching RM1bil.

For now, foreign investment incentives are strong, but those for domestic firms to scale-up and retain intellectual property remain weak. In 2022, 99.2% of investments in Malaysia's electrical components sector came from foreign sources alone, while only 0.8% were domestic. As of mid-2024, only 13 companies had emerged as potential "national champions", despite NSS ambitions. In short, Malaysia will primarily remain a provider of land and labour unless foreign investment transfers knowledge that allows local firms to move beyond contract manufacturing. Furthermore, competitors are moving faster, and Malaysia also competes directly with Thailand, Vietnam and the Philippines.

Talent is another pressure point. Malaysia produces an estimated 5,000 to 20,000 engineering graduates annually, yet the industry demands about 50,000

skilled semiconductor engineers. To compound matters, nearly 1.86 million Malaysians have left the country, driven in part by wage differentials with Singapore. While initiatives such as the German Dual Vocational Training programme can help address skill shortages, whether or not its graduates can develop transferable skills that will build Malaysian intellectual property remains unclear.

Ultimately, the question is if Malaysia can convert foreign capital into durable domestic capability, beyond merely attracting semiconductor investments.

ENDNOTES

1. This detail is corroborated by the Malaysian Investment Development Authority, which also notes that German investment totalled RM32.2 billion in 2024.

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

THE STORY OF NORTHAM ROAD



MERCHANTS, MILLIONAIRES AND THEIR MANSIONS

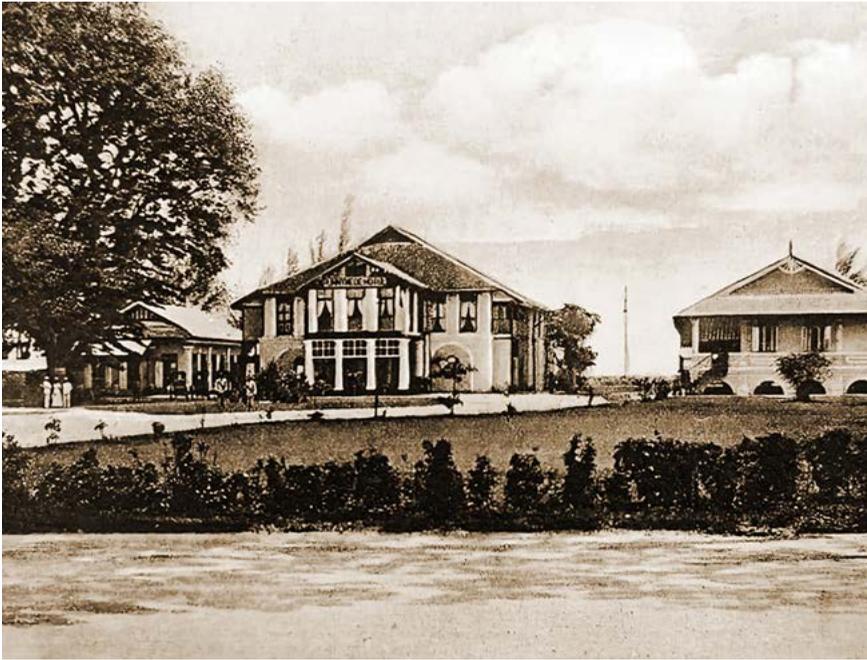
**BY
EUGENE
QUAH
TER-NENG**



THE BROADCAST UNIT cracked against the humidity. “Testing, one, two, three... Can everybody hear me?” None of the participants could. We were gathered beneath the frangipani trees on the morning of 7 December for a heritage walk, organised in conjunction with the George Town Literary Festival. On my third attempt, the unit cooperated, and we began walking westwards from the Old Protestant Cemetery. Around us, weathered tombstones marked where the town once ended. Beyond them stretched what maps now call Jalan Sultan Ahmad Shah, but which memory still calls Northam Road.

The gloriously fine weather mercifully held, despite threatening skies the day before. Remarkably, it was also 216 years to the day the East India Company approved the construction of the very road we were about to traverse. Our walk followed both geography and chronology, with each building along the road marking a moment in the city’s evolution. From this point on, the road would stretch northwest along the beachfront towards what we now call Gurney Drive, accumulating mansions, millionaires and meanings as it extended. Before this road was built, only a bridle path ran past coconut palms located beyond the cemetery, offering views across the strait to Kedah Peak—Gunung Jerai—rising blue in the distance. And what began as a beachfront retreat for Company officials would become the address of choice for Penang’s wealthiest Chinese towkays, earning this stretch its enduring nickname of “Millionaires’ Row”. People have been asking me to write up stories from these walks, and so here are some selected tales.

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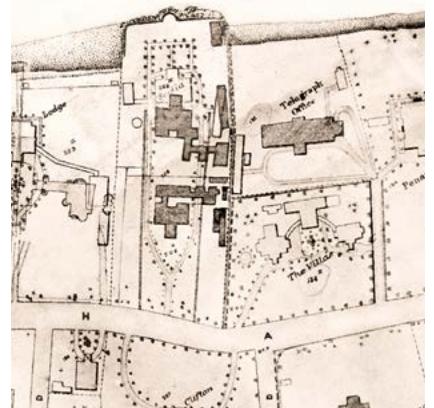
2b

RUNNYMEDE

The 1809 meeting which approved the construction of this road along the north beach was recorded by a certain Thomas Stamford Raffles, then just a young assistant secretary in Penang. He had recently completed building a house along the proposed route, named Runnymede after the meadow where the Magna Carta was signed. Whether construction was motivated by public benefit or personal convenience remains ambiguous. On Wednesday, 3 August 1808, Olivia Devenish Raffles wrote to a family friend, Dr. John Leyden, that, "Mr. R. is building a pretty brick house on the beach, which I hope will be finished in eight to ten weeks." *The Prince of Wales Island Gazette* of 14 January 1809 later reported: "The north beach will, ere long, assume a very handsome appearance, when the several elegant villas now building, are finished." One such villa directly west of Raffles' property was Sans Souci (French for "without worry"), belonging to John James Erskine, a colleague and friend. From their beachfront properties, Olivia and Erskine could each see their namesake hills across the Great Bay: Mount Olivia and Mount Erskine (now Pearl Hill). But both Sans Souci and the original Runnymede are long gone. The latter burnt down in the early twentieth century, and its final traces were destroyed around a decade ago.

NOVA SCOTIA AND THE SIAMESE CONNECTION

Continuing past today's United Overseas Bank branch (formerly Citibank), then across the road to the present-day Penang Club (the old building long demolished), we reached Mayfair Apartments. A curious chimaera of a building, its colonial façade is awkwardly fused to a modern apartment block. The lot was once occupied by Asdang House, later known as the Metropole Hotel, and is but a ghost of its former self. On Christmas Day 1993, it was surreptitiously demolished. Following public outrage and an ensuing court case, the developer was ordered to rebuild this heritage building.



3



4



5

The entire lot once stretched from the road to the sea, where there once stood a bungalow called Nova Scotia, the residence of Lieutenant-Governor Major McNair of Penang (in office 1880–84). By 1904, this estate had been subdivided. On the seaward side, reported the press, was “Phya Rasada’s new residence on the Northam Road, next to ‘Sans Souci’”. This “Siamese” noble was actually Khaw Sim Bee, one of the wealthiest men in Penang and also the governor of Phuket (which bore the title “Phya Rasada Nupradit”). On 13 January that year, when Prince Chakrabongse Bhuvanath (จักรพงษ์ภูวนารถ) of Siam stopped in Penang, he was received not at the since-demolished Government House (Nova Scotia) but at Khaw’s new residence. The adjective “new” is itself an understatement. According to the *Pinang Gazette*: “Twenty-four hours before the coming of the Prince the masons were still busy with the house exteriorly, while within there was scarcely a vestige of furniture or decoration either in the European or the Chinese rooms (the house is designed with a very cosmopolitan eye). Mr. Neubronner, however, aided by Mr. Sarkies [of the E&O Hotel], fitted the place throughout with the rapidity of scene-shifting, and all preparations were completed an hour before the arrival of His Highness.” The house was designed by

Neubronner’s son, Henry, later the architect of the famous minaret of the Kapitan Keling Mosque on Pitt Street. The Prince, a brother of King Vajiravudh (Rama VI), arrived looking excellent despite his rough passage. After the necessary handshakes, His Royal Highness was asked by the architect to perform the ceremony of opening and blessing the house. Speaking in both Siamese and English, he wished for “Prosperity to this house”, which was henceforth known as Chakrabongse House. In 1909, Khaw Sim Bee was shot during an assassination attempt in Trang. He survived, but then succumbed to his injuries at home on 10 April. The building was sold to the Ng family in the 1960s, demolished, and replaced with a building that is now called Lava Mansion.

Khaw Joo Tok, one of the late governor’s Penang Free School-educated nephews, acquired the building at No. 46 Northam Road, directly behind Chakrabongse House. (It had served as the Con-



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6a



6b



8

sulate of the Netherlands until 1908.) In 1922, *The Straits Echo* reported that his acquisition, “reconstructed on modern lines by Messrs. Stark and McNeill”, was nearing completion. On 24 August 1924, the heir-apparent to the Siamese throne, Prince Asdang, “arrived at Prai from Songkhla by motor-car [...] and crossed to Penang by special launches”. During his short stay, he resided at Joo Tok’s renovated property, later named Asdang House in his honour. Just two months later, the Prince’s brother, Rama VI himself, stayed at the same house. (Prince Asdang never ascended the throne, having died nine months before the king.) Asdang House, like its neighbour, both bore the name of the King’s siblings.



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NORTHAM LODGE AND SOONSTEAD

Beside the Mayfair apartments stands a handsome building known as Soonstead. It stands on one of the subdivided lots of what was once an enormous seafront estate. Originally called Northam Lodge, the lot once housed one of the earliest buildings on the unnamed road, then just descriptively called “the road along the North Beach” or plain “northern road”. The place name “Northam”, however, is common in the United Kingdom, and most likely refers to the Northam shipyards at Southampton (established 1693), which would have been familiar to the property’s owner, James Cousens, a Company official and “sub-Treasurer and Accountant-General of the Court”, and his colleagues. There was also a Northam Road Bridge over the River Itchen, built shortly before Penang’s own bridge to Northam came about. An 1814 map of George Town simply labels this bridge over the Bound Ditch (Boundary Ditch) as “Bridge to Northam”, suggesting that the property’s existence preceded construction. Although the road would bear the name “Old Battery Lane” by the 1820s—thus preserving the memory of Georgian-era artillery once positioned here—it is likely that the descriptive name “northern road” was eventually conflated with the large property, located almost midway between its two extremities, and simply became Northam Road. Some news articles right up to the twentieth century still occasionally misspelled it as “Northern Road”.

On April 1816, Cousens was found guilty of “embezzling suitor’s monies”. He was probably the first official in the Presidency to be thrown in jail. His properties, including Northam Lodge, were confiscated. The next known owner was George Port, curator of the Botanical Gardens, who owned it in the 1820s. In 1852, Carnegie &



9



Co. put the “Out-houses, and Compound [...] called Northam Lodge” up for auction to pay off creditors. By the late-nineteenth century, Northam Lodge was in bad condition. Its last reported use in April 1897 was to temporarily house the “Young Men’s Association”. It was eventually subdivided and sold off. By 1901, the press reported that the seven-acre plot where Northam

Lodge once stood remained the only undeveloped land along the entire road.

By 1911, Heah Swee Lee built a house at No. 46B, Northam Road, next to Khaw Sim Bee’s Chakrabongse House, on the subdivided lot where Northam Lodge’s outhouse once stood. Like Khaw’s property, it was designed by Stark & McNeil. In 1935, Heah’s granddaughter, Kooi See, married Soon Cheng Sun, the eldest son of the wealthy merchant Soon Eng Kong. The property was transferred to the Soon patriarch and later inherited by Cheng Sun, who renamed it Soonstead. In 1961, Soonstead hosted the “Wedding of the Year” between Cheng Sun’s daughter, Betty Soon Siew Tin, and Dr. Cheah Sin Huat. Among those present were Chief Minister Wong Pow Nee, Governor Raja Tun Uda as well as two other distinguished guests who “arrived together, accompanied by their wives”. “[T]hey were the Prime Ministers of the Federation and Singapore, Tengku [Tunku] Abdul Rahman [who proposed the bridal toast] and Mr. Lee Kuan Yew.” In 1973, the house was sold to the late millionaire Loh Boon Siew. Still owned by Loh’s company, Soonstead has been recently beautifully restored. Loh also owned the former Donnybrook Annex, a mansion at the junction of Transfer Road and Northam Road, which he quirkily decorated with a statue of a First World War French soldier and Soonstead’s original gates.

ACQUIRING A ROYAL NAME
Northam Road, named for Cousens’ since subdivided property, acquired the moniker “Millionaires’ Row” after the wealthy Chinese towkays who built their grand residences along this beachfront stretch. But why is it now called Jalan Sultan Ahmad Shah? In 1983, the road was renamed to commemorate the official visit of the seventh Yang di-Per-tuan Agong, Sultan Ahmad Shah of Pahang, to Penang. This renaming marks not a rupture with the past, but merely another layer in a longer text written by Company officials, merchants, princes and politicians in turn. Walking it today, one can still trace the lines of the road’s former estates, shaped as much by social ambition as by geography.



11

CAPTIONS

1. (Cover spread) View of Khaw Sim Bee’s Chakrabongse House in 1908, built over the former Nova Scotia.

2A & 2B. Top: View of Runnymede, around 1910. Raffles’ original building had burnt down in 1901. Bottom: The later Runnymede Hotel building from 1930 remains derelict, as seen in this picture from January 2013.

3. A section of Northam Road in 1893, showing the massive original Northam Lodge and the neighbouring Nova Scotia.

4. An 1820 map showing the Bound Ditch which connected to the Prangin Canal, effectively turning George Town into an island accessible by two bridges. The Ditch was later filled in and became Transfer Road. Four large bungalows can be seen along the Northam Road, including its likely namesake, Northam Lodge. Source: Marcus Langdon Collection.

5. An 1814 map of George Town showing the location of the Burmah Road/Penang Road Drawbridge as well as the Northam Bridge over the Bound Ditch to Northam Road. Source: Marcus Langdon Collection.

6A & 6B. Top: View of Asdang House after its conversion into the Metropole Hotel, mid-twentieth century. Khaw Joo Tok, a nephew of Khaw Sim Bee, had to sell off Asdang House during the Second World War. Bottom: View of the reconstructed Asdang House, now fused with the Mayfair. Source: Peter Yeoh (top), Penang Hiddens Gems (bottom)

7. Phraya Khaw Sim Bee, otherwise known as Ratsadanupradit Mahitsaraphakdi (พระยาภิรมย์ภักดี). At the time when he built Chakrabongse House, Khaw was governing Mthon Phuket, “which included all the surrounding west coast provinces from Kraburi and Ranong

in the north to Trang in the south”.

8. The rarely seen sea-facing side of Soonstead (formerly Heah Swee Lee’s Northam Lodge).

9. Soonstead, surrounded by two lawns, as seen from Boustead Tower across the road in 2013. It appears to have been built on the footprint of an annex of the much larger Northam Lodge, which once covered the area now occupied by several buildings visible on the left.

10. Loh Boon Siew purchased Soonstead from the Soons in 1973, and installed the gates at his eponymous villa down the road, close to the junction of Northam and Transfer Roads.

11. Soon Eng Kong, a wealthy planter who became the owner of Northam Lodge after his son Cheng Sun married Heah Swee Lee’s daughter. Heah transferred the property to his new in-law, which Cheng Sun later inherited and renamed Soonstead.

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

ON THE UNCERTAINTY OF BEING

DUA DARAH EXPLORES MIXED-RACE IDENTITY

BY
YEE HENG YEH



FOR MANY MALAYSIANS, a lifetime of filling out official forms has normalised the idea that racial categories are as neat and rigid as the boxes that they check: Malay, Chinese, Indian, and Lain-lain (lit., “others”). But the reality on the ground is rarely as simple.

Dua Darah, a new play whose evocative title suggests the mingling of bloodlines within a single body, examines the inner conflict of a Malay-Chinese Muslim. Written by playwright Johan Othman, directed by Chee Sek Thim and produced by Tan Hock Kheng, it comes from the same trio that won the Best of 2023 award for *Malam Takdir* at the BOH Cameronian Arts Awards. Originally conceived as a monologue drawing upon Johan’s life experiences, the play has since evolved into an ensemble piece that meditates on memory, faith and the judgements faced by those who do not conform to common understandings of race and religion.

THE RETELLING OF A RECOLLECTION

Set during the Covid-19 movement restrictions, the play features a protagonist who performs Chinese funeral rites for a deceased aunt alone. With no one else available to take on this task, they are forced to navigate both duty and doctrine. “At the end of the day, actually it’s [about] the self,” said Johan. “All this social normalisation, religious pressure—they awaken this conflict. And I try to bring the conflict inwards.”

The project began in early 2024, with Johan meeting monthly with Sek Thim and Hock Kheng to workshop the script. Although first written in English, they later decided that it should be staged in Malay. “So what we did was an exercise where Sek Thim would question me and record me,” Johan explained.

“Based on the memory of the story,” added Sek Thim, “he reconstructs it in Malay, as if he’s telling it to a Malay-speaking audience.”

This emphasis on memory—in its unreliability and ambiguity—becomes central to the production’s approach. “It is a record of a memory,” Sek Thim said. “There’s no documentation of the actual event. Compounded by the fact that it happened during Covid, the [funeral] process is really truncated. Things become distorted—we’re playing with that distortion.”

BEHIND THE CREATIVE CHOICES

On the rehearsal floor, the performers move fluidly between chorus and character. The protagonist, originally written from Johan’s male perspective, is now played by a woman, Hilyati Ramli. Another fellow collaborator from *Malam Takdir*, Hilyati had earned a nomination for Best Actor in a Leading Role. For Sek Thim, her casting choice complicates



2

the work in productive ways. “The funeral process, the idea of representing the family, is essentially borne by the male in a patriarchal system,” he noted. “By juxtaposing a female character with that very male-centred ritual, it highlights a secondary layer [of narrative complexity].” Johan added that the character was intentionally left unnamed. “The narrative is [universal] irrespective of [whether the actor is] male or female.”

Although *Dua Darah* unfolds in Malay, it is also punctuated by English and Hokkien dialogue. The mother (played by Ho Sheau Fung) speaks in vernacular English, while a funeral medium (performed by Teoh Chee Lin, also the choreographer) uses Hokkien. The process of translation was collaborative and sensitive to nuances, with debates erupting between Hokkien-speaking members of the team over specific phrases. As Sek Thim mused: “Do you lean towards the writer’s intention to bring out the image, or use Hokkien in a way the audience can understand? As Sheau Fung said, we’ve got to find a balance.” He laughed, and added, “Whatever that means.”

The need for balance was also underscored in a post-reading discussion last July, when invited audience members responded to the play’s language with surprising openness. However, some suggestions were driven by a sense of caution. For instance, one line in which the protagonist questions God’s silence drew scrutiny. Some felt that the original phrasing sounded too demanding, Johan recalled. He ultimately found a satisfying solution in the word “*bisu*” (mute). “It can be very sharp, and at the same time very gentle. I like the sound of it.” But for Sek Thim, the real issue is emotional intensity, not vocabulary. “What needed reconsideration was maybe the emotional response of the performance to the text,” he said. The play, then, is not about challenging political sys-

tems, but claiming space to discuss issues that some might find troubling. “If you’re not feeling comfortable with it, why can’t we talk about it safely?”

For the cast, performing the work demands great dexterity. Hilyati admitted that her primary anxiety had little to do with potential controversy. “It’s more of how I, as a performer, am going to absorb the direction, or memorise the very long script and all the movements at the same time.” Sheau Fung concurred, describing working with Sek Thim as a painful but exciting evolution. “He’s challenging my limits all the time,” she said. “As an actress, I know my tricks. But he rejects all my tricks.” Meanwhile, Chee Lin learned to develop movement, derived from the familiar gestures of Chinese rituals as well as certain keywords. “I was thinking about how to simplify these movements,” he said. When these gestures are deconstructed and made abstract, they turn into physical motifs.

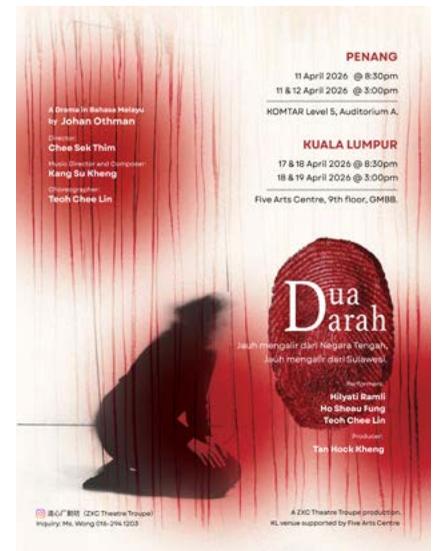
A DIFFERENT KIND OF MALAY DRAMA

Layers of text, movement and soundscape add further dimensions to *Dua Darah*, creating the texture and rhythm for what could have been a more static, interiorised story. For Hock Kheng, staging the play aligns with ZXC Theatre Troupe’s commitment to producing Penang-based work, regardless of language or theme. He described the script as being personal rather than polemical. “The audience will see two different cultures and their customs, how they truly interact. When they actually come into contact, it’s not conflict, but exchange.”

This subject matter also resonates with some of the cast members, for example Sheau Fung, whose cousin married a Malay man. “For a Chinese woman converting to Islam, it’s a lifetime effort of explaining to people, ‘I’m living like this. There’s really nothing wrong.’ But the perception of others is [still] real.”

For Johan, the play expands the possibilities of what Malay dramas can engage with, rather than shying away from the complex realities of Malaysian life. In a sense, the production team’s composition serves as a testament to how people from different disciplines and cultural backgrounds can come together to put on a show that, despite potentially weighty themes, promises to be a compelling experience.

“I don’t know how it’s going to turn out,” Sek Thim said, smiling, “but I feel that it’s going to be quite a fun production.”



***Note:** Performances of *Dua Darah* (Bahasa Melayu with English surtitles) are as follows. For tickets and inquiries, contact Ms Karen at 016-4072307 or the ZXC Theatre Troupe on Instagram (@zxc_theatre_troupe).

PENANG	
TIME	11 and 12 April 2026 @ 3:00pm 11 April 2026 @ 8:30pm
VENUE	Auditorium A, Level 5, KOMTAR
KUALA LUMPUR	
TIME	18 and 19 April 2026 @ 3:00pm
VENUE	Five Arts Centre, 9th floor, GMBB

CAPTIONS

1. Performers Ho Sheau Fung and Teoh Chee Lin in rehearsal.
2. The *Dua Darah* cast and crew.



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

AS PART OF Penang Long Art Weekend, the contemporary independent art space, Blank Canvas, showcased *A Wind-Blown Fire Needs Little Effort*, an exhibition which started on 7 March. Featuring work by its fourth resident artist, He An from China, the exhibition is inspired by his discoveries in, feelings about and reflections on Penang and Malaysia. It also marks a significant milestone for the residency, being its first featured project to be created entirely on-site.

Over a career spanning three decades, He An has earned significant international acclaim as a vital voice in contemporary art. His work has been featured in major exhibitions across China and the West, and some pieces are held in the permanent collections of prestigious global institutions. *Penang Monthly* spoke with He An to understand his approach to art, aesthetic encounters with climactic conditions and collaborative experiences with local communities.

A FULLY ENGROSSED ARTIST IN RESIDENCE

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EXPLORES
MALAYSIAN
CULTURE

BY
PAN
YI CHIEH



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URBAN EXPERIENCES AND INDUSTRIAL MATERIAL

Born in Wuhan in 1970, He An began his creative journey at the Hubei Institute of Fine Arts, where he built a rigorous foundation in the classical disciplines of sketching and painting. In 1996, he moved to Beijing to begin a career in graphic design, but by 1999, he had fully committed to art. The capital's open-minded atmosphere and burgeoning art scene acted as catalysts, providing fertile ground for him to articulate himself within a global community of creators. Today, his work frequently navigates the intersections of social issues, regional politics and cultural identities. He believes that a contemporary artist should have the capacity to engage with profound questions about identity, particularly in the context of complex sociopolitical landscapes.

Deeply influenced by the industrial landscape of his youth, his works often reflect a "wild" unpolished aesthetic that eschew aesthetic refinement for raw con-

frontations with reality. Wuhan, a powerhouse of heavy industry known for its iron works, steel mills and shipyards, provides He An with his primary visual referents. The makeshift architecture of his hometown was often constructed from salvaged scrap metal and raw industrial components. Spending his formative years in a vibrant, if marginalised, neighbourhood, he further developed a keen eye for those living on the fringes of society. Today, He An leverages the inherent properties of industrial materials to articulate profound ideas through a distinctive mirroring of the complexities of the human condition.

NEGOTIATING IDENTITY IN THE TROPICS

Despite his extensive global travels, He An had long avoided Southeast Asia because of his hesitation at living with its intense tropical heat. It was not until 2024 that he finally embarked on his first trip to Malaysia. During a one-week stay in Penang, he was profoundly impressed by its multicul-

tural dynamics, particularly its religious harmony and cultural integration, which felt entirely distinct from his previous international experiences. Deeply moved by this peaceful coexistence and the unique cultural identity of the Malaysian Chinese community—which he found distinct from China's Han-centered culture—he experienced a new wave of inspiration.

He An returned for an extended stay in 2025, which continued into early 2026. He drove across the peninsula to observe the fascinating daily rhythms, architecture and various cultural festivals in Bukit Mertajam, Kuantan and several smaller towns. He



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views the vibrancy of local festivals as the true essence of multiculturalism, observing that their traditions have been fundamentally shaped by the tropical climate. The very climate that he once shied away from is precisely what makes local cultures so pronounced and diverse, influencing everything from local cuisine to architecture. Through these journeys, his initial curiosity evolved into a deeper inquiry into culture, history and identity. He An reflected on the nuances of Chinese identity and the ways in which the culture has evolved through localisation. Rather than viewing heritage in terms of origin and purity, he is now more interested in how once-shared



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traditions have adapted to and been transformed within new environments.

This ongoing inquiry into diverse living experiences provides the creative and intellectual foundations of his residency project. The exhibition's title derives from an ancient Zen saying, later adapted into Confucianism, which foregrounds the delicate space between two fundamentally different points of view. While a Zen perspective often involves detached and passive observation, a Confucian approach strives towards strategically controlling one's circumstances. Here, He An seeks to explore and capture the "in-between" spaces separating these philosophies, mirroring his own reflections on Malaysia's multicultural landscape.

WHEN CONTEMPORARY ART MEETS LOCAL ARTISTRY

Alongside his art career, He An is also a practising Taoist priest in China. This dual role has made him intimately familiar with various religious traditions, rituals and spiritual experiences, where art and religion trace parallel paths. He found the renowned Hungry Ghost Festival ceremonies in Bukit Mertajam especially inspirational, particularly the spectacular practice of burning paper effigies. Although certain

regions in China still produce paper effigies, the intense grassroots energy and community devotion that he had witnessed in Malaysia offered a distinctly different experience.

"When I saw people adjusting the overhead cables to make space for the towering paper effigy to pass, I felt a strong sense of community driven by manual and collective grassroots power," He An said. It was deeply poetic that after community members and artisans put such immense effort into constructing these effigies, they then ritually burned them.

In *Wind-Blown Fire*, He An integrates elements of the Hungry Ghost festival and inspirations from Malaysia's vibrant multi-religious tapestry, including Taoist hand gestures, into his works. He was fortunate to have found a local Penang artisan, Samm Koh, to co-create the final pieces, including "A Wind-Blown Fire Needs Little Effort" and "Swan". Samm, a fourth-generation effigy maker involved in funeral services, is also an independent heavy metal musician. In short, Samm possessed not just mastery of delicate traditional techniques but also a "wild" contemporary edge. As a bridge between disparate worlds, capable of weaving many different experiences together, He An had found the perfect collaborator.

Samm and his team skillfully combined traditional religious structures with He An's artistic vision and signature use of materials to produce a unique work. Their work also involved a meticulous process of blackening paper: He An insisted on using pencils to colour blank white paper, which glistened with the polished, metallic sheen of graphite. To achieve this tedious goal, he worked closely with students from Universiti Sains Malaysia's School of the Arts, whose assistance he deeply valued. This act of creation mattered more than the final result. Like a Taoist priest writing out a talisman, it was really the process that invested artwork with power.

***Note:** *A Wind-Blown Fire Needs Little Effort* runs at Blank Canvas until 10 May 2026. This article is based on an interview with He An on 25 February, his artist's statement and a sharing session on 7 March (featuring He An and Kwong Yee Leong, the founder of Blank Canvas). All photographs courtesy of Blank Canvas.

CAPTIONS

1. (Cover spread) He An in the exhibition space.
2. A series of three works from the exhibition.
3. He An, Samm Koh and his team, with artisans Tan Chin Tien and Lee Teik Joo.
4. He An and Samm Koh's team installing the exhibition.
5. During his research lecture, He An shared his insights into Malaysian architecture.
6. Blank Canvas is dedicated to fostering artistic dialogue. Here, He An shares his creative journey and the inspirations he found in Penang and elsewhere in Malaysia.



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.

ONE OF MALAYSIA'S FEW FEMALE SILVERSMITHS REINVENTS THE CRAFT

BY SAMANTHA KHOO



AS JESSIE KOH switched from her front- to back-facing cellphone camera, I leaned in closer to my laptop screen for a virtual tour of her studio in Kuala Lumpur. Rolling mills. Heavy hammers. Blowtorches with oxygen tanks. These were just some of the equipment necessary for bringing delicate silver jewellery to life, inspired by Asian natural and cultural heritage in general, and her Peranakan Chinese heritage in particular. These pieces, from the hands of one of Malaysia's few female silversmiths, are available for sale through Jessie's Trinket Trove and JK Gems, where skillfully fashioned rings, necklaces and pendants await buyers with discerning taste. I spoke with Jessie to find out how and why she became a silversmith, what entrepreneurship in the jewellery industry looks like and her hopes for the craft's future.



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REDISCOVERING CRAFT

Jessie grew up surrounded by craftsmanship. "My father, who served in the army, would build furniture and do carpentry at home, and I would help out. My mother was a housewife, and she worked with fabric, sewing clothes and crocheting," Jessie began. "One fond memory I will always remember is making [my own] dresses with my mother. We'd pick out the fabrics, take my measurements, and I would help with the simpler parts of sewing the dress." Inspiration did not start and end with family members alone. In the evenings, RTM aired two-minute segments on art and culture. Jessie remembered being mesmerised by how traditional crafts such as *keris* and *wau* were fabricated, which further fuelled her interest in artisanal work.

Although Jessie went on to build a career in the corporate sector, specifically in telecommunications, her desire to create art kept brewing. As she tinkered with various crafts between jobs, she found herself gradually drawn to fashioning jewellery even as she continued climbing the corporate ladder. By the end of her 20-year stint, she had received accolades and recognition for her work. Yet Jessie's long-term plan was always to return to, and create, something with her hands.

She finally took a leap of faith and left her career altogether. "My parents were concerned about whether I'd have any work to do, naturally. But my colleagues and friends celebrated. They knew first-hand how work stress can eat you up," she said, remembering the burnout that she experienced at work.

Jessie enthusiastically began her new trajectory with metalsmithing, using bronze, brass and copper as raw materials. She learned to melt, shape and cut metal into jewellery, marking the start of her jewellery business, Jessie's Trinket Trove. Eventually, she picked up more robust techniques to create higher-quality pieces made only with silver. Jessie's Trinket Trove laid the groundwork for JK Gems, marketed as an outlet for more refined artisanal silver jewellery. Each piece takes up to several weeks to create and tells a story in the process. "I always knew [that] I wanted to create pieces that would last, something that would grow old with you," Jessie said.



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SUSTAINING AND RENEWING SILVERSMITHING

In the past, silversmiths were not primarily jewellers, but worked on larger pieces of silverware such as *keris* and trophies. However, rapidly changing commodity prices have rendered larger items unaffordable. “With the increasing price of silver, the artisans are making fewer large piece. Today we can only afford to make smaller jewellery pieces that people will want to wear,” Jessie said. The increasing precarity of the craft also means that she is part of a small community of active practitioners. According to a Kraftangan Malaysia and Tradisi Busana PR Sdn Bhd study, there were already fewer than 40 silversmiths working nationwide in 2018, marking a huge drop from the 200 or so artisans active in 1995.^[1] Silversmithing is now under threat due to a lack of customer appreciation among younger generations and fierce competition with cheaper, albeit lower-quality, mass-market alternatives.

Jessie is fully committed to investing equal energy and enthusiasm in keeping silversmithing alive, both as a desirable commodity and a repository of heritage. This is where her corporate background becomes useful. Engaging in traditional crafts today is not merely about replicating established techniques, but revisiting them as *art*—a serious creative endeavour. And the silversmith cannot just be an artisan, but must also be actively involved in reinventing tradition, becoming a

bastion of knowledge and serving as a one-person sales and marketing team. Aside from designing and creating pieces, Jessie also runs her own booths at pop-up markets. If you visit them, you will likely see her in action with her equipment, shaping her next piece as she awaits customers.

Her jewellery is fashioned at her studio in Plaza Damas, My Artisan Hub, which has become more than just a functional workspace. Not content with making and selling jewellery alone, she also runs on-site workshops to teach others the art of metalsmithing. “I encourage people to step out of their comfort zones and make their own jewellery. It’s a time-consuming process, which is perfect for those who want to slow down,” she explained. Her one-day workshops are designed for beginners, while the six-day boot camps cater to more serious learners.

“There’s a lot to manage in my work, and it still gets stressful, but at least I’m doing what I love, which makes it feel less like work and more like personal fulfilment,” she said. “After all, making art is how we remember we’re alive.”

***Note:** Learn more about Jessie’s Trinket Trove at <https://www.instagram.com/trinketrove/?hl=en>, JK Gems at <https://www.jk-gems.com/> and My Artisan Hub at <https://myartisanhub.com.my/>.

CAPTIONS

1. (Cover page) Jessie’s latest collection.
2. Warisan Peranakan Cuff with rose quartz and tourmaline.
3. Eternal Flora Triangle labradorite and topaz pendant.
4. Turquoise engraved cuff.
5. Chalcedony floral cuff from the Peranakan Series.
6. Eternal Flora carnelian and garnet pendant.
7. Jessie shaping and buffing her creation. She needs to wear a mask as this part of her work creates fine airborne particles.
8. The making of a Peranakan cuff.
9. Jessie in her workshop.

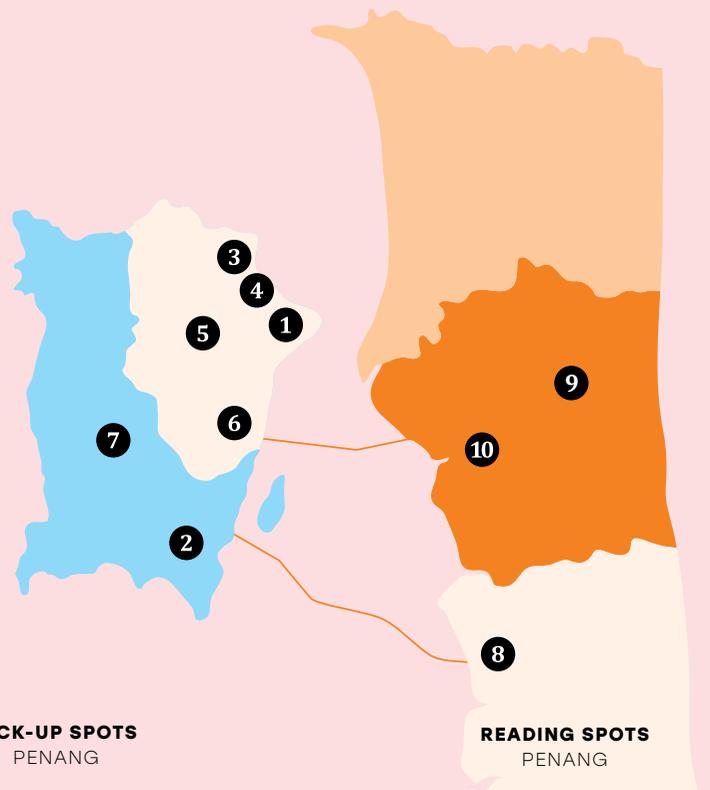
ENDNOTE

1. Described in: *Today Online*. (2018, December 8). “Saving Kelantan’s silversmiths... with handmade shoes.” <https://www.todayonline.com/world/saving-kelantans-silversmiths-handmade-shoes>.



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.

HERE'S WHERE YOU CAN FIND PENANG MONTHLY



PICK-UP SPOTS KL/SELANGOR

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

PICK-UP SPOTS PENANG

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

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

READING SPOTS PENANG

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



WATER FOR ALL

PBAPP works to supply clean and potable tap water to all domestic and non-domestic water consumers in Penang, on a 24/7/365 basis.

However, Penang is a water-stressed state with a limited land area (1,059 km²) and limited water catchment areas (62.9 km² of precious hillside forests).

For now, we only have one primary raw water resource (Sungai Muda), and we share it with Kedah.

Climate change has affected seasonal rainfall in dam water catchment areas.

Everyone who lives and works in Penang needs water every day.

Please make it a point to use water at home and at work wisely, so that we have enough for all.

Please support our target of lowering per capita domestic consumption in Penang to 250 litres/capita/day (LCD) or less in 2026.

