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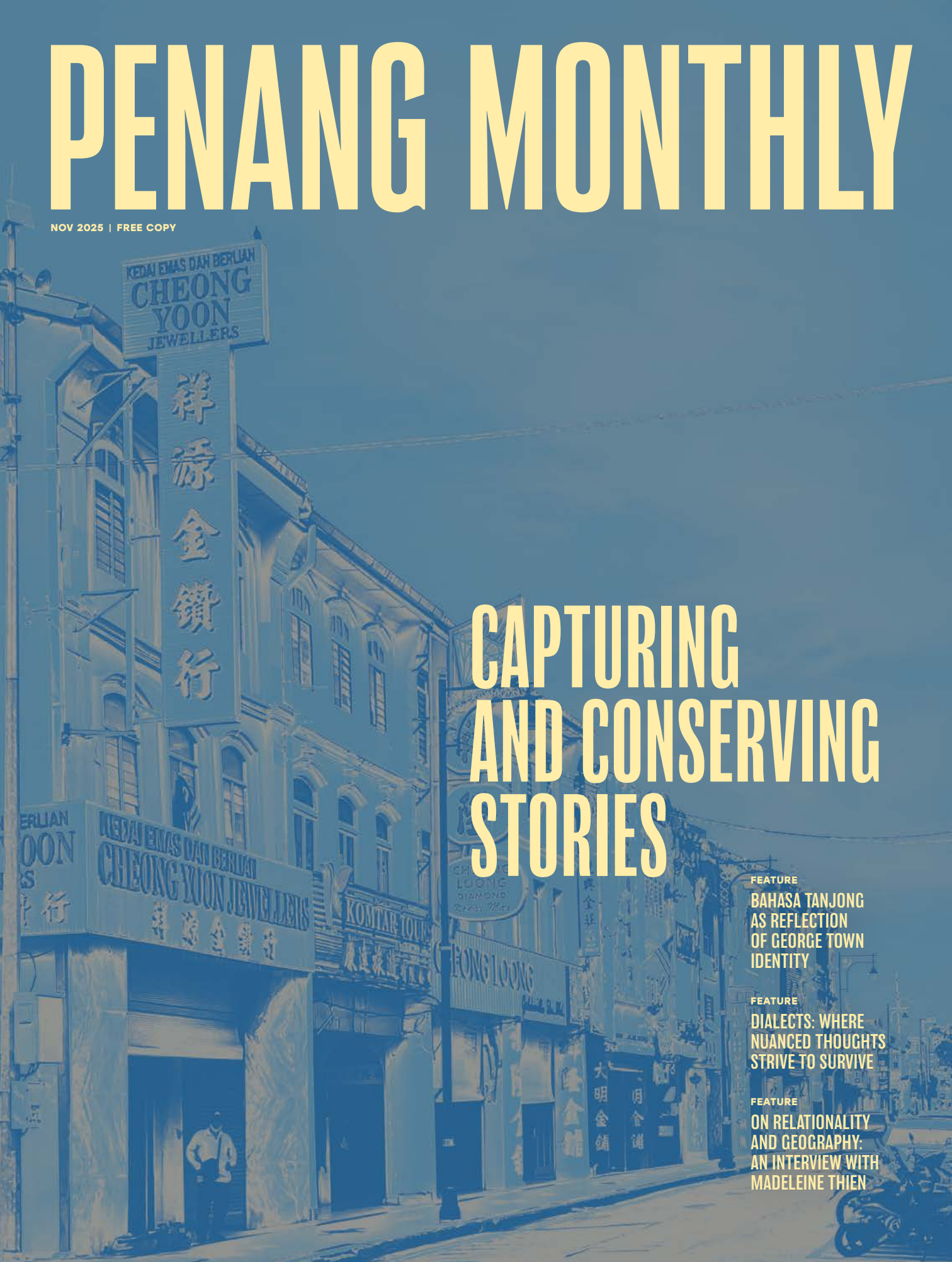

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1. Supply Penangites with information about significant issues in order to promote public participation;
2. Encourage discussion about various aspects of Penang's fate and fortune;
3. Profile Penang personalities who have contributed, sometimes in 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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GTLF

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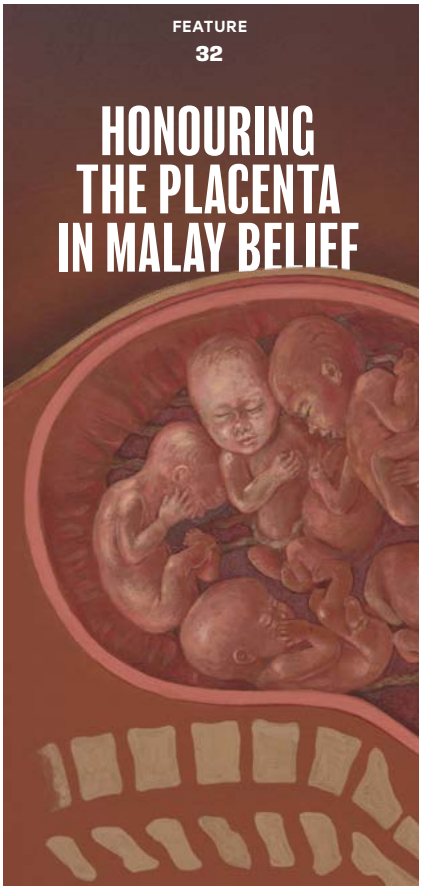

GTLF

ONE OF PENANG INSTITUTE'S TWO ANNUAL FLAGSHIP EVENTS

BY
OOI KEE BENG

FESTIVALS ARE BASICALLY a picnic at the community level, aren't they? And just like family picnics, festivals seek to bond. Favourite snacks are brought along by uncles and aunties, favourite games are arranged for the children, and favourite drinks in all colours are prepared to avail all who are kind enough to come. There is always hope that distant relatives as well as close ones who live far away will somehow find the time and the impulse to turn up. To enjoy and to add to the enjoyment.

The expectancy is always high. And one hopes the weather will be kind, that all will behave, and that no bad argument breaks out.

Picnics are such optimistic events, come to think of it. A paradise for the multitasker, a dream for those in the family who love to keep connections alive, a time to touch base. Much can go wrong at picnics, no doubt, but they hold so much promise.

Picnics not only seek to reinforce a sense of natural belonging in all who attend, but also offer a rare chance for all to step outside their normal roles, air their minds and relive some youthful delights. Without being prompted, people come dressed casually, brightly, even outrageously. Daring the weather to be cruel.

Festivals are the same, writ large. They are always optimistic events. All those attending are expected to come with time on their hands, space in their heads and curiosity in their eyes.

Just as family picnics are usually arranged by relatives with some means, festivals have to be funded in some way, or they have to be commercially viable. The latter tends to turn them into fairs.

Picnics also need to be repeated, turned into occasional family events.

A good picnic has to end with kind phrases like: "See you again soon"; "We must do this again soon"; "Next time at our place"; "Give my warmest regards to the family"; et cetera. Likewise, festivals cannot be once-off events. They need to become something that drums the rhythm of the community's year. Just like the Mid-Autumn Festival, Easter, Ramadan, New Year's Day. Festivals are heritage of the future being made. They are collective identity markers.

Living in a time of great disruptions in lived environments, in global conditions, in career paths, the need for simple social pleasures such as picnics, fairs and festivals is a matter of psychological health today. No demands, only one's presence is needed.

Pleasures. That's a good word. Please. Pleasant. Pleasurable. Pleasing.

Likewise, Presence. Being there. Being here. Being.

Being in a crowd, yet being in your own head—that is what a literary festival can offer.

Literariness is a quality not often recognised as a key element in individual development. In multicultural societies like those in Penang or Malaysia, daily language use tends to be all too functional, and thus not contemplative or philosophical in nature. There is little space for poetry, for quick wit, for enjoyment of a good turn of phrase. We are too busy remembering old books, or books read in school; we are too busy making a living; and we are too busy staying divided, maintaining collective boundaries so as not to get into a violent argument (or get put in jail).

The George Town Literary Festival (GTLF)—which was initiated in 2011—remains a yearly affair that reminds the People of Penang that developing literariness, being literate is a never-ending project. Our language use is not a matter fully subsumed under, and thus equal to, our ethnic identity. Our personal thoughts are not necessarily the thoughts of our ethnic group.

Besides being this reminder, the Festival wishes to be a platform that offers individuals who love to read, to write, to talk and to listen, a chance to experience the collective freedom all these simple acts provide.

There is no private language. Our thoughts are never only our own. They are continual discussions, be this in oral conversations or in written or posted form.

There are few better places in the region than little, historical and pluralistic George Town, where a literary picnic can be held; which the world can participate in; where pretentions can be low, but ambitions high.

Lifelong learning means lifelong reading, lifelong writing for some, and lifelong conversations. For such reasons, GTLF will from now be considered one of the Institute's Annual Flagship Events, the other being the Penang Economic Forum (PEF) held mid-year. GTLF will express the cultural and intellectual essence of Penang, while the PEF will study the economic realities of the state.

Penang Institute has been organising GTLF since 2024, and it does what it can to encourage lovers of books and lovers of language, wherever they may be based, to take seriously the belief they feel within that they have a lot yet to say and to contribute by reading, talking, writing and discussing.

Literacy, literariness, literature. These are the most basic of human rights. Like picnics.

STORIES ON THE STREET
GTLF 2024

BY TEIOH NUAN NING

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

EVEN BEFORE I arrived in Penang for the annual George Town Literary Festival (GTLF) in late November, I was familiar with the fabled festival. An old English teacher of mine told stories about bringing gaggles of students from my alma mater in Seremban all the way to Penang to attend GTLF—a journey he had been consistently making for the better part of a decade. I never tired of hearing those tales of mischief—literary or otherwise—and finally attended the festival in 2024 to see for myself.

In perusing the online catalogue, I discovered just how flush GTLF 2024's programme was—forums, lectures and workshops were tightly packed into three full days, often with multiple events happening simultaneously. There were panel discussions, interviews, exhibitions, book readings, movie screenings and more, all spread across a whopping 10 different locations in the heart of George Town. Let the festivities begin!

2

A LITERARY FEAST

The main draw for visitors who travel to Penang solely for the festival is that there are no other public gatherings in Malaysia of writers—and publishers, historians, translators, journalists and readers—that even come close to GTLF's scale and range. While the festival has historically focused on local literary talent, it spotlights a fair share of regional and international authors too. There's literature on the page to spoken word poetry, panels in multiple languages, and talent ranging from the burgeoning to the established. What is fascinating is how the festival functions also as a melting pot, and forces different ideas to interact.

Taiwanese author, Kevin Chen, whose session focused on his novel *Ghost Town*, talks about his autofiction (the main character is named Keith Chen). Three hours later, during a panel about historical fiction, the novelist, Jeroen Olyslaegers, advises that fiction—including his own—should not derive its drama from an author's real life. There is a contradiction, but no tension. By bringing together a group of authors diverse not only in country of origin, but also in literary styles, upbringing and personality, GTLF sets the stage for such implicit conversations.

Ultimately, neither the festival nor its writers defend a single right answer; they only present a range of perspectives worth considering. In doing so, they question my biases of what makes good fiction—or what makes fiction at all. It's a grounding reminder that in the sprawling diversity of the literary arts, there may be a range of answers, but rarely a single right one.

I'm encouraged to investigate a broader variety of books, expanding my tastes and reading list with a newfound hunger that is easily satiated by what's on offer at the festival's marketplace. Besides helping me burn through my wallet, the booksellers here are passionate and incredibly knowledgeable. They can recommend a book for any mood, have read most regional authors cover-to-cover and are even friends with some of them. There's no better place to get a literary prescription.

WORD ON THE STREET

The most memorable part of GTLF 2024 is its humanisation of not only the writers it spotlights, but of literature itself. It dismantles the illusory ivory towers, and situates literature firmly "on the street". Literature trickles into the everyday: it is no longer just about studying an archaic poem in class, but has purpose and meaning, especially off the page. Across three days, I remain enraptured by hour-long panels about literature's involvement in issues from nation building to love and romance.

Even archaic poetry makes a resurgence. The annual Hikayat Lecture on Literary Translation tackles the poetry of Ibn Khaldun, a figure who was completely foreign to me prior to the festival. Entering the lecture, I knew nothing about Arabic poetry or scholarship; I leave the session with only marginally more information, but infinitely more curiosity.

The sincere passion of the speakers is a common thread that runs throughout the festival; it is what allows GTLF to tackle dense topics and make them both exciting and beginner-friendly. In this case, the lecture is made gripping with wacky stories about Ibn Khaldun's life and friends, and earnest readings of his poems and letters.

IN THE HEART OF GEORGE TOWN

One of the festival's most intriguing strengths is its ability to turn George Town itself into its literary spectacle. From its main event buildings at Bangunan UAB and Bangunan Wawasan to movie screenings at Khoo Kongsi, as well as the book launches, signings and readings at various hotels, including Tan Twan Eng's (aptly) at the Sun Yat Sen Museum, the festival's peripatetic curation necessitates a pilgrimage through a city rich in history and heritage. It takes a village; this festival employs an entire city.

Across three days, even the festival's patrons become an inextricable part of the GTLF backdrop. There is the woman, who moves from panel to panel making ink sketches of every speaker in her catalogue; a group of friends, who look old enough to be my grandparents; and the Californian tourist, who stumbled upon the festival and stayed long enough for us to discover a shared love for Cixin Liu's novels.

The festival embraces its street style with gusto, even down to its poster, which features a retro road sign as the festival's recurring motif, inviting visitors to move from the metaphorical streets to the physical, UNESCO-designated ones. Ban Ban Kia hosts a walking tour of George Town to this end, not to highlight Penang's architecture, which holds an undeniably rich colonial history, but to draw attention to its shop signs.

3

From the nuances of typography to the legacy that their invisible craftsmen leave behind, it is a testament to the fact that stories are everywhere; you only need to know where to look. The festival, with its myriad of passionate scholars and lovers of literature, is more than happy to point you in the right direction.

AN ESSENTIAL EXPERIENCE

"We tell ourselves stories in order to live," said Didion.

Tan Twan Eng, the festival's keynote speaker, says something similar, albeit with a little more optimism: "Stories give us pleasure, and stories hold societies together." GTLF certainly does that. It is an accumulation of the stories we tell about stories and, above all, a recognition of the importance of narratives of all kinds.

For those who believe themselves to be non-readers, it is my belief that GTLF will convert them, if not into readers, then into people who like or want to read from time to time; if not through its plethora of literary offerings, then at the very least, through the infectious community that assembles like clockwork each year. There really is something for everyone. If you haven't found it yet, you just haven't stayed long enough.

CAPTIONS

1. (Cover page) An evening during the outdoor film screening at Khoo Kongsi, George Town.

2. The "Suite Conversation" session featuring writers, Tan Twan Eng and Sharon Bakar, at the E&O Hotel.

3. Writers perform and share their work during the Spoken Word segment at the closing ceremony of the festival.

REAI THE PENANG STREETS

BY TAN SHU MIN

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I STEP OUT of the house, shoulders slumped, still half-asleep. It's still dark; it's before sunrise, and the white ceiling light draws my eyes to the signage by the door. Letters leap out, bold and insistent. The first row demands immediate recognition, the second edges in politely and quietly, almost apologetically. Another row curls at the bottom, delicate, easy to overlook. Yet another twists like tiny bean sprouts, odd little shapes clinging and looping, hovering between legibility and ornamentation.

DING SIGNS HAVE A LOT TO SAY

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APAN TANDA

படித்தல் சனை்

MULTILINGUAL MARKETS: EVERYDAY PRAGMATISM, MULTILINGUAL INCLUSIVITY

In Penang's wet markets, multilingualism is not a spectacle; it is the backdrop. At Jelutong Market, mornings echo with the sounds of metal clanging, aunties haggling, uncles ordering Nasi Lemak, motorbikes nudging through bodies. Above this bustle, the market sign presides with bureaucratic stillness. Once red, now faded white, it crowns the top of the arc: "Pasar Jelutong" in Malay. Below, three black scripts—Chinese, English, Tamil—are stacked evenly like footnotes. No one pauses to marvel at this. The sign simply works: pragmatic, inclusive, recognition without fuss. Each language extends a hand to someone, quietly accommodating the polyglot crowd. And yet, what makes this scene striking is precisely its ordinariness.

Multilingualism here is banal, part of the fabric that holds daily life together. As Higgins and Coen remind us in *Streets, Bedrooms and Patios,* "as homo sapiens, we are all the same in terms of genetic structure and cognitive potentiality… Beyond that, we do not think that as humans we have anything in common but our differences; there is no general human nature to be found." What makes life collective, then, is not sameness, but difference—an ordinariness of diversity that structures *how* people live together. In Malaysia, perhaps what binds is less a shared cultural core than the everyday recognition that difference is the baseline. Whether among relatives, friends, colleagues or acquaintances, there is often little that is "common" beyond the label "Malaysian". In this sense, Jelutong's sign doesn't just accommodate; it enacts this ordinariness, quietly normalising the coexistence of differences that is the texture of daily life.

Yet, this very ordinariness also reveals another tension: the sign does not simply display Malay, Chinese, English and Tamil as parallel "systems", but layers them as voices on one wall—some dominant, others quiet, even ghosted. The ease of moving between scripts may feel mundane, but as Craig Calhoun reminds us, to de-emphasise such differences as if they were neutral would be to "fail to grapple with the real, present-day political and other reasons why essentialist identities continue to be invoked and often deeply felt." The market, in this sense, is a site where histories of exclusion and belonging are continually performed, and where lived identities are dialogically negotiated.

This tension becomes visible when we consider why Pasar Jelutong, in particular, has become one of the largest and most central markets in Penang. Its scale and structure are not simply the result of commerce or geography; they also reflect historical and political decisions privileging Malay as the national language, alongside policies that designed schooling, signage and public life. Malay scripts take visual precedence in national spaces, while English, Chinese and Tamil remain in place, but moved to a secondary role, manifesting a hierarchy shaped by post-independence educational and language policies.

Viewed through Edgar Schneider's lens, the multilingual signage of Jelutong Market represents a "feature pool" of linguistic choices, selected by the market's diverse communities. Vendors and shoppers navigate this pool strategically: Malay signals official authority, English appears in some contexts, Chinese scripts signal commercial presence and Tamil acknowledges smaller audiences. Yet, what makes Pasar Jelutong distinctive in Penang is the prominence of Hokkien—not just in speech, but in written exchanges—shaping daily interactions in ways uncommon elsewhere.

As Mikhail Bakhtin reminds us, "each word tastes of the context and contexts in which it has lived its socially charged life; all words and forms are populated by intentions." The use of Hokkien, alongside Malay, English and Tamil, carries its own social weight, signalling relationships, authority and belonging in ways that extend beyond mere communication. Thus, if the

signs' ordinariness quietly sustains daily life, their polyphony reveals the histories, choices and intentions embedded in every script—a tension inherent in the routine and socially charged realities of multilingual urban life.

Once, on an off-Sunday, I wandered Jelutong Market during its non-peak hours; strangely, the usual chorus of haggling and clanging was absent. Without the noise, my eyes stopped skimming, and I began to notice what I usually miss. In the lull, more signs stood out. Behind the current market sign, almost swallowed by the same paint as the wall, another "Jelutong Market" lingers. The old lettering—English only, plain, utilitarian—is half-erased, but not gone, a ghost buried in the concrete. The new sign doesn't replace it so much as cover it, as if pluralism were something you could bolt upon history. Even in silence, the ghosted English lettering emanates the social histories of a past era—colonial, commercial, ordinary—but it coexists with the present multilingual scripts, creating a Bakhtinian polyphony of multiple voices resonating across generations of market users.

In contrast, to the right, the "No to Bogus Monks" sign speaks in English and Chinese, not Malay or Tamil. English, the language of colonial administration, signals wider intelligibility, while Chinese addresses the dominant local community. Its choice of language reveals its audience—and, more tellingly, who it casts as the "problem". In a market where Chinese traders and shoppers are prominent, the warning polices trust and regulates social and economic behaviour. Yet, there is humour in its blunt specificity: the line between "real" and "fake" monks is serious but comical, reflecting everyday negotiations of loyalty, caution and belonging. Viewed this way, the market itself emerges as a space where official or national linguistic hierarchies are subtly resisted: local actors deploy language strategically, blending authority, vernacular and humour to shape their own social terrain.

As Higgins and Coen observe, if we focus only on "the language of oppression and alienation", we miss how languages also carry pleasure, creativity and play—the "radical accent of the popular language of our times". At Jelutong Market, these everyday linguistic practices matter because they do more than facilitate trade: they turn haggling into wit, gossip into negotiation, and blunt warnings into comic interactions. The signage acts as convivial infrastructure, extending recognition, teasing and shared humour—and shaping social life with the same energy and inventiveness as the *pasar* stalls themselves, producing affective ties across differences without spectacle.

WALKING THROUGH WOR(L)DS

Street signs do more than guide movement—they preserve and reveal layered histories of conflict, commerce and community memory. Head down to Penang Road, Little India or Chulia Street; there, Malay, English, Chinese and Tamil scripts jostle for your attention. Kedai Langsir Belfort, Elegance Carpet Trading, Cheong Yoon, Bon Loon, Kedai Emas… Each one a tongue sticking out, demanding recognition from passers-by who may never glance at the storefronts. These signs don't just inform; they insist—they perform.

Yet, the stakes here differ from those in markets like Jelutong Market; while markets stage multilingualism as social life in motion, street signs inscribe history and power in public spaces. Juxtaposing the two highlights the fact that language in Penang is simultaneously banal, playful and politically loaded—shaping interactions in real time, while preserving layered histories across the city.

This jumble of scripts is exactly what scholars of the linguistic landscape (LL) seek to examine. Rodrigue Landry and Richard Bourhis define linguistic landscape as the visibility and prominence of languages on public and commercial signs, serving both informational purposes—guiding communication—and symbolic purposes, signalling social and cultural presence. The size, placement and prominence of scripts reveal the relative power of language communities, reinforcing hierarchies even when multiple languages coexist.

Carnarvon Street exemplifies this layered complexity very well. Though named for the fourth Earl of Carnarvon, its pavement tells a messier story. In 1867, the Penang riots divided the town along ethnic and social lines: the "White Flag" and "Red Flag" factions—Jawi Peranakan and Indian Muslim communities—clashed, while Hokkien societies along Lebuh Armenian and Cantonese groups near Jalan Pintal Tali aligned with opposing sides. The street became a literal fault line, cutting through neighbourhoods and inscribing allegiances into the city's geography.


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> **"... scripts are not just top-down markers of authority, but tools wielded by those who live, work and move through these spaces. Residents, travellers and communities actively negotiate presence, identity and belonging, adapting them to daily life and practice."**

By the mid-20th century, conflict had given way to commerce. Bookstores lined the street, and coffins stacked against shop walls gave death a constant public presence. Yet, stories and books also flourished, offering a subtle reprieve from the violence. Today, only a few coffin makers remain, but Carnarvon Street continues to carry its layered history—of conflict, commerce and community.

Even now, letting your eyes wander the streets reveals how signage structures attention and social meaning. At The Cosmorama Educational Supply, Chinese characters stretch across the top in dark blue, drawing the eye, while Jawi snakes quietly along the bottom, curling like a soft whisper. The street addresses multiple audiences simultaneously: Chinese shoppers are invited first, while Malay ones are discreetly acknowledged. By contrast, Nanyang Publishers arranges its scripts differently: Chinese dominates the largest visual space in bold, Jawi hovers at the top, and English sits modestly at the bottom.

Using Landry and Bourhis' perspective, Malay's position reflects symbolic power: it is always present, asserting legitimacy and state authority, but it does not necessarily capture the eye or dominate the street in daily interactions. This uneven visibility nuances our understanding of power in the linguistic landscape: it is not only about which language is most prominent, but how each script functions socially—managing commerce, making community membership and shaping affective ties. From a structuralist perspective, one might simply categorise languages by dominance or hierarchy, but as Julie Choi argues, treating languages as bounded "systems" flattens the lived complexity of multilingual experiences. Instead, the scripts on Carnarvon Street and elsewhere in Penang are better understood as voices in dialogue.

Campbell Street offers another illustration of this phenomenon. Named after Sir William Robert Campbell, Penang's Inspector General from 1886 to 1891, the street carries layers of social and linguistic history in its very names. Unofficial nicknames like "*fa kai*" ("flower street" in Cantonese) and the Malay "Jalan Makau" reference Cantonese sex workers and the port of Macau, encoding social and cultural narratives in language itself. As Michael Foucault reminds us, power is not only top-down, but exercised in particular ways within specific spaces; here, residents and shopkeepers enact and negotiate influence through language itself. Today, the street is lined with a mix of older and newer shops, selling clothes and handicrafts, yet its language remains performative and contingent—partially hidden, requiring careful attention to uncover its histories.

Heritage conservation complicates this dynamic further. Streets that my parents and grandparents remember as worn, informal and layered with faded Chinese, Jawi, Tamil and English now appear "done up", with polished façades and standardised scripts. Grants from programmes such as Think City's George Town Grants provide funding to restore shophouses, but these interventions often standardise scripts and façades, subtly privileging languages and forms that align with tourist or UNESCO expectations. Malay may officially dominate, but in curated spaces, its visibility is secondary.

This selective visibility is a form of symbolic power: it signals which communities and histories are deemed worth preserving, and which are marginalised, echoing Pierre Bourdieu's insight that scripts carry cultural capital and reinforce hierarchies. What is "heritage" becomes intertwined with what is marketable, legible and aesthetically appealing, rather than what reflects the lived multilingual experience of local communities.

In Foucaultian perspective, power is exercised relationally and locally: scripts are not just top-down markers of authority, but tools wielded by those who live, work and move through these spaces. Residents, travellers and communities actively negotiate presence, identity and belonging, adapting them to daily life and practice. In areas where buildings have remained largely untouched, older signage endures, preserving Chinese, Jawi, Tamil and English scripts in ways that reflect historical continuity. Grassroot initiatives like Ban Ban Kia celebrate this heritage, archiving Penang's unique old shop signs, while drawing attention to the living, locally produced layers of multilingual culture.

Penang is a place that beckons you (and me) to pay attention, to wander, to let your eyes browse the many scripts born of history, commerce and community in equal measure. In Penang, the city's history is well articulated—for those who are willing to be literate.

SHUMIN TAN is an educator who enjoys writing on the side. She writes personal essays and poetry that wander through questions of home, language, and identity. A third-culture kid at heart, her works have found homes in *Singapore Unbound*, *Jom Magazine* and at the European Cultural Centre.

BAHASA TANJONG

AS REFLECTION OF GEORGE TOWN IDENTITY

“HANGPA NAK PI MANA?”

In George Town, this line immediately sparks familiarity and placeness. Bahasa Tanjong, Penang’s distinct Malay variety, is symbolic of the island’s layered identities and histories. While it is described as George Town’s Malay dialect, Bahasa Tanjong is a variation of the northern Malay dialect that, according to researchers, took shape over two centuries ago, making it more than just an accent.

In many ways, Bahasa Tanjong is a living archive of trade, migration and everyday intimacy. Words are borrowed and reshaped from a mesh of Tamil, Hokkien and English. Small discourse markers, like *dok*, *na*, *hangpa*, provide affectionate or softness when making requests or calling kin. It is spoken by people who grew up with Penang’s social life, and it continues to symbolise belonging in a city that is always amalgamating and racing toward a high-tech future.

BY
LIANI MK

BAHASA TANJONG: A DIALECT BORN OF CONTACT

Bahasa Tanjong's literal translation is "language of the cape", and refers to a Malay dialect associated with George Town (locally known as Tanjong). Linguists and historians draw its connections with the Jawi Peranakan community—Indian Muslim families in Penang —where multilingual domestic lives produced a variant of Malay coloured by Tamil, Malay, English and other local languages. Scholarly work frames Bahasa Tanjong as a northern Malay variety with distinctive lexical and phonological features that set it apart from Standard Malay.

A few features stand out on first listen. The sentence particle *dok* often softens or cushions a statement. Words like *hangpa* stands in for plural "you" instead. The "r" is often rolled in a rounded way associated with northern Malay varieties; and you'll hear a "gha"-like articulation in certain consonant clusters that point to regional northern Malay phonology.

Penang's multilingual cityscape ranges from Hokkien traders, Tamil shopkeepers, Malay *kampungs*, Eurasian families and the British colonial bureaucracy. This has created the conditions for Bahasa Tanjong to emerge. Where languages meet, they mix: in market bargaining, in wedding songs and in the quotidian habit of switching mid-sentence.

Research into Penang's linguistic landscape shows that Bahasa Tanjong historically functioned not only as a home dialect, but also as a heritage variety used in local print, theatre and correspondence—especially within the Jawi Peranakan community. Over the 20th century, however, the standardisation of Malay under post-independence language policy and urban demographic shifts pushed many regional dialects into more intimate, domestic spheres. The dialect survives in everyday banter, family jokes, stage plays and increasingly in online skits and community archives that celebrate localness.

LINGUISTIC PROFILE OF GEORGE TOWN

Walk through George Town and you'll hear code-switching across different languages, (often directed at food, the traffic or everyday chitchat): Hokkien curse words, Tamil sentence-final particles, English loanwords from colonial-era commerce and Malay forms mutated by local history. Bahasa Tanjong sits at the centre of that web. From Tamil it takes not only lexical items, but sometimes discourse particles; from English it borrows functional vocabulary (especially for workplace and colonial-era admin items); and from Hokkien it uses rhythmic phrasings that influence pacing and emphasis.

That mixing produces a speech style that functions as social shorthand. Saying *hangpa* instead of *kamu semua* or tacking *dok* on the end of a sentence does more than vary grammar, but it signals familiarity, local membership, sometimes humour or irony. For many Penangites, language choices are a quick way to place someone inside or outside a local social world.

BAHASA TANJONG IN POP CULTURE

Bahasa Tanjong is an old friend to Malaysia's popular culture. From the comic timing of P. Ramlee (a Penang native whose films often reflexively imagined local speech and class differences) to local cinema and stage in later years, this dialect has been used to index authenticity, provincial wit or, at times, caricature. More recent Malay-language films and web skits rework those associations that sometimes mimic Tanjong speech for laugh lines, sometimes elevating it as cultural distinctiveness—as seen with A. Razak Mohaideen's *Anak Mami* films that revolve around Penang's Jawi Peranakan families, and the upcoming *Mamu Georgetown*, which is in production this year.

While the use of Bahasa Tanjong in pop culture can provide interesting conversations on ethnicity and spread recognition of the dialect, it can, however, also flatten the community that is associated with it. Thus, the challenge for storytellers is to use Bahasa Tanjong respectfully while still centering real people's voices rather than clichés.

THE DIALECT AND THE MACHINES: AI, DATA AND REPRESENTATION

Penang's present is paradoxical. The island is a manufacturing and tech hub, home to semiconductor plants and engineering clusters. The state government has signalled an appetite to build an AI ecosystem to attract talent and investment. Recent local reporting on Penang's AI ambitions illustrates a push to upskill workers and invest in digital infrastructure as part of economic strategy.

But what happens to a dialect like Bahasa Tanjong as AI becomes the lingua franca of services and automation? Large Language Models (LLMs) and speech recognition systems are typically trained on dominant, standardised varieties of language. Dialects, slang and code-switching, which do heavy social work in places like George Town, are often under-represented in training datasets. That leads to systematic bias: speech recognition that mistranscribes, translation tools that flatten nuance and chatbots that misunderstand local pragmatics.

The fix is partly technical, deliberately collecting dialectal corpora, tagging code-switched speech and training models to handle mixed inputs. At the same time, it is partly political in deciding which speech forms "count" for digital infrastructure funding. There are early local moves to build datasets and partnerships between linguists and tech developers in Malaysia's universities and civil society. For Bahasa Tanjong, representation in AI systems would mean that chatbots, accessibility tools and heritage-digitisation projects could better reflect Penang's lived voice rather than erasing it.

WHAT BAHASA TANJONG TELLS US ABOUT PENANG

If Bahasa Tanjong can teach planners anything, it is that urban modernity and local belonging do not have to be opposites. The same city that builds chip fabs and AI labs is also one that folds discourse particles into everyday speech. Recognising and preserving that speech is not just sentimentalism, but is also civic intelligence. Language is how people claim the city for themselves.

The dialect's continuity in markets, family talk, community theatre and online platforms shows that cultural survival is adaptive, not static. As Penang navigates its technological ambitions, the question is not whether the city will change (it will), but whether it will do so while keeping room for the humour, hybridity and nuance that languages encode.

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

DIAL

BY
IZZUDDIN RAMLI

WHEN I'M ASKED to explain the Kelantanese Malay dialect, I often begin with a listening trick. I say two phrases: *ikan makan kucing* and *ikan makan kkucing* (with a sharp emphasis on the "k"). On paper, they look identical. But to Kelantanese ears, the meaning flips: in the first, the fish eats the cat; in the second, the cat eats the fish. A tiny shift in stress transforms the meaning of the whole sentence. To me, this captures what Kelantanese dialect really is—not just vocabulary or accent, but a rhythm of thought and feeling that lives in tones and cadences.

I grew up in Kelantan in the 90s, speaking this obscure dialect every day—at home, in my *kampung*, at the *pasar malam*. To me, it is the language of jokes, quarrels, lullabies and gossip. It carries *dikir barat*, *wayang kulit* and *mak yong*—traditions whose wit and music only come alive in Kelantanese Malay. I remember watching a *dikir barat* performance on TV that was performed by Singaporeans in Standard Malay; the rhythm was intact, and the costumes were faithful to tradition, yet the soul was missing.

At school, however, my Kelantanese tongue became something I had to suppress, though not entirely. Like many children, I was taught to master Bahasa Melayu *baku* (formal Malay)—the Johor-Riau dialect chosen by our founding fathers to be the national standard. Oral exams were especially difficult for someone who had yet to step out from his playground; I stumbled, trying not to slip back into the clipped syllables of my mother tongue. At the place where I pinned my hopes and dreams, it often felt as if a big part of me had to be left outside the classroom for me to fit in.

I later learned that many others have experienced this struggle; this tension between home and school was part of a larger national story. When Malaya gained independence in 1957, the Constitution enshrined Malay as the national language. Two years after, in 1959, Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka (DBP) was established to modernise and regulate the language, drawing on Johor-Riau Malay as the model. For the young nation, this was solely about unity and nation-building—to bring the already divided major ethnic groups together through a shared language. But for many smaller communities in the periphery, it meant their dialects were suddenly labelled non-standard, of lesser value, even, at times, inferior. My Kelantanese Malay, rich in humour, intimacy and rhythm, was among the dialects that did not make the cut into the official language of schoolbooks.

By the late 60s, the national language project deepened. The government promoted Bahasa Malaysia to signal inclusivity across ethnic lines. Universities shifted from English to Malay as the main medium of instruction. DBP pushed *bahasa baku* as the common standard. All of these were framed as progress, placing Malay on the same footing with English. Yet, the downside was that it also narrowed the spectrum of Malay expression, side-lining many local dialects especially in Kelantan, Terengganu, Kedah, Sabah and Sarawak.

Later in life, through books, I came to admire writers and thinkers like Za'ba, Pak Sako and Abdul Rahim Kajai, who fought on their own terms to defend the Malay language against colonial rule. Their vision of Malay as a modern language of knowledge was crucial for the nation that was soon set to shape its own future. They gave voice to the public and pushed for Malay to be the primary language of education and administration in Malaysia. Yet, as a writer who now writes in

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WHERE NUANCED THOUGHTS STRIVE TO SURVIVE

Malay and English, I also realised the contradiction: if Malay was to represent all of us, why was my Kelantanese voice treated as less? And do I still carry it—the voice of the language I first absorbed in the womb?

Again, the rationale was unity, but language is never neutral. By institutionalising one form, the state created what the Italian philosopher Antonio Gramsci might call a cultural hegemony: not only rules enforced by law, but consent won through shaping thought and legitimacy. With the mandate to nationalise the Malay language, DBP became not just a publisher, but the arbiter of what counted as proper Malay. And for someone like me, living in a country where identity is a deeply contested issue, this raised an enduring but reflective question: whose Malay is the national one?

Yet, dialects remain resilient. In Kelantan, Terengganu and across Sabah and Sarawak, dialects continue to thrive in oral traditions, politics, theatre, music and daily life. They carry intellectual and cultural treasures overlooked by the standard, and have even carved out new ground. I find this echoed in contemporary music. A striking example is the KL-based punk band, *No Good,* who sings in raw Kelantanese—unfiltered, rooted, inseparable from the dialect's rhythm. Listening to their songs, you feel the same surge of anger, youthful spirit and *gedebe* that animates traditional, communal music, such as *dikir barat*. (See *Penang Monthly* February 2023 issue for an article on *gedebe*.)

But dialects can also be frustrating when taken only at face value, reduced to mere words, tempered into something more polished—a phenomenon I later discovered when listening to another band called *Pokpang*. It is accessible, still dialect-heavy, but without the organic wit and pulse of lived speech. Dialect can be both a rebellion and a compromise—lived in full conviction—even sometimes worn like a costume.

> **"... dialect isn't merely about the different words used, but also different ways of thinking, seeing and saying. It prioritises experiences, and frames reality in its own terms.**

This points to a larger reality: dialect isn't merely about the different words used, but also different ways of thinking, seeing and saying. It prioritises experiences, and frames reality in its own terms. For example, when Kelantanese speak about directions, they don't say "east" and "west", but instead *alik naik* (where the sun rises) and *alik jatuh* (where the sun sets). This is what dialects offer: not merely words, but worlds—a whole structure of thought.

So, what does this mean for literary writing in Malaysia today? I've been reflecting on this in light of the country's growing publishing industry, when prizes are awarded to many promising young writers, and more established writers begin to rediscover their roots.

In general, I tend to think of dialects as occupying a somewhat superficial position—cosmetic, reduced in writing to vocabulary meant to signal locality, character and humour. But dialects are not ornaments. In storytelling, it carries wit, irony, intimacy and spirit. In Kelantanese tales, it is the pulse of the narrative itself. To strip it down to vocabulary is to flatten it into texture without essence.

And so, I return to my childhood classrooms, where I stretched my vowels into Bahasa Melayu *baku*. I recognise the necessity of a national language—one that has deeply shaped how I see the world—but I cannot escape the sense of absence it also creates. Dialects remind me that Malay, and in fact Malaysia, is not one voice, but many. To neglect them is not simply to silence words—it is to erase entire ways of being.

TRANSLATION AS PALIMPSEST OF LANGUAGE, MEMORY AND MEANING

BY PAULINE FAN

TRANSLATION, at its deepest, is more than carrying words across borders. It is the layering of voices, memories and silences upon the fragile surface of language. To translate is to inscribe something new without erasing the presence of the original, like the indelible text of a palimpsest. A palimpsest is an ancient manuscript that has been written, scraped clean and written upon again, yet the traces of earlier inscriptions persist, ghostly and insistent. It is a page that holds time and memory.

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In our country, where languages overlap and histories converge, the image of a palimpsest feels especially resonant. Translation here is not only a literary endeavour, but an act of listening to multiplicity and learning to live among echoes. My own journey as a translator has unfolded within this layered terrain. Each book I take on adds its own inscription to the palimpsest of Malaysian literature in English, yet never effaces what lies beneath. The Malay and indigenous text remains insistent, resonant and alive under the surface.

It is no coincidence that the three Malaysian writers I have translated into English—Kulleh Grasi from Sarawak, Fatimah Busu from Kelantan and Ruhaini Matdarin from Sabah—are voices often considered to lie outside the "centre" of the national canon. Their geographical origins place them at a distance from the narratives of KL and the west coast. Yet, from these so-called margins come some of the most subversive, luminous and necessary stories. Translating them has not only meant rendering their words into English, but also bringing into sharper relief the polyphonic map of Malaysian literature.

THE LEOPARD BY THE LAKE

I first encountered Kulleh through his music. After his band performance, we sat by a lake at sunset, sharing a glass of *tuak* (Iban rice wine) and talking about poetry. That evening, he confided that he wrote poems, but had never shown them to anyone. When I finally persuaded him to send me some, I was struck by the way he wove together Malay, Iban and other indigenous languages. I had never read anything like them. That first heart-to-heart conversation, and the friendship that grew from it, eventually led me to translate Kulleh's debut collection, *Tell Me, Kenyalang* (Circumference Books, 2019).[1]

In translating Kulleh, I entered his inner world: his dreams, his subconscious, his personal and community histories. I journeyed with Kulleh through the myths, landscapes and languages of Sarawak's indigenous peoples. His poetry is a living inheritance carried from his ancestors, among them a forebear named Kulleh, "leopard" in Kenyah.

The task of translation was not simply to carry his polyphony into English, but to leave traces of the original so that readers could still sense the spirit of Sarawak

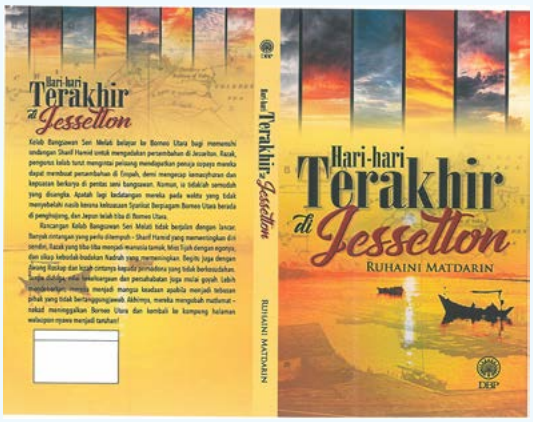
breathing from within. My translation became one more layer in a manuscript already thick with inscriptions: oral traditions, indigenous memory, colonial residue and the reclaiming of indigenous narratives in our "national" literature.

A DANCE OF DEFIANCE

Long before I read her work, the name "Fatimah Busu" had already carried weight for me. Widely considered to be the most important Malay woman writer of her generation, her name is spoken with reverence, sometimes tinged with unease. When I finally immersed myself in her stories, I understood why. Her prose is sharp with subversion, unflinching in its gaze, and alive with the contradictions of women's lives. Reading her felt like being pierced and illuminated all at once.

Gathering her stories for translation was an act of recovery. Many had disappeared from print, circulating only among rare-book sellers. Her uncompromising criticism of the literary establishment had pushed her to the margins, even as her voice remained impossible to silence. Yet, it was precisely this voice—sardonic, defiant, profoundly human—that demanded to be carried into English.

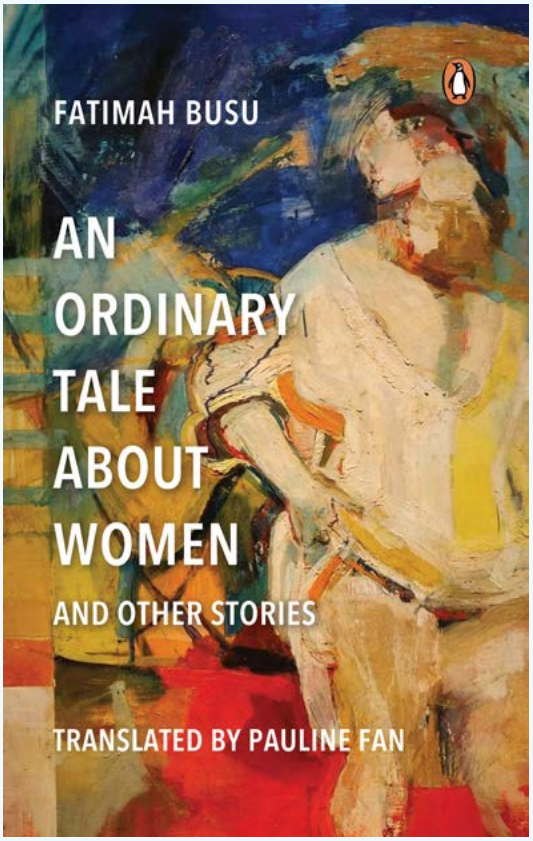
In *An Ordinary Tale About Women and Other Stories* (Penguin Random House SEA, 2024), I tried to preserve not only the biting wit of her Kelantanese-inflected Malay, but also the tenderness beneath her satire. Translating Fatimah meant listening for her fury and her laughter, her defiance and her vulnerability. Each story reminded me that her work is not only literature, but resistance: a testament to women refusing to be diminished.



THE SPARK OF UNTOLD HISTORY

When I first read Ruhaini Matdarin's *Hari-Hari Terakhir di Jesselton*, I was struck by her lively storytelling style and imaginative power. I knew at once that I wanted to translate it. Meeting her only confirmed this: the sparkle in her eyes, her quick intelligence, her generous humour—all mirrored in her prose.

The Last Days of Jesselton[2] takes us to the fall of British rule in North Borneo and the arrival of Japanese forces during World War II. Yet, Ruhaini refracts this history through allegory, Bangsawan theatre and the voices of ordinary Sabahans. Her novel moves between registers: history layered with imagination, politics entwined with performance, everyday speech charged with allegory.



As I translate this novel, I listen for the rhythm of untold history, the immediacy of conversation, while also carrying across the theatrical pulse of performance. What is often overlooked as peripheral—Sabah, its histories, its cosmologies—emerges as central, not only to the Malaysian story, but to the shared human story of survival and transformation.

REMEMBRANCE AND RENEWAL

Kulleh, Fatimah and Ruhaini each write from the so-called margins. Yet, their work expands the horizon of Malaysian literature in vital ways. Kulleh layers ancestral memory with a contemporary voice. Fatimah pierces through the hypocrisies of power with satire edged by tenderness. Ruhaini reframes history through intrigue and performance, animating the stage of Jesselton in its final days. Each of them insists on a rootedness of place, while opening new vistas of imagination.

For me, translating them has also been a way of inhabiting my own layered identity: a Malaysian who moves between languages, inheritances and ways of seeing. Each act of translation inscribes me, too, into the palimpsest. I carry the rhythms of Malay, the cadences of English, the echoes of other tongues. In translating, I learn to dwell in the simultaneity of presence and absence, silence and song.

Translation is, at once, remembrance and renewal. It allows the past to speak in the present, and the present to carry forward what was never lost. In the voices of Sarawak, Kelantan and Sabah, I hear not the margins but the centre: the living heart of a literature still in the making.

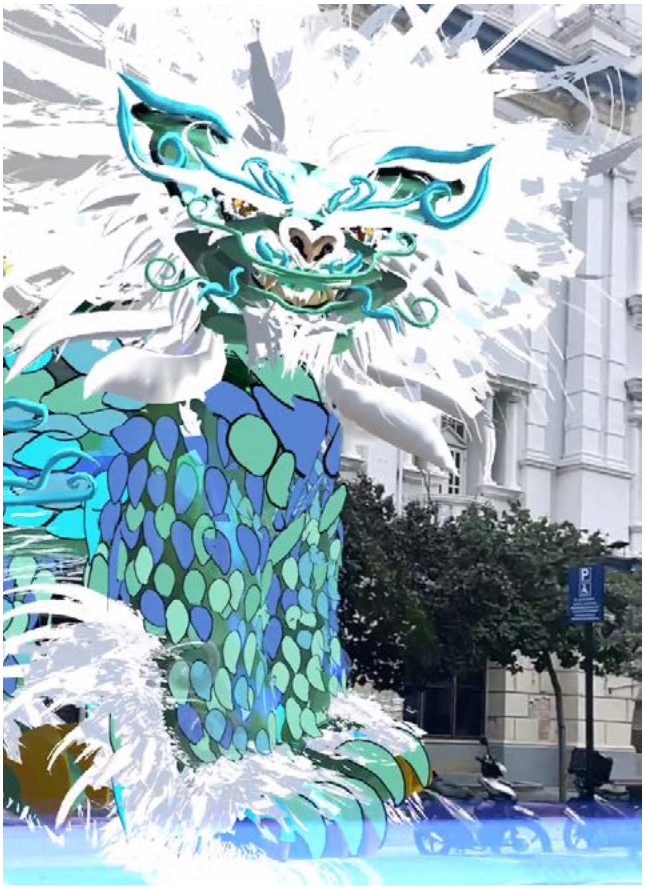
FOOTNOTES

1. *Tell Me, Kenyalang* was shortlisted for the 2020 National Translation Award in Poetry, and longlisted for the 2020 Best Translated Book Award in the US.

2. *The Last Days of Jesselton*, my ongoing translation of Ruhaini Matdarin's novel, was selected as a winner for the inaugural PEN Presents x International Booker Prize programme in September 2025.

THE DEEPER LANGUAGE OF MYTHS AND LEGENDS

BY
MIRIAM DEVAPRASANA



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ONE OF MY favourite streets to pass through in George Town is Kampung Malabar. I often imagine what it might have been like for its community members to gather at night for street storytelling.[1] I think of the kinds of people who would come together, the stories that filled their evenings, and how those makeshift performing spaces might have looked. This gives me a sense of rootedness in neighbourhood life, and of how the power of storytelling shapes a sense of place and belonging.

Creating a sense of place is never just about physical development or spatial configuration; it is equally built upon the layers of memory, imagination and folk knowledge, passed through generations. Every city has its whispered tales, restless spirits and forgotten figures that resist verification, and yet, refuse to disappear. Penang—for all its documented histories and colonial records—exists just as vividly in these half-remembered myths and community fables.

While the aim here is not to claim these memories as fact, they reveal the wealth of stories that shape the island's past. In their retelling, these offer a different lens through which to view the becoming of Penang as we know it today—a place formed as much by belief and storytelling as by brick and boundary.

EARLY LEGENDS

The sea has always framed Penang's story. Early accounts speak of Nakhoda Ragam (See *Penang Monthly*, February 2025), a legendary seafarer who is said to have named the island Pulo Ka Satu—possibly meaning the first island in sight—during his voyages between Linggi and Kedah. He is also reputed to have named several coastal points based on his travel encounters, including the releasing of the *bayan* (parakeet) at the southern coastline, thereby naming the place Bayan Lepas (released or escaped parakeet). Other locations believed to be attributed to Nakhoda Ragam include Pulau Kendi, Gertak Sanggul and Pulau Betong. These 16th century accounts suggest that Penang's earliest sense of place was shaped by navigation and memory rather than ownership.

By the 18th century, another sea captain redefined the island through the language of empire. What had once been encountered was now claimed: Pulo Ka Satu became Prince of Wales Island, and the settlement, George Town. The legend of Ragam and the history of Francis Light reveal a tension between openness and possession, a shift from discovery to dominion that continues to influence how Penang's history is contested today.

A familiar narrative (which I was taught in school) from Light's early days tells of him firing silver coins from a cannon to encourage locals to clear the dense coastal jungle. Those who helped were said to have been rewarded with whatever coins they found. The cleared area became the site of the settlement, including Fort Cornwallis and the Esplanade. Whether or not the story is true, it lingers as a fraction of collective memory, and acts as a reminder that Penang's 18th century histories were shaped as much by labour, as by chance and exploitation.

At Fort Cornwallis stands another storied relic: The Seri Rambai cannon, cast in the early 1600s by the Dutch, and later gifted to the Sultan of Johor. It passed through the courts of Aceh and Selangor before making its way to Penang in the late 19th century. Over time, local folklore transformed the weapon into a symbol of fertility. It is believed that women hoping to conceive need only place seven-coloured flowers on its barrel as a sacred act of prayer. This belief echoes the stories of Si Jagur[2], a cannon defending the Portuguese in Melaka, now positioned in Fatahillah Square, Jakarta. The cannon is also linked to fertility and protection—repositioning instruments of war as vessels of life and hope, revealing how local belief reworks the meaning of material things.

CAPTIONS

1. The Legend of the Clock Tower, illustrated by Ysabel Loh.

2. The Seri Rambai cannon.

FOOTNOTES

3. As recorded in GTWHI's *Oral History* collection (Interview 1307) with Chan Chee Wan. A comparable practice can be observed among Chinese street storytellers, as documented in *Singapore Infopedia*.

4. A brief description on Si Jagur can be found here: https://tetanggaexhibition.com/en/node/4

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2

ENDURING STORIES IN NEW FORMS

Across Penang's many legends, what endures is the instinct to make sense of place through story. In contemporary expression, this storytelling continues through new mediums. "Ceritalah", a digital heritage platform by Think City and Maitree, carries the same impulse to tell, remember and reimagine, but channels it through technology. By merging oral histories and community memory with augmented and extended reality, Ceritalah invites us to walk through familiarity layered with what was remembered and passed down through oral tradition, reminding us that sense of place can also be inherited through imagination.

Among the featured artworks, "The Legend of the Railway Clock Tower" by multidisciplinary artist Ysabel Loh recalls a time when *qi*, the vital energy current, was said to flow from the Goddess of Mercy Temple along Lebuh China to the seafront along Weld Quay. This source of energy was believed to sustain both the island and its spiritual life, gathering beneath the site where the railway clock tower now stands. It was said that two guardian lion spirits from the temple would emerge at night to play in the underground wells and waterways, ensuring the continued balance of the island's energies. The construction of the colonial railway clock tower in 1907 was believed to have disrupted this flow, and the guardian lions were never seen again. Whether allegory or memory, the legend reflects the unseen negotiations between local spiritual cosmologies and the spatial order imposed by colonial modernity, creating an uneasy tension between faith, environment and power.

Another figure revisited through Ceritalah's story trail: "As the Rising Sun Sets" concerns Tadashi Suzuki, remembered in fragments of oral history as the head executioner during the Japanese Occupation of Penang and Butterworth. Rumoured to have relished cruelty, Suzuki's presence lingers in Penang's wartime memory as both terror and myth. Some recall the red sports car he drove through George Town, possibly confiscated from the wealthy during the Occupation. Others say that he dipped his sword into the blood of those he beheaded. Though his existence is difficult to trace, his story prevails as a vessel for collective trauma—a community's way of naming fear, character and the darkness that official histories often sanitise or silence.

History might tell us how a place and its people came to be, but oral traditions, myths and beliefs tell us why a place continues to matter. They reveal the inner life of a city: its fears, faith and the meanings to space that people make beyond official narratives and records. Ceritalah carries this understanding into the present, showing that community stories are not the opposite of history, but one of its deeper languages. It reminds us that Penang's heritage is not a relic to be preserved, but a living dialogue through the stories we choose to tell and the ways we choose to listen. What we inherit, after all, is not just a story of what happened, but the many ways people have chosen to remember it.

***Note:** The author acknowledges prior involvement in aspects of the Ceritalah project. However, this piece serves as a reflection on how platforms like Ceritalah illustrate the evolving nature of cultural storytelling and heritage interpretation.*

Find out more about Ceritalah here: https://www.ceritalah.app/

LINGO-ING

IN THE HEART OF GEORGE TOWN

BY AZAR FIRDAUS YUSOF

PENANG'S STREETS ECHO with linguistic revolution as Gen Z, the first generation to grow up immersed in digital technology, creates a verbal landscape where tradition meets modernity. TikTok, with its 1.5 billion active users across 150 countries, has become a linguistic playground, where Malaysian youth both consume and create new expressions. A recent study reveals that 52% of Malaysian Gen Z participants frequently incorporate TikTok slang into their daily conversations, while only 6.9% never do so. This trend is not merely FOMO (fear of missing out) on the part of the Gen Z, but reflects deeper processes of identity formation and cultural evolution.

Gen Z, referring to those born between 1997 and 2012, is the first generation for whom the internet and social media are integral, not novel. Their linguistic practices are shaped by digital environments. They use social media for education, entertainment and socialising, all of which influence language use. Platforms such as TikTok and Instagram act as laboratories, where the youth experiment with words to express belonging and individuality.

Penang's linguistic landscape adds another dimension. Global digital expressions merge with a long history of multilingualism, embodying what Pennycook and Otsuji call metrolingualism—the creative language practices that emerge in cities. Here, slang and code-switching continue Penang's long tradition of linguistic fluidity.

CULTURAL IDENTITY AND BELONGING THROUGH SLANG

For Penang's Gen Z, slang is not just casual speech, but a marker of creativity, belonging and generational identity. As Halliday notes, anti-language forms solidarity while distinguishing youth culture from older norms. In Penang's multicultural setting, these linguistic boundaries simultaneously include and exclude, mapping social worlds as described by Pennycook and Otsuji.

Peer influence drives slang use. Most Gen Z speakers use slang mainly with siblings and close friends, while fewer than 15% use it with strangers. Slang's social role as an intimate code reinforces bonds within trusted networks. Beyond that, it fulfils emotional functions: fun is cited as speakers' main motivation. In WhatsApp chats, especially among young Penangites, acronyms like "idc" (I don't care) and "iykyk" (if you know, you know) appear side by side with localised slang such as "OTW dy lah" (on the way already *lah*).

Meanwhile, code-switching between English and Malay also defines Penang youth's communication. Unlike earlier generations who might be more used to separating languages by context, today's speakers weave them together within

single sentences. A Penang student might say, "That lecturer damn *garang*, but his class vibes best *gila*." This agility reflects both cosmopolitan awareness and local belonging, an enduring hallmark of Malaysian identity.

Penang's hybrid expressions showcase linguistic inventiveness. Phrases such as *potong stim* (to spoil the mood), *kiasu* (fear of losing) and *mantap* (great) coexist with imports such as "bussin'" (excellent) and "rizz"(charisma). On TikTok, a youth might caption a café photo with "This Nasi Lemak slayed *lah*," blending global and local codes. This everyday artistry exemplifies urban speech creativity.

THE LIVING WORD IN GEORGE TOWN

The use of language, including slang, in Penang reveals a city deeply engaged in linguistic experimentation. Rather than decline, these shifts signal the natural dynamism of language. Gen Z slangs' brevity, humour and hybridity reflect adaptation to changing social and technological realities. Instead of erasing heritage languages, digital slang often coexists with them, creating layered identities: a young Penangite may pray in Arabic, converse in a mix of Malay, English and Chinese (*inilah baru ngam, that one tak ngam*), and post on their social media in English and Malaysian Gen Z slangs—all within the same day.

Though many might frown at the use of modern slangs (what does "skibidi" even mean?) that has not yet stood the test of time to be added into our lexicon the way older slangs like "cool" or "what's up" have, this phenomenon arises from the same impulse to make language meaningful to the present. Each roots communication in lived experiences.

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ON RELATIONALITY AND GEOGRAPHY
AN INTERVIEW WITH
MADELEINE THIEN

BY
WILLIAM THAM

FOOTNOTES

1. The original interview was conducted online on 7 October 2025 (MYT).

2. See for example "In the Studio: Madeleine Thien," a BBC interview with Paul Kobrak, for the emergent research process of TBOR: https://www.bbc.com/audio/play/p0l6054f.

3. She won the Asian Canadian Writers' Workshop's "Emerging Writer Award for Fiction," which led to this publication. See the colophon of *Simple Recipes* (2021), published by McClelland & Stewart.

4. For a discussion on the limits of hyphenated identities, see Michel-Rolph Trouillot (1995), *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*, Beacon Press.

5. See "From Malaysia to Canada: Stories of Diversity and Unity," a 2025 exhibition prepared by the High Commission.

6. Jim Wong-Chu (2014, June 3). "The Generation that Responded to Duty" [interview by Zhen Liu]. *Ricepaper.* https://ricepapermagazine.ca/2017/06/interviewjimwongchu2014/

7. For an analysis of Madeleine's geographical sensibility, see Joanne Leow (2015), "Counter-Cartographies: Literary Wayfinding in Transnational Cities" (PhD thesis, University of Toronto).

8. I thank Madeleine's fellow Canadian writer, Vincent Ternida, for a conversation on lives in writing during his visit to KL in July, supported partly by the High Commission, which in turn prompted this particular exchange.

WILLIAM THAM has been published in NANG, PR&TA, The Best of World SF: Volume 2, and the Southeast Asian Review of English. He co-edited The Second Link: An Anthology of Malaysian and Singaporean Writing.

In anticipation of Madeleine's appearance at the George Town Literary Festival (GTLF), she talks about her new novel, the writing process and her identity.[1]

IN MADELEINE THIEN'S 2016 Booker Prize-shortlisted *Do Not Say We Have Nothing* (DNSWHN), her characters covertly exchange a hand-copied book of records among themselves, within which messages and covert information are encoded beyond official surveillance. Literature is figured as offering a space of refuge for otherwise covert or sensitive matters, "until a day comes when they can be re-entered into the book of history". This relationship between text and experience is expanded upon in her latest novel. DNSWHN's book-within-a-book eventually lent itself to the title of *The Book of Records* (TBOR, 2025), which she candidly describes as a "strange" centuries-spanning set of stories-within-stories, weaving between speculation and history. Set in a near-future ravaged by climate change, TBOR is, at its core, a novel about interpretation. In focalising the life and thought of Spinoza, Du Fu and Hannah Arendt through the father-and-daughter pair at the novel's core, Madeleine portrays literature as a living entity, the impact of which spans different times and spaces.

Gradually concretising over nine years, TBOR initially appears to depart from Madeleine's past focus on lived memory: from Canada-set intergenerational experiences of migration to the Cambodian genocide and China's Cultural Revolution. However, its focus on interpretation retains significant thematic continuities with earlier work. Indeed, Madeleine views her oeuvre as a metaphorical book of records, which collectively asks:

"…what it means to…keep a record of the times in which we are alive, sometimes through books, sometimes through music, sometimes through actions, sometimes through the ideas that pass from person-to-person."

Literary work, in this light, offers an opportunity not just to fill official historical gaps by balancing documentary fidelity against speculative possibility, but also enables a "search for other ways of seeing things—other languages, whether it's music, or mathematics, or physics, as well as literature and philosophy." But even as precise attention to spatial-temporal contexts emerges throughout her work, enabled by meticulous research,[2] her writings are ultimately emotionally anchored in the familial: from the descriptions of migrant families across her career, to the shared interpretations of the same corpus of texts by the father-and-daughter at TBOR's heart.

Madeleine's writing process is intuitive and emergent, rather than structurally determined. Along the way, her characters remain her "constant companions", right up until the last moments prior to publication. For the literary/philosophical triad in TBOR, Madeleine's active engagement with their life and work was a matter of coming to terms with "what it means to *think* with another person", a dialogue unfolding across the centuries, mediated by Jorge Luis Borges's and Italo Calvino's literary influences.

It is this sensitivity to other experiences that Madeleine attempts to foster in her work as a creative writing instructor. Although writing is "ultimately a solitary endeavour, partly because of the concentrated time in which one is alone with the work", in practice, textual production still retains a relational aspect. Having taught at universities in North America, Africa and Asia, she has come to see instruction less as curating, but more as gently redirecting emerging writers in generative ways. By fostering intensive writer-reader relationships—perhaps the first experience of this kind for some students—such programmes become "a microcosm of how differently we *hear*" by "enlarging our perceptive capacities when it comes to *reading*". In providing space to "articulate certain things about the way a piece of fiction is working and what's underneath it", the classroom becomes a space for trust-building and opening the possibility of sensing text anew. Madeleine does have an entirely different relationship with literary criticism and nonfiction, however. Writing for the *New York Review of Books*, for instance, demands a "language that is precise in a very different way from what I do with fiction".

There is also the question of identity to contend with: Madeleine's debut short story collection, *Simple Recipes*, was made possible partly due to the activism of Jim Wong-Chu, a pioneering figure in promoting a distinct Asian-Canadian literature, and his peers.[3] Perhaps consequently, she has been described variously from the outside as an Asian-Canadian, Chinese-Canadian, or diasporic writer, whereas her parents—whose pathways and backgrounds she remains open to speaking about—would have preferred her to simply be a "Canadian" writer.[4] The High Commission of Canada in Malaysia, in KL, meanwhile, emphasises her Malaysian roots, in cognisance of her father's North Bornean/Sabahan background prior to his migration to Vancouver with her Hong Kong-born mother in 1974.[5] For Madeleine, such assignations are more of societal reflections—how "it thinks about its multiculturalism, diversity, citizenship, or terms of belonging"—rather than immutable entities, to perhaps be replaced by other forms of identity in turn. As she reflects on the initial importance of championing Asian-Canadian literary work:

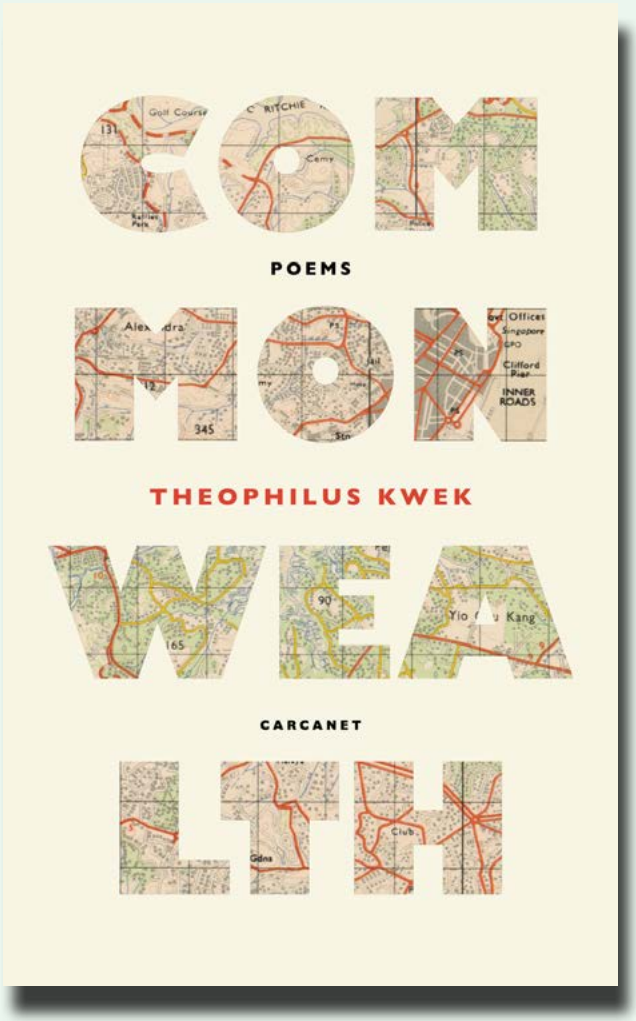
"…we had to force open the 'Canadian' identity, we had to claim it, …we had to change what 'Canadian' meant.

…it could be a much wider, more complex, description of one's identity."

Indeed, even Wong-Chu himself imagined the possibility of a more inclusive future, where the hyphenated identity he championed would no longer be necessary.[6] While Madeleine sees ethnicity in more contingent terms, she remains comfortable describing herself as a Vancouver writer, despite having left the Pacific Northwest two decades earlier. The city remains "foundational to my identity and even the way I think about the sea, the ocean and the land", imprinting itself in her work. This reflects a particular moment in Canadian literature, when a focus on "the specificity of places felt very right", seen for example in Alice Munro's fiction.[7] Her imaginative perceptions of Vancouver's geographies, particularly its coastline, recur in the depictions of the South China Sea in TBOR, even if Vancouver does not appear, even by name.

From a mid-career vantage point, as she embarks on the early stages of writing a new manuscript, the writer's life—save for the whirlwind book tours that accompanied DNSWHN's accolades—appears more quotidian than romantic.[8] It requires an affordable city to live in and a stable job, following which she can carve out opportunities for writing. By "find[ing] the right ratio of space, of time," a balance is struck between creative labour and the need to take on work that offers more predictable remuneration, thus upending the problematic myth of the "starving artist". In contrast to younger cohorts, who are increasingly expected to perform an authorial identity, she consciously evades the need to demonstrate a writerly identity through her relative quietness: consequently, "a writer like me is probably quite reliant on something unusual happening, like a nomination for a big prize". By way of closing, she provides the following advice for these emerging writers: "I still strongly feel that we [as writers] have a responsibility to our work, and that only they can write that book. No publisher or contact is going to make that book that only they can create. I still think that's our first artistic loyalty; that devotion to that work."

COMMONWEALTH, SHARED



A REVIEW OF *COMMONWEALTH, A GEOGRAPHY*

BY

CIAN SACKER OOI

"ENOUGH TIME, it seems," opens *Commonwealth* by Theophilus Kwek*,* "for a reckoning."

This first poem is quiet. A patient observer stands apart from time, watching a frozen moment unfold with calm interest: a hawker centre at "CLOSING TIME"*,* a distinctly local relic of the past, witnessed at the end of the day.

Language is bent gently into its rightful place across each stanza. The sharp edges of intentionally anachronistic modern phrases smoothed by the placid flowing of one line into the next, on to the last. Birds stand sentry over abandoned food, shutters are pulled closed, and wrung sugar-cane sticks are bound with string. The poetic measure is steady, considered and peaceful.

This patient observer is implicated in the scene, and so are we: "to scrape the grounds from the bottoms of *our* cups*"*.

It is a melancholy peace, and the after-echoes of joy and comfort seem nostalgic, as if we know already this is the last time we shall stack our trays with Milos, *kopis* and Tigers.

Decidedly learned, but confidently striding forward in its individuality, the poems of this compilation are wrought by a detailed, thoughtful mind. Each line break is considered, each full stop punctuated.

But as I—like you, I'm sure—get caught up in the totalising pleasure of detailed literary analysis, I am reminded of the poem I was to prepare an analysis for as part of my interview to study English at (funnily enough) The Other Place to Theophilus' own alma mater. 45 minutes of diving into enjambment, metre and euphony later, I proudly presented my discoveries—how corsets stand as a metaphor representing a perfect outer ideal mould performed towards a cold, intimidating world—only to be horrified by the very first follow-up question:

"And how do you think what you've just said fits in with the title of the poetry compilation this poem comes from?"

WHAT TITLE?

"It's written at the bottom of the poem: the weather (2001)."

"Could you give me a moment to think about that question please?"

I am struck again today, just as I have found myself struck many times over the years since that interview, with the same question. What does closing time at a *kopitiam* have to do with Commonwealth? Or learning to garden? Or old men talking around a stone table?

But though my attempts to tie meanings together in a nice little bow back in 2020 were scrambling, it hammered home something that I carry with me now into every act of reading.

There are two kinds of meaning that we find in every interaction we have with the outside world and the minds which inhabit it: the one we find on our own, and the one we find through others.

This first is simple; our subjective analyses are informed by our individual perspectives and experiences, so we read into a poem what we ourselves have felt before.

The second is not so easy to grasp, for to understand a perspective we ourselves do not have, we must empathise with an experience we ourselves have not felt. We must learn to look at the poem in the reflection of mirrors put up by people who are not ourselves.

Each of the poems in this compilation has this dual source of meaning in a profoundly affective and impactful way. The simplest example of this is geog-

raphy. If you have grown up in Southeast Asia, a lot of these will be personal, nostalgic, and therefore emotionally poignant. If you have not, I think that you will see instead—in Theophilus' sensitive, attentive wording—a mirror reflecting these experiences onto you, allowing you to connect with what you understand, but more significantly, giving you the opportunity to sympathise with what is foreign. The quiet, patient and interested bystander who speaks through Theophilus' poems aids in this approach. The voice is sensitive, but not emotional; personal, but not self-interested.

Moving now through the next pages, I try again to do what I neglected in 2020, and when I tune my ears in to the tune of *Commonwealth*, I begin to hear words echoing throughout each poem and line. Colony. Sultan. Tropics. Trade. Conquest.

"The Marines, their mettle
by then already lost
Churchill's best ships in the South China Sea."

I am confidently and easily led by Theophilus' adept hand through a history I am familiar with, but do not know the details of. Tableau, story and biography are blurred together as paint blended by an artist's brush.

Familiarity, memory and colony yet again. Colonial subjects aren't shown as completely dehumanised by their colonising superiors, but the power dynamic is certainly clear. Beyond the assertion of military might or fiscal strength, we are shown the implied and performed cultural superiority. A Scottish Earl will never be able to see the Singaporean coffee shop owner in the same way his daily local customers do, not just because the Earl did not grow up here, but because his upbringing has assured him that this experience is less cultured than (Ceylon) tea and biscuits.

The fiscal lechery of these landowners is shown bare within its context, not through families dis-homed, but through imported tea leaves brought by cart to a wealthy white man's porch, "doused with milk tinned for the boys abroad", sadly void of the "crack of knuckles against wood" of the *kopitiam* uncle's warmth.

Just as we are touching back on the world of the first poem, we are swept back again into the current of Theophilus' research and his musing. It is as though he is scouring the past for an answer. Is he looking to explain the colonial experiment beyond simple greed, or to understand at what point our memories become nostalgia?

Time is important in these poems, not as a mark of difference, but of unity. Time and era changes between scenes. Each page looks through a window into a different age, and the various poetic styles perform this difference with shared spirit.

"History
spills around me into the corridor,
dammed-up joy unstopped by the end of the hour
as I fold my lesson-notes into my bag—
sometimes it doesn't repeat itself, but nags.
It's hard to look away, after all
from something unfinished"

This is one of my favourite lines in *Commonwealth*:

"Only minutes from where a longer
silence falls, it's easy to mistake the builders' noise
for that of things being built…"

"The peace of a silence that is not just the absence of construction, but something *longer* is a peace that needs no optimisation. A peace that the colonising perspective could not comprehend."

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I will always love language used like this. Self-confident, self-aware and self-ironic dancing that plays just barely within the limits of what words can mean. And still beyond these words the line excels, drawing its poetry into its purpose. The grand project of colonial self-professed "development" seen as cultural replacement feigning productivity.

"Listen: this is gain, and this,
loss."

The peace of a silence that is not just the absence of construction, but something *longer* is a peace that needs no optimisation. A peace that the colonising perspective could not comprehend.

"Notice: there will be room here
for more than quiet."

The act of "building" is found throughout the compilation, but the crime it performs—which Theophilus' voice here cannot forgive—is its very nature: what has been developed can never be undeveloped. Cultural growth, technological innovation and international aspiration are all *irreparable* constructions, Pandora's boxes which cannot be closed once opened.

I am reminded of something in the first poem, and with this new understanding of "building" see its final line anew: "charged as on our first day, with the thrill/of something built, and something brighter".

These poems are easy to read. It feels like walking through a museum gallery, each poem specific enough to be appreciated instantly, yet rich and deep enough to be immersed in.

There are, however, times when I feel these poems reach towards an itch in my mind that they don't quite reach. I wonder if I should have liked something more emphatic to break up the emotional calm. I can't put it quite to words, but something in me yearns for something solid to latch on, to locate myself in relation to, and from there look out upon the compilation's expanse. The first and the eponymous poems come closest to this for me.

Theophilus' poetry is erudite and educated, and plays into its conventions with intention. The language of yesteryear's anglophone poetry—scribes, wise men and prophets dancing in lofty and prosaic metaphor—sits differently when speaking of the East, interspersed with Eastern languages, and it gives me pause. I hope that should you pick up this collection, you will ask yourself many more of the questions I have tried passively to gesture you towards, to ask why the mountain Theophilus describes, which "glowers at the tower's heart/like a shard, which day after day/cuts the hands of those who dare to scale it, where [h]igh above, the kingdom's children play/on grassy slopes that never winter" feels more European than from Funan, and above all, what did I feel that you didn't? What did we both share in feeling? What does this mean for poems in a compilation called *Commonwealth*?

***Note:** Cian grew up in Singapore, but ended up reading English at the University of Cambridge. That terrifying interview mentioned herein really did happen, and it taught him that engaging with art isn't about coming to a well-reasoned and well-supported singular understanding, but is instead all about the joys of thinking, unthinking and rethinking.*

PENANG: A STRATEGIC CHOICE FOR GLOBAL CONTENT OPERATIONS

BY LEE YONG JIN

1

BY THE TIME I took my seat at the hot desks on the higher floors of Menara Skymind in George Town, Penang, I was joining what was once UBM Tech Research Malaysia, a long-established presence that is now Informa TechTarget. There are more than 60 people employed here, most of whom work for Omdia, the research and consulting arm of Informa TechTarget. I work closely with Omdia analysts all over the world, helping ensure every insight that leaves Penang is clear, its data accurate, and reports of the highest quality to our customers.

SETTING GLOBAL STANDARDS

To understand how the Penang content operation evolved before I was here, I sat down with Milena Cooper, the Vice President of Operations for Omdia, who shared that Malaysia has put its mark on the map, evolving from its origins as a business process outsourcing (BPO) hub to become a competitive destination with long-term wage advantages. "English is one of the largest global business languages," notes Milena, emphasising that "the fluency you get in Malaysia is a true benefit for any business." She recalled when she first arrived in Penang, she was impressed by Penangites' linguistic versatility and having key university graduates with sought-after skill sets such as data science and analytics.

"We have a global standard for offices and tools," Milena explains, noting that when new offices are established, "they will naturally evolve, and our Penang office is no exception, which makes it a very well-equipped, modern place to work."

For the editorial team, part of the company's ongoing strategy involves elevating us as "guardians of content quality." Milena poses critical questions that guide the copyediting process: "Does what I read make sense? Does it inspire the customer? Is it original, knowledgeable, robust and backed by data?"

This human expertise becomes more and more important at a time when many industries have embraced AI-enabled processes. The company is actively exploring ways to leverage AI and other tools to reduce editors' workloads, which should help alleviate routine copyediting tasks, allowing us to focus on higher-value work. This transition could see us producing content ourselves, contributing to marketing and serving as subject matter experts who repurpose information.

"Editors could be recognised as co-authors if needed, where their contribution offers noticeable content value," Milena suggests, indicating a forward-thinking approach to my role in the digital age—one that requires the kind of human judgment and cultural understanding that makes Penang a valuable hub for global research operations.

"I can't speak for every editor," Edreal Ho, my fellow coworker, reminds me. "Editorial and content practices likely vary from company to company, and even between roles in the same organisation." Editing involves us being attuned to publication schedules and delivery timelines, while balancing the priorities of other tasks.

When asked about skill development, Edreal emphasises that it is very important for editors to have intuition. "Developing an intuitive understanding of what reads right and what the reader needs to know is essential." Collaboration is also equally crucial, particularly with writers whose work they are shaping.

2

CAPTIONS

1. Edreal tackles another editing project from one of his workspaces.

2. Emili Ismail (second from left) with colleagues at a Motorola Solutions company event.

Some editors prefer to preserve the author's personality throughout the writing, but we balance this approach by ensuring the content meets our quality standards for clients. "To edit someone's work is to shape the way they sound, and we must do that with tact," he explains. "Some deliverables require extensive edits, but others may require us to learn to forgo perfection."

Editing for global audiences taught Edreal valuable cultural lessons and considerations. "A lot of it comes down to who you're dealing with," he explains. Working with analysts worldwide exposes us to diverse writing styles and worldviews. "Understanding their position, their needs, why they do what they do, what concerns them; these insights are crucial to fostering better relationships," Edreal reflects.

While some situations may call for pushback, we have to be realistic with our processes: "At the end of the day, we're all just trying to do our jobs as efficiently and as best as we can."

THE PENANG ADVANTAGE

To understand the editing and content scene from a different industry, I spoke with Emili Ismail, Team Lead and Content Developer at Motorola Solutions, about why Penang is important for their global content operations.

Motorola's Penang-based team is "a key part of Motorola's Global Content Development group," says Emili. "We work closely with our other writing teams in the US, Canada and Krakow, Poland." This collaboration ensures consistent and accurate product information across Motorola's portfolio. The team's responsibilities span the entire product lifecycle: for new products, they collaborate with Engineering, Regulatory and Business teams to create user manuals and technical documentation. While working with the translation team, they make sure the materials are ready for global use. For existing products, the guides are constantly updated as software changes, hardware evolves or when new features are introduced. They also make sure everything is compliant with global safety and legal requirements across different countries.

"The strategic decision to establishing operations in Penang includes several key advantages," explains Emili. These include cost-effectiveness, enhanced by favourable currency exchange rates that make talent acquisition here highly competitive compared to Western counterparts.

Penang's appeal goes far beyond economics. It has a diverse and skilled talent pool, but it is also maintained by specialised institutions such as the Penang Skills Development Centre (PSDC) and Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM).

"A high proficiency in English—both written and spoken—among the workforce is indispensable for effective communication in a globalised business environment," Emili notes. This linguistic advantage is particularly valuable for producing high-quality content for international audiences. The presence of numerous MNCs that have already established content development teams in Penang further validates the region as a strategic hub, creating what Emili describes as "a dynamic industry ecosystem".

There are substantial career development opportunities in the corporate world for professionals looking for similar roles. Expertise in industry-standard technologies such as the Darwin Information Typing Architecture (DITA) and Desktop Technical Publishing (DTP) tools forms a strong foundation for growth. "From here, you can hone your craft to become an editor or a senior writer," Ismail explains. "Alternatively, your understanding of content structures and project flows makes a natural segue into project management or specialising as an Information Architect."

Echoing Milena Cooper's earlier comments on alleviating routine work for higher-level tasks, Motorola's Penang team is also adapting AI rather than seeing it as a replacement. "The company actively encourages us to use AI tools to automate rote, repetitive tasks," says Emili. "This strategic adoption allows us to focus our efforts on more complex and creative problem-solving." She personally uses AI for advanced analytics to process data better, identify trends and make more informed decisions; her team members can develop higher-level skills while still being relevant as technology changes.

LEE YONG JIN is an editor by day, perpetual graduate student by night. He works for a multinational company while his English MA dissertation judges him from across the room.

MACHETE MAKING IN THE JUNGLES OF SARAWAK

BY RACHEL YEOH

METAL ON METAL—the clanging is clearly heard as I arrive at the riverbank, where five other longboats are moored. The boatman motions my company and I to head to shore, and summoning up my balancing ability, I hop from one partition to the next, across to the next longboat, and safely to land.

"Kampung Orang Penan, Long Beku," the boatman sputters.

It is quite a journey to reach Long Beku. We had driven from Penang to KL to catch a two-and-a-half-hour flight to Miri, Sarawak, before getting on a 4WD for a five-hour bumpy ride via logging roads to Long San Village in Ulu Baram. From there, it was a 45-minute upstream battle on the longboat (we had to get off the boat and push the boat upstream at one point because the drought had shallowed the Long Akah river).

1

I am told that only 86 people live in this village. We amble up the slope to the village. Unlike the other longhouses we've seen belonging to the Iban and Kenyah tribes, theirs are a tiny fraction of the length, held up on wooden stilts and walled by corrugated zinc sheets.

Ahead of us stands a hut; the metallic sounds ring out from there. Several teenage boys and young men stand by, presumably waiting for us. As we approach, they shy away, revealing two craftsmen at work, hammering glowing metal against an anvil. These are local craftsmen, masters of the traditional art of *parang* (machete) making.

PARANG AS AN EXTENSION OF SELF

Originally nomadic, most Penan people can now be found around the Ulu Baram, Limbang, Tutoh and Lawas regions in Sarawak.[1] In these heavily forested areas, the Penan and other indigenous groups hunt and gather for a living. Traditionally, they hunt using a blowpipe, its arrows dipped in poison from latex collected from the Moraceae and Loganiaceae families of plants. They also use homemade shotguns and air rifles to shoot large wild animals such as deer and wild boars, and these weapons are often considered heirlooms passed down from one generation to the next. [2][3]

Another tool they keep close by is what we know as *parang,* however, it consists of two blades: the most prominent is long, usually half a metre in length, called *poeh.* The second is much smaller, probably one-eighth of the *poeh,* with a blade that curves upwards and a hilt that is double the length of the blade, called *darhad.* They are kept in a sheath made from Red Meranti called *dat.*

"There is a belief that our souls are tied to our *parang,*" Peter Sini, one of the craftsmen who had been learning the craft since he was 12, says, "that is why the *parang* that we own and use will be buried with us when we die. We do not leave home without it."

Over the next few days, as I journey with the Kenyah guides[4] from Jevinda Village Stay deep into the jungle, chasing waterfalls, I realise how essential the *parang* is to them. From hacking through the overgrowth to making marks on barks (which is crucial for getting in and out of the jungle safely); from chopping bamboo to harvesting vegetation, the *parang* moves like an extension of their limbs.

"As for the *darhad* knife, we use it for field dressing jungle kills. We also use it in the kitchen—it is perfect to remove the skins of onions and garlic, and to process our jungle harvests like banana flowers," Sylvester Bilong, the chief guide, explains.

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> **“There is a belief that our souls are tied to our *parang*... that is why the *parang* that we own and use will be buried with us when we die. We do not leave home without it.”**

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PARANG FROM USED STEEL

To forge and shape the *parang* blades, they use simple tools. In this hut, there are two makeshift open-hearth furnaces. As I watch, Peter places a metal rod into the furnace and periodically pedals the hand-cranked blower to channel a steady and controlled volume of compressed air, melting the metal and ridding it of metal oxides.

“Where do you get the metal from when your village is so deep in the jungle and only accessible by going upriver?” I ask.

“Oh, that’s the metal we use,” Peter points to a container filled with rusty metal odds and ends. I look at him, puzzled. “Scrap metal from car workshops,” he explains. “Once in a while, these unwanted scraps get delivered to us.”

Just then, the metal in the hearth begins to glow bright orange. Using tongs, he picks it up, lays it on an anvil and starts hammering it into shape. The *poeh* is flat-ended; thinner and broader towards the tip, and thicker and narrower towards the hilt. Once the metal loses its glow, he drops it in the hearth again and the process repeats.

At the corner of the hut, another man sits on a bench, shaping and polishing a shiny blade using an angle grinder. Thinning the tip creates a forward-biased balance point when the user swings the *poeh*. When fashioned this way, a swing of the *poeh* easily cuts through thick material like dense foliage, perfect for use in the jungle.

“Not all our blades are made with scrap metal, although most are. Those not made from scraps are usually requested by locals and cost more. They are usually made upon order as it can be customised for left-handers or right-handers,” Peter explains. Through the arduous process of refinement by fire, these rusty and motor-oiled scrap metals are given a new lease of life.

It is somewhat unexpected to find that these remote communities are also practising a quiet form of sustainability—turning trash into a possible heirloom. One of my friends gets herself a *poeh* enclosed in a *dat* decorated with Penan plaid after being assured that it can be stored in her check-in luggage. It is to end sitting with pride in her living room, an invitation for guests to ask, “What is this?”

5

CAPTIONS

1. Peter pedals the hand-cranked blower to channel a steady and controlled volume of compressed air, firing the furnace to melt the metal.
2. Hammering the metal into shape.
3. Shaping and polishing a blade using an angle grinder.
4. Longhouse in Long Beku.
5. From left: *Dat, poeh* and *darhad.*

FOOTNOTES

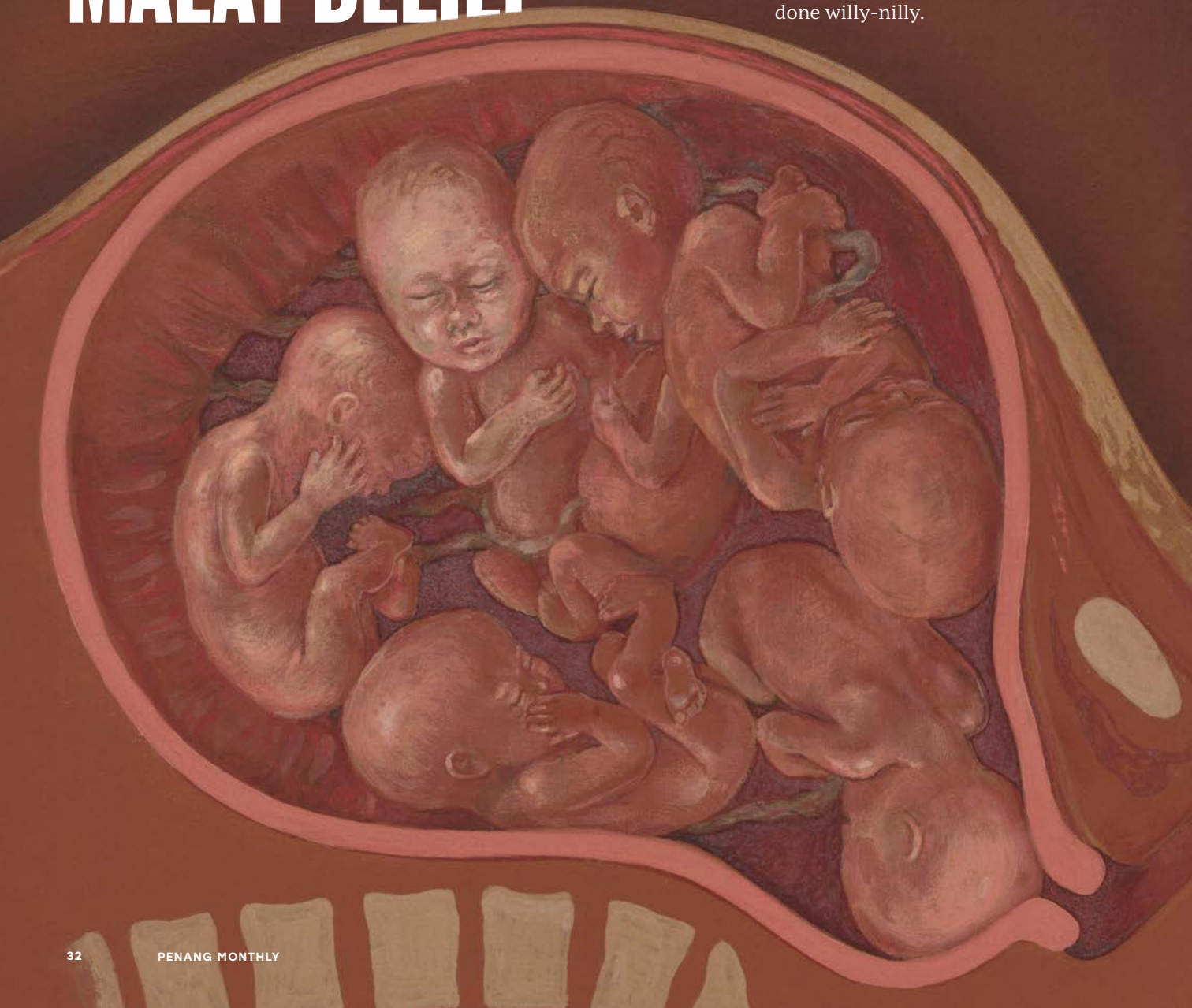
1. http://www.survival-international.org
2. https://dayakdaily.com/revocation-of-shotgun-licenses-will-have-serious-impacts-on-natives-of-sarawak-cautions-masing/
3. https://publisher.unimas.my/ojs/index.php/BJK/article/view/4400
4. The Kenyah and Penan people in Ulu Baram usually have settlements built close to each other as they have a symbiotic relationship due to their distinct yet complementary land use practices.

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

BY
HUSNA
SHAFIRAH

HONOURING THE PLACENTA IN MALAY BELIEF

MALAYS BELIEVE THAT babies never grow in the womb alone. The placenta, attached to the top of the mother's womb, facilitating the processes of nutrient and oxygen exchange, hormone production, waste removal and immune protection, is an essential entity. Malay and Islamic belief deem the placenta as a baby's closest companion—almost like a sibling or a twin. In fact, the word *"tembuni"*, referring to the afterbirth in Malay, is synonymous with the term *"kakak anak"* or the child's sister. Thus, its disposal cannot be done willy-nilly.



THE TRADITIONAL MALAY WAY

Malays believe that burial is the best way to return bodies (and body parts) back to the earth. This ruling extends to the placenta as well, once the baby is born. A proper burial with care and respect honours the dignity of both the mother and baby, and can also prevent the placenta from misuse in black magic rituals. While the mother recovers from labour, caring for the placenta becomes a father's first duty—a rite of passage into parenthood.

Twenty-seven years ago, my newly minted father braved this, guided only by my *maktok*'s verbal instructions. The first step is cleansing to remove smell from the organ. Fresh out of the hospital bag, the bundle of gore greeted him before the stench of blood hit. Under running water, he massaged the veiny structure on a layered slab, working the remaining blood out of the placenta with his bare hands. I had imagined that the soft, spongy texture of the placenta would have been unbearable for my squeamish father, but he was more worried that missteps during the handling would negatively affect my sister.

After that, he combined coarse salt, tamarind and lime to mask the smell of the placenta—similar to how fish are cleaned to remove their stench. This step is crucial; foul odour might attract scavenging animals after burial.

Once the placenta is fully cleaned, it is wrapped in a white textile similar to *kain kafan*, or a burial cloth. Old Malays, such as my grandma, believe in the connection of a placenta and the baby's life. Many would bury various objects along with the placenta in hopes that it would benefit the baby. For instance, those who want their child to be smart and studious when they grow up would bury the placenta with a pencil.

My father included three iron nails in the bundle for strength and protection against mystic disturbances. It is believed that postpartum mothers and babies are especially vulnerable to evil spirits and djinns—the latter are also believed to cause colic. Sharp objects like thorns, nails and needles are believed to deter such invisible beings.

The placenta must be buried only about a cubit deep. Father says the elderly advises against deep burials, as it may cause late development in the child.

Apart from being scavenged by animals, Malays believe that placentas can also be scavenged by *penanggal*, a ghost in the form of a flying head that drags along its heart and innards. The elderly warn that it is attracted by the smell of blood from labour and the placenta, and lingers around the house, waiting for a chance to steal an improperly buried placenta. A coconut shell covers the buried mound to prevent *penanggal* from having direct access to the placenta. However, the placenta bundle must not be merely placed in the coconut shell—my *maktok* stressed that the bundle must *bertemu tanah*, be in contact with the soil.

At this point, the burial is complete, but my father must finish a final task—warming up the baby. For that, he gathered dried leaves and dried coconut husks, and placed them above the burial spot before lighting them on fire. This fire is believed to keep the baby warm and comfortable, and dispels stomach wind.

Burial spots for placentas can vary; mosque compounds and imams' house lawns are popular spots for families who wish for their children to be religious. My *maktok*, however, was not keen on such an idea. She preferred spots under trees or plants. The idea was for the burial spot to be shaded and protected from the sun, symbolically shielding the baby from harm. As a child, I recall her suggestion that my cousin's placenta be buried under a yam plant, because its leaves resemble big umbrellas. But as with many traditions and customs, the practice differs from household to household.

MODERN PLACENTA MANAGEMENT

Today, placenta management in the Malay community has undergone changes. As Islam discourages superstitions, many families have chosen to simplify these rituals, focusing on cleanliness and respect instead, while leaving out practices rooted in old animistic beliefs. In my family, the passing of my *maktok* put a stop to the elaborate *pantang larang* we used to heed for placenta burial.

Without the older generation to guide young parents through these steps, many traditional postpartum care businesses have stepped in to help with placenta kits. These kits contain tamarind, coarse salt and *asam keping* to wash the placenta, a white cloth or a cloth bag for the placenta bundle, and a claypot (instead of a coconut shell) to cover the placenta during the burial. Most kits also come with detailed written instructions. These sets also include personal protection equipment (PPE) like plastic aprons, rubber gloves and face masks, highlighting the increasing awareness of blood-borne diseases, especially among the younger generation.

Modernisation has also produced a changed landscape, in which empty land plots and banana trees are now considered a privilege, especially in big cities. Many who live in high-rise homes improvise by burying the placenta in a large pot placed in their balcony, where a decorative plant is planted above it. The tree, a symbol of life, grows healthily along with the child, adding a modern meaning to this improvised tradition. Some also opt for placenta management services that will handle the placenta burial according to tradition.

THE DILEMMA OF UNCLAIMED PLACENTAS

In some countries, bringing home the placenta requires legal approval. Here in Malaysia, the placenta is usually handed to the guardian to do with it as they will. However, despite this privilege, some placentas are still left unclaimed by parents. The burden of unclaimed placentas falls on healthcare workers.

Beyond the physical burden, a friend who works in healthcare has noted that many health workers face an ethical dilemma when it comes to placenta management. For example, while most clinical waste is incinerated, the practice of bulk incineration of placentas might not sit well with some. A Muslim healthcare worker once wrote to the Mufti of the Federal Territories to seek clarity: Must all placentas be buried? Can Muslim and non-Muslim placentas be disposed of the same way?

Should the healthcare worker have stayed professional and just followed the medical procedure for clinical waste disposal? Yes. But is the dilemma still relevant? I also think so. Healthcare providers are, after all, human beings with personal beliefs, values and cultural or religious ties. It is only natural for them to feel a sense of responsibility and care, especially when dealing with something as culturally significant as the placenta for a Malay Muslim. The Mufti, by the way, has clarified that while burial is highly encouraged, placentas *can* be disposed of through other methods, especially when burial is impractical. Ideally, Muslim and non-Muslim placentas should be buried separately, but this is often unfeasible.

Taking the placenta home isn't just a cultural choice—it's a way of easing the burden on our healthcare workers. It is also a chance to provide "personalised" treatment to honour the placenta, something that has provided nourishment to the baby, and kept the baby safe and healthy throughout gestation.

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

BIRDING

IN PENANG

OFFERS A LIFESTYLE RICH IN EXPERIENCES

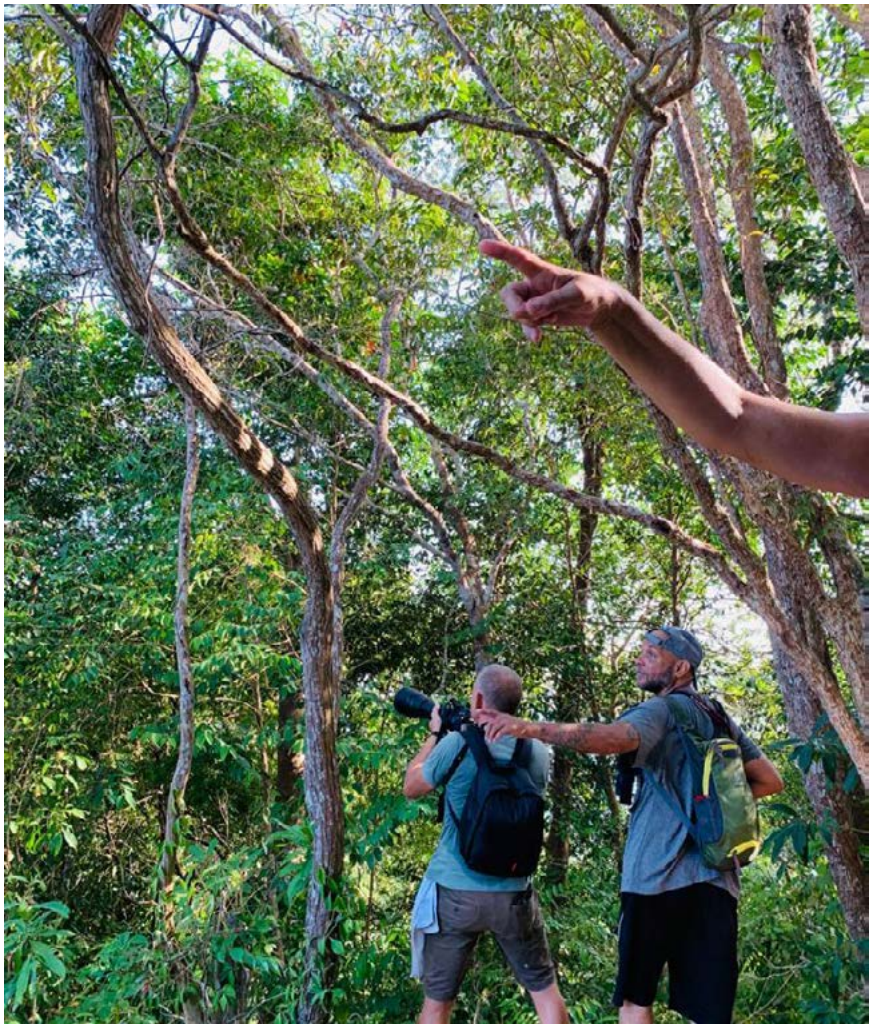
BY **NATASHA AMIR**

WHEN ANDREW AND Karen Jordan moved from the UK to Penang under the Malaysia My Second Home (MM2H) programme, they knew their new life here couldn't and shouldn't just feel like an extended holiday. "You've got to try and find a life outside of beaches, hotels and casual acquaintances," Karen said. "Birding helped us get a footing with both expats and locals."

The couple had visited Penang more than a dozen times before settling here, but a local publication they stumbled upon became an invaluable guide beyond the tourist lists of things to do and see.

"At Gusto Café in Tanjung Bungah, we had picked up *Penang Monthly*," Karen recalled. "We took it back to the UK and read it, circling places we wanted to explore once we moved. Through the magazine, we learned about the Botanic Gardens. That became one of our first stops for birding."

That first visit opened a door. "It's how you see parts of Penang even some Penangites have never seen," Andrew said. "And you meet the most interesting people along the way."



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THE DIFFERENT TYPES OF BIRDERS

The Jordans' enthusiasm is infectious. They speak of "lifers"—first-ever sightings—with the excitement of treasure hunters. They have recorded about 650 lifers out of roughly 830 species found in Malaysia. Some trips have taken them to Borneo, Sri Lanka and Thailand, but most have been just a dawn's ride away. Birding, they insist, does not require you to be super fit.

"We've met birders with disabilities, who still manage to get incredible sightings," Andrew noted. "You can even do it from your balcony." In fact, they actually do have a friend who birds from his balcony. He calls himself a "balcony birder". Believe it or not, that is literally what he does—sit by the balcony, and watch as birds perch or fly by.

They also know people who have turned their own verandas into tiny sanctuaries with bougainvillea, hibiscus and flowering shrubs that draw sunbirds and even sea eagles. Others, called "twitchers", also bird from their cars or scooters, watching birds from their car window and hopping out for quick sightings. And, of course, there are bird photographers, who will stake out a single rare bird for hours for the elusive "money shot".

Karen finds the patience of hardcore photographers amusing. "I can't sit for 12 hours waiting for one bird," she said. "As much as we love nature, I like to keep moving."

The couple's own birding style is decidedly active. "In the three days out in the field, we once covered close to 90,000 steps," Andrew said. "You can only see different birds if you move." Early mornings and late afternoons are prime time. "It is *literally* the early bird that catches the worm," Karen said. "Between 7.30 and 8.30 in the morning, and again around 4 to 6.30 in the evening, that's when the magic happens."

BIRDS OF A FEATHER FLOCK TOGETHER

Birding has given the Jordans not only a way to exercise, but a social circle. They swap sightings with lawyers who bird before office hours, retirees who never miss a weekend walk, students on scooters and seasoned travellers passing through.

"Even if you don't know each other, within 10 minutes you feel like friends," Andrew said. "It's because you all share that one passion." They rarely take day trips on their own, but often go with another birding couple, Dave and Ruth Beaver, whom they met through their shared love of birding and who, coincidentally, moved to Penang within two days of each other.

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The community also follows an unwritten code of ethics. Exact nest locations are never posted online to protect against disturbances or the illegal bird trade. "You can share a photo of a nest," Andrew explained, "but never the GPS coordinates."

Their regular haunts tell a story of change. Air Itam Dalam Educational Forest, once rich with bird calls, has been battered by storms and neglect. "It used to be full of life," Karen said. "Now it's almost a playground for kids, and the canopy walk is falling apart." Similar losses are visible along the Kerai River Walk in Seberang Perai, where tree clearing has driven species away.

Still, the Jordans keep discovering new corners for birding: the fishing harbour of Pulau Betong, the open paddy fields of Permatang Pauh, and the hidden trails beyond Kopi Hutan on Penang Hill.

"We often meet Malaysians who didn't even know these spots," Andrew said. "Birding shows you a Penang that many locals haven't seen."

The pandemic unexpectedly swelled their ranks. "Birdwatching went up by about 60% after Covid-19," Andrew noted. "People wanted something safe and outdoors." Karen added, "It made people more aware of their own surroundings. And it just does wonders for your mental health—two quiet hours of birding can reset your whole day."

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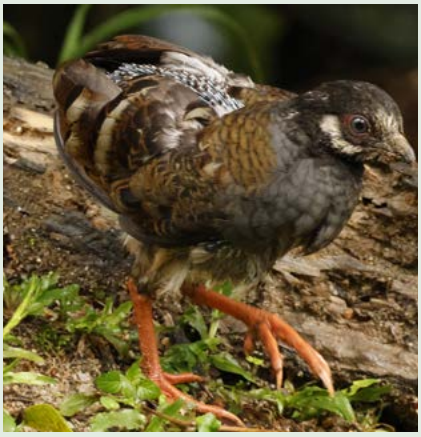
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CAPTIONS

1. (Cover spread) Indochinese Blue Flycatcher.
2. Andrew and Franklin Spencer spotting birds during a birding session.
3. Winnie Ooi, a fellow birder from Taiping.
4. Andrew and Karen Jordan at Bukit Larut (Maxwell Hill), Taiping.
5. Rufous-collared Kingfisher.
6. White-rumped Shama.
7. Asian Paradise Flycatcher.
8. Streaked Spiderhunter.
9. Long-tailed Broadbill.
10. Black-and-yellow Broadbill.
11. Red-headed Trogon.
12. Malayan Partridge.

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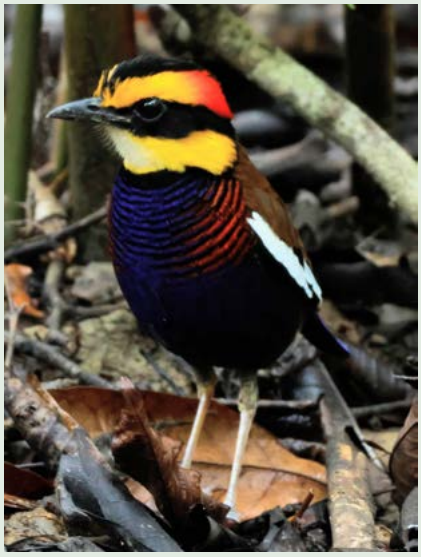

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CAPTIONS

13. Puff-throated Babbler.
14. Rufous-browed Flycatcher.
15. Crested Serpent Eagle.
16. Ruddy Kingfisher.
17. Malayan Banded-Pitta (male).
18. Greater Sand Plover.
19. Dusky Eagle-owl.
20. Large Niltava.
21. Pale Blue Flycatcher.
22. White-crested Laughing Thrush.

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SLOW TRAVEL, BIG REWARDS

For the Jordans, birding has become a model of sustainable tourism. "It costs almost nothing," Karen said. "A bus or motorbike ride, a pair of binoculars and you're ready. No expensive equipment, no crowds."

Their adventures illustrate how low-impact travel can support local economies while protecting nature. They get up before dawn, pack water and mosquito repellent, and head to places like Taiping, Wang Kelian, Pedu Lake or Teluk Air Tawar. Some days stretch from 6am to well after dark, but the payoff is worth it: the iridescent flash of a green broadbill at Air Itam Dam, a Malayan banded pitta glimpsed in a forest hide, or a sudden gathering of white-crowned hornbills wheeling overhead.

Night walks offer another layer of wonder. "When the guide turns off his torch, you can't even see your hand in front of you," Karen said. "Then, the kingfishers and mammals appear. It's surreal."

Their travels also highlight how Malaysia could better position itself as a birding destination. Compared to Thailand, they say, information is harder to find and professional guides less visible.

"Europeans would love this," Andrew said. "But permits and local knowledge need to be more accessible."

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Back home in the UK, the Jordans still join birding outings, but the contrast is striking. "In Malaysia, you've got rainforests, mangroves, mountains and shorelines. Migratory species too," Karen explained. "In the UK, the birds are stunning, but it's the same few species each trip."

Despite hundreds of lifers, the thrill never fades. "When you've gone months without a new sighting and suddenly you spot one, it's amazing," Andrew said. "You can't help but fawn over it."

Out of their 650 sightings, the Malayan banded pitta, a shy, brilliantly coloured bird they finally sighted in Perlis with the help of an experienced guide, is their favourite bird to date.

"Absolutely stunning," Karen said. "We'd never have found it on our own."

Birding has given the Jordans far more than photographs. It is exercise, meditation, discovery and friendship.

"Anything you've got going on in your life just disappears when you're in the jungle," Andrew said. "No phone signal, just birdsong. It's wonderful."

Their story shows how a simple, inexpensive hobby can open doors to communities and conservation, and how travel can be sustainable. It's less about ticking off sights and more about slowing down, listening and looking closely.

Sure, Penang is a dream for birders, but only if you know where to look. The best spots aren't always the obvious ones on a tourist map. They're the quiet paddy fields

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on the mainland, the hidden trails beyond the bustling Penang Hill cafés, the little pockets of mangrove where kingfishers wait for fishermen to come in. And believe it or not, half the fun is getting there. Chat with the aunty selling *kopi*, the uncle sweeping the path or another early-morning walker, and you'll hear tips you'd hardly find online. Birding here isn't just about the birds, but the conversations, friendships and camaraderie you develop along the way.

***Note:** This article is based on an interview conducted by Rachel Yeoh and me with birders Andrew and Karen Jordan on 21 August 2025.*

NURUL NATASHA is an intern at *Penang Monthly* with a passion for writing and graphic design. She enjoys crocheting, singing and occasionally making music—a ukulele is never too far from her reach.

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POTEHI EVOLVES IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

IN PENANG, ITS FATE IS IN GOOD HANDS

BY LIM WAN PHING

THE STAGE IS a dark blue box. On top of the box is a wooden chaise lounge, where a little lady puppet reclines. She sings, "Upon lifting my head and looking, how strange! Why has a scholar come to the garden?" A male puppet appears, replying, "Ah, I had no idea! Please don't take offense, Miss. Since this is a private garden and I have disturbed you, I should leave at once."

The scene is from *The Peony Pavilion*, the finale at the Penang Puppet Festival 2025. A collaboration between Malaysia's Ombak Potehi, Taiwan Smile Folksong Group and Penang master puppeteer Chuah Saw Tin, the show brought smiles to the audience as they followed a 16th-century Chinese classical story about two lovers strolling in a garden.

The puppets move skilfully and gracefully: lazing in their chairs, falling asleep on a table, holding hands, and finally, embracing for a happy-ending kiss. Children sit on the lawn, enthralled by the colours, costumes, music and storytelling. Next to the stage, a projector screen displays subtitles in Mandarin and English.

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FROM CHINA TO MALAYA

Glove puppet theatre, or Potehi, originated in Quanzhou, Fujian province in southern China. It was brought to Taiwan earlier, around the 17th century, according to the National Taiwan Museum, and then to Malaya (present-day Malaysia and Singapore), Indonesia and Myanmar by Chinese migrants who sailed south for better opportunities in the late 19th century. "*Potehi*" is the Hokkien word for cloth (布 bù), bag (袋 dài), show (戏 xì), as puppets are made out of cloth that resembled a sack.

In Penang, Potehi thrived in the late 1940s and well into the 60s and 70s. With over 10 troupes in the state performing for temple festivities, funerals, deities' birthdays and general entertainment, business was so good that managers owned two or three troupes at the same time. Competition was fierce and "stunts" like setting a paper house on fire were deployed to attract audiences.

Unfortunately, Potehi lost its popularity to television and film by the 80s. Today, there are only four troupes left, with a majority of the members aged 60 and above. Thankfully, scholars and art activists like ethnomusicologist professor Tan Sooi Beng have revived interest in the form, with decades-long work researching, documenting and learning from Potehi masters.

PENANG PUPPET FESTIVAL 2025

The Penang Puppet Festival 2025 is one of the many outcomes of Tan's revitalisation project. Running for its second year, it tied in with the 10th anniversary of Ombak Potehi, an arts collective co-founded by Tan to bring Potehi out of temples and into schools and the wider public.

The two-week long festival held in August included performances, lectures, screenings and workshops by troupes from Taiwan, Singapore and Indonesia. The first week focused on traditional puppetry, the second week on modern puppetry. Aside from Potehi, it also included other puppet forms, like Malay shadow puppetry (Wayang Kulit), Teochew iron rod puppetry, Hokkien string puppetry (Kalehi) and mixed-genre contemporary puppetry.

"The festival is a modest beginning, bringing young and old together from different countries," says Tan at the festival's opening performance, "Tanah Air Kita". "We believe that Potehi can survive if we collaborate with groups in the region to share techniques, experiences and friendships."

ADAPTING TO THE TIMES

Like migrants themselves, Potehi has had to adapt to the times and localities to stay relevant. For traditional troupes in Penang and Johor, they've included changes in language from traditional Hokkien to Taiwan's Minnan dialect (the Taiwan Minnan dialect is a branch of the broader Minnan language group). Other changes include musical instruments (from coconut fiddles to electric guitars), puppet sizes (longer, and with bigger eyes to attract audiences from afar) and costume changes (from complex hand embroidery to sequins that are easier to sew). These changes are applied mostly to attract modern audiences, some to cut costs and others due to lack of skilled artisans.

Storylines have also had to change to appeal to wider audiences. Modern troupes like Ombak Potehi have staged plays about Hang Li Po, the Japanese Occupation, Merdeka and even *Journey to the West* spin-offs that involve a stopover in Balik Pulau for durians.

In Indonesia, Wayang Potehi as it is known, switched its language to Bahasa Indonesia as a result of Suharto's ban on Chinese cultural expressions in public spaces. When the order ended in 1998, Potehi troupes began to flourish. One such troupe is Jakarta-based Siauw Pek San, founded in 2023. They performed two plays at the festival: one of the patriot doctor Oen Boen Ing and his identity as an Indonesian-Chinese, another an Indonesian adaptation of a Chinese classic called *Sie Jin Kwie Ceng Tang* (Sie Jin Kwie Fights to the East), an action-packed story filled with sword fights and somersaults.

In Singapore, Paper Monkey Theatre brings Potehi out of HDB void decks and into indoor theatres, specifically targeting school students. Their shows are performed in English and Mandarin, and are mostly classical adaptations of *Journey to the West*, but infused with modern-day themes like the parent-child relationship to make it relevant to the audience.

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In Taiwan however, Potehi has gone far ahead to becoming stage and light shows in a genre known as "golden rays", which started in the 50s. This was followed by pili glove puppetry in the 80s, which are today studio-filmed puppet shows complete with CGI special effects and *wuxia*-style storylines, with puppets resembling anime action figures.

MAKING WAVES, CROSSING CULTURES

Next year, Ombak Potehi hopes to invite troupes from Vietnam, Cambodia and Thailand to join them for the third iteration of the Penang Puppet Festival. Festival curator Keith Song explains, "Last year's theme was Voyage, signifying the start of a journey. This year's theme is Tanah Air, where roots have taken hold in our adopted homelands. Next year, our theme is Bloom, as our unique cultural identities grow and blossom."

Like *The Peony Pavilion*, most of Potehi's scripts are based on classical Chinese texts, but there is no rule to say one cannot inherit old stories and create new ones at the same time. For now, with the likes of Ombak Potehi making waves and crossing cultural boundaries to promote the puppet theatre movement, we can be sure that the future of Potehi in Penang is in good hands.

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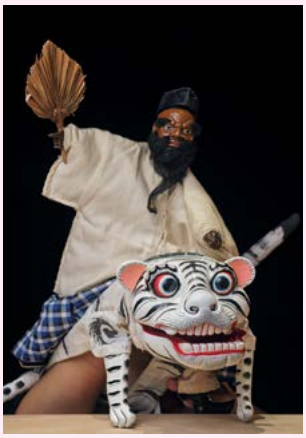

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CAPTIONS

1. (Cover page) Justice Toh's daughter, Toh Lay Niew, from *The Peony Pavilion*.

2. Ombak Potehi performs 三仙白 (The Three Star Gods).

3. Musicians from Taiwan Smile Folksong Group.

4. Musicians from Jakarta troupe Siauw Pek San perform "Aku Jenderal Sie Jin Kwie".

5. Datuk Kong in the "The Disastrous Dragon" scene by Ombak Potehi.

6. Monkey King fights Tiger Immortal in a show by Ombak Potehi.

7. Wak Long Music & Art Centre performs "Penculikan Sita Dewi" from the Ramayana.

8. The elaborate set up of Jakarta troupe Siauw Pek San.

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

NIRA NIPAH

THE SWEET SAP OF PENANG

BY
LIANI MK

IF YOU'RE LUCKY, you might glimpse some bottles filled with light-gold liquid on sale in a makeshift roadside stand on a humid day. Then, sampling it, your senses might be confused by the commingled taste of sweetness and slight tartness that puts it somewhere between coconut water and sugarcane juice. It is likely that the sap was freshly harvested that morning, before the heat of the day could sour it.

The drink is refreshing, slicing through the heaviness of a sweltering afternoon. *Nira* nipah is typically available at Kepala Batas, in Seberang Perai Utara.

The nipah palm (*Nypa fruticans*) is an odd-looking palm species. Instead of growing upright and extending up toward the heavens, it has its trunk submerged in mud. It bears long, feathery leaves that fan out wide over tidal rivers and estuaries. Its roots turn together in a tight coil in the ground, holding the banks together and serving as a haven for tiny fish, crabs and shellfish. At the backroads of Penaga and Kepala Batas, these palms might look like swamp vegetation to an oncoming car. Coastal dwellers across Southeast Asia—especially those living in the northern states of Peninsular Malaysia—have, for centuries, tapped the stem of the nipah flower to collect its sap, known as *nira*.

The flower stem is first pounded with a wooden mallet over several days to stimulate sap movement. Once softened, it is cut and a plastic bottle or bamboo tube is hung below to catch the oozing nectar. The same stem can yield sweet sap for an entire month before wilting. What emerges is a transparent liquid with a delicate flower scent.

The liquid is high in natural sugars and minerals. However, fermentation happens very quickly in the tropical heat, and left at room temperature, *nira* ferments within hours. Some tappers delay the process by adding bark pieces or by cooling the sap with ice. That is why *nira* nipah should be enjoyed fresh—its refreshing flavour is a result of good timing.

A TASTE OF MANGROVES

I believe sipping *nira* nipah is akin to tasting mangroves; it is sweet and a little salty, salt washed by the sea wind. Palms adore estuarine mud where salt and fresh water mingle, an underutilised borderland area often leveled for development.

Penang's northern coastline—from Butterworth to Kuala Muda—was once dominated by stretches of mangrove forests. Today, all except a few pockets have given way to housing estates, aquaculture ponds and reclaimed areas.

Many are unaware of how crucial these palms are for the environment. Nipah roots stabilise muddy riverbanks, lower tidal erosion and trap sediment that shields mainland villages from flooding. They shade and shelter young fish, prawns and water birds, and the palms are, for the people around them, a barrier and blessing to its natural landscape. To harvest *nira* is to work with the tide.

FROM SAP TO SWEETS

While *nira* nipah is usually consumed in its liquid state, it can be also transformed into other products such as *gula* nipah.

Heating it with water turns it into a thick syrup that is often used when making indigenous desserts. When left to ferment, the sap can turn into *tuak* nipah, a light indigenous liquor or vinegar, depending on its storage period. Unless the flower stalks are trimmed, they bear the clear seeds known as *attap chee*, which bob up and down in bowls of Ais Kacang and Cendol all over Malaysia.

The entire nipah palm holds value: sap, fruit, leaves and even ash. Its broad fronds have long been traditionally utilised for thatching roofs or to make mats. Dried leaves are burned, and in some parts of Sarawak, *garam* nipah (also known as *garam apong*) is produced; this is a mineral-salt whose application to preserve food has largely been lost.

GROWING WITH THE TIDE

Alas, as with most traditional occupations, *nira* tapping is diminishing. In Kepala Batas, Kebun Nipah Pak Man is one of the few remaining farms in the specialty trade. Photos on their Facebook page show queues of palms sitting in dirty water, workers tapping sap at dawn. The job is difficult and time-consuming, but speaks to the need for a close knowledge of tide cycles and plant rhythms. Most young people, attracted to city jobs, no longer view it as suitable labour.

Climate crises also contribute to the generational burden. Urbanisation close by introduces pollution; rising sea levels and unpredictable weather patterns erode the health of mangrove forests. Excessive rain can dilute sap; intrusion of saltwater kills off younger palms.

Small farmers have the skill to decide each crop's quantity and taste. Some community-based projects have tried to revive demand for *nira* nipah, selling it as an artisanal, sustainable beverage.

Its natural sweetness, low glycaemic index and linkage with sustainable mangrove systems position it as a waiting-to-happen niche product among health-conscious consumers. Mass commercialisation is risky, however; it has the potential to devastate fragile ecosystems, while packaging and shelf life requirements could prompt producers to adulterate the drink's natural character. The real job is juggling tradition, innovation and speed of contemporary demand.

TASTE OF PLACE

Penang's gastronomic heritage has a tendency to focus on popular multicultural street food—think Char Koay Teow, Nasi Kandar and Laksa. But *nira* nipah is another part of the state's story, this time from the periphery. To most people from the north, the *nira* nipah is redolent with memories of roadside stopovers after Friday prayers, or family drives across Kepala Batas, where cold bottles were submerged in ice water beneath zinc-thatched shacks.

Under threat from reclamation and urbanisation, smallholding farmers continue to tap and sustain their nipah groves in the northern coast. In the global narrative of Penang's progress with its rising condominiums and skyscrapers, highways, free industrial zones and smart cities, this labour sometimes goes unnoticed. But in maintaining *nira* nipah, it holds the potential to somehow maintain an entire ecological heritage. As climate change dawns more rapidly upon us, *nira* nipah teaches us that sustainability is a practice rooted in the interconnectedness of people and place, water and sweetness, hands and sap.

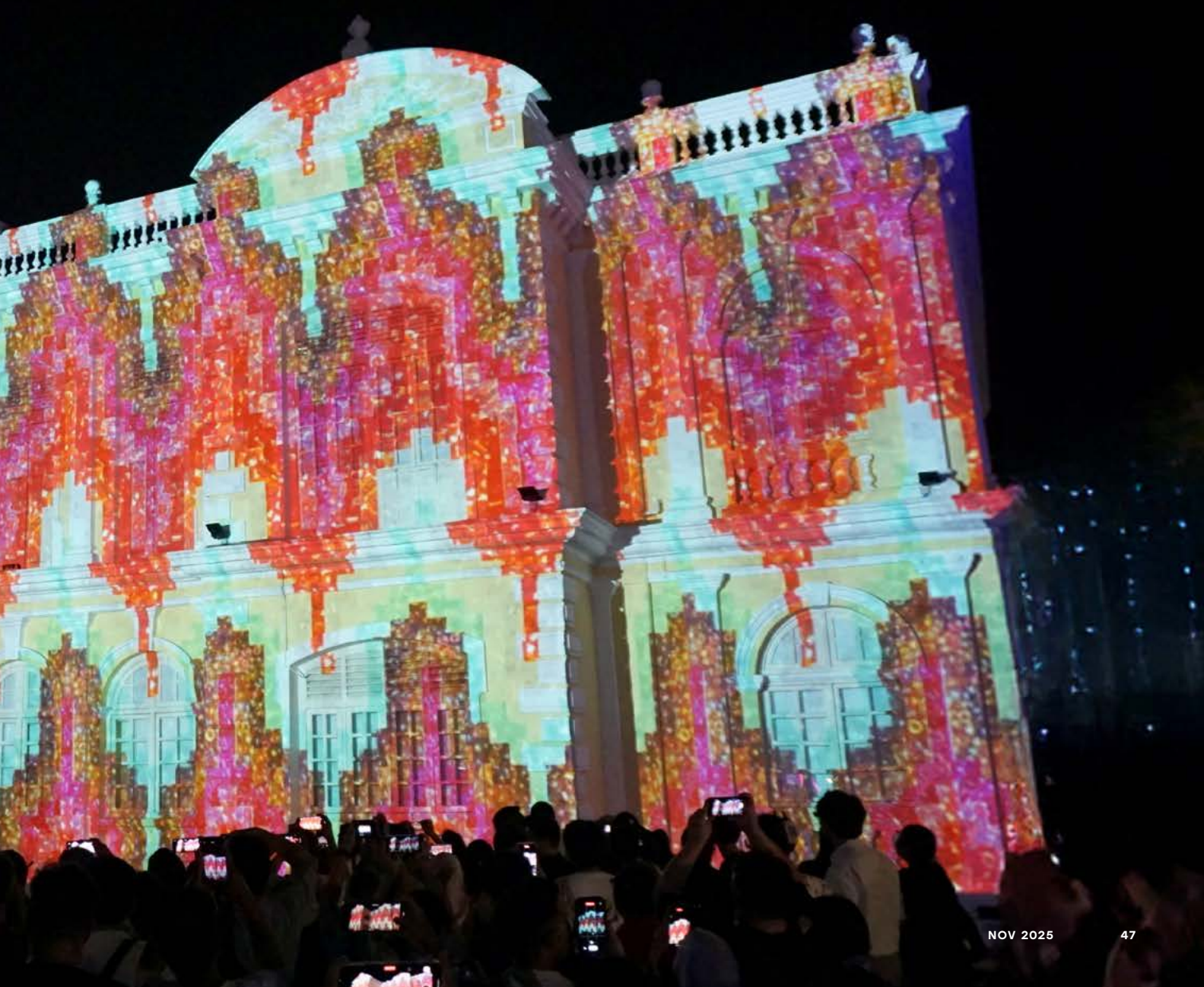
Of mixed indigenous roots, **LIANI MK** is an independent writer, journalist and artist covering indigenous knowledge, migration, language, film and culture in Southeast Asia. With a background in history and Southeast Asian Studies, she also engages in media advocacy with a regional feminist organisation.

GEORGE TOWN FESTIVAL 2025

GEORGE TOWN FESTIVAL (GTF) 2025 was held over 10 days in early August—and like how it is done every year, the streets, and both public and private spaces were turned into pop-up galleries and performing venues. This 16th edition of GTF (it started in 2010 to celebrate George Town's UNESCO World Heritage status) included over 50 events covering theatre, dance, music, visual arts and digital projections, showcasing both local and international talent.

STILL MESMERISING AFTER ALL THESE YEARS

BY ERIC YEOH



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CAPTIONS

1. The crowd waiting for the "Rhythms & Roots" concert to begin.

2. Traffic jams are made better with music jams in the bus in "Between Departures".

3. GTF 2025's opening weekend with "Transmute: Dengung Masih Dalam Sepi" featuring Muhd Sharul Mohd and NAMIE, as part of "After Dusk".

4. Penang Town Hall's façade lit up with colourful animated *rojak* projections of "Terang" by Filamen.

5. "A Market Under a Starry Night" by Moondiri Market and Kung Bros Collectors Market.

This year's theme was "Connection", and the events were curated to explore that interplay between artistic expression and human experience, inviting both local and international visitors to engage with a diverse range of performances and exhibitions.

I've always been a strong supporter of the Festival, however, I still only managed to cover approximately half of all the events held. This was partly due to its compact format, with 50 events over 10 days peppered all around George Town—covering every item in the programme seemed like an impossible task!

"After Dusk" kicked off the festival, transforming Padang Kota Lama into a light and sound carnival. As the Town Hall's façade lit up with colourful animated *rojak* projections of "Terang" by Filamen, the "Rhythms & Roots" concert next to it featured local groups serenading the crowd. On the field itself, "A Market Under a Starry Night" by Moondiri Market and Kung Bros Collectors Market provided retail therapy with arts, crafts, food and all things local for festival goers to browse and buy. In another section of the field, dancer Muhd Sharul Mohd with musician NAMIE captivated the audience with "Transmute: Dengung Masih Dalam Sepi", before diabolos filled the night sky with "Starry Night" by Diabolution. For those looking for a more immersive experience, "Between Departures" was a bus ride like no other. Riders were literally *jamming* in traffic by accompanying musicians from 1Drum, beating on traditional percussions in a moving bus.

All these events I just mentioned were free for all to attend. In fact, 70% of GTF 2025's programmes offered complimentary admission, making it accessible to a wide audience. For those new to Penang, it also served as an excellent introduction to the city's vibrant arts scene and rich heritage.

Personal highlights for myself were the dance and music programmes. The Festival banked on long-term collaborators such as Taiwan under the "Isle to Isle" cultural and creative exchange platform. "Birdy", presented by Hung Dance Company from Taiwan was a series of solos, duets and ensemble dancers exploring the theme of freedom in a world filled with constraints. With a choreography that was both fluid and precise, movements that were traditional yet modern, it was a perfect yin and yang offering. The dancers were clad in minimalist traditional attire, moving to a hypnotic pulsating electronic score. As someone who has attended many shows over the years, I would say that this marquee event ranks as one of the finest in the Festival's history!

"Waris", a site-specific performance merging dance, memory and ritual, took audiences along one of the last remaining public beaches in George Town, by the old Paramount Hotel. This powerful performance was a result of a two-week artistic lab involving the local fishing community, Universiti Sains Malaysia's (USM) School of the Arts and WindRiver Productions. Like recalling a distant memory, the performance was a surreal offering, raising questions about environmental and social issues, while at the same time taking its audience on a nostalgic journey back to when family outings on this beach were a typical weekend affair. Site-specific performances have always been a highlight of the festival with George Town having so many interesting grounds, and "Waris" was another feather in its cap.

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Other dance offerings included "129BPM" Vietnam's H2Q Dance Company, where modern hip hop moves were accompanied by traditional Vietnamese music. The highlight of this performance was the spontaneous dance jam, where members of the audience joined in with the dancers, creating a special connection between audience and artists.

Jazz lovers had a real treat from the Stacey Wei Quartet from Taiwan. "Three Generations, One Jazzy Heartbeat" featured musicians spanning three generations that were formed specifically for the festival. Malaysia's Tay Cher Siang also joined in the quartet at the Majestic Theatre, performing a varied selection of music that appealed to both seasoned and novice jazz enthusiasts.

Another milestone concert was "The Malaysian Real Book: Page to Performance". Led by WVC Jazz and featuring vocals by Alwagera and May Mow, the concert's enjoyable repertoire was drawn from the Malaysian Real Book, which itself was another groundbreaking initiative: the compilation of Malaysian jazz and popular music that not only showcased the rich and diverse heritage of Malaysian music, but also highlighted the music of contemporary composers and songwriters.

Classical music lovers were not left out; they were transported away to the beautiful landscapes of Spain during "A Night in Spain". Held at Loft 29, the mesmerising recital featured Malaysian pianist Mei Yi Foo, violinist Bartosz Woroch and cellist Ivan Torres. This well-attended recital of mostly works by Spanish composers was sponsored by the Embassy of Spain in Malaysia.

Various workshops were also held for local dancers, musicians and the general public to foster cultural exchanges with the visiting artists. These workshops served as a platform to obtain further insight and strengthen the connection through the arts that will hopefully pave a way for future collaborations.

For art lovers with young families, the festival offered "Between Light and Grey: A Double Bill of Puppetry" which explored memory, identity and human connection, performed by Ong Aik Lee and Lim Yun Xin. Other programmes for children included "My Cloud" from Singapore's Paper Monkey Theatre and Thailand's Talentshow Theatre production "Safari". All these shows were crafted with children in mind to spark their interest and develop a love for the arts from a young age.

As for visual arts, George Town's unique venues came alive with pop-up art installations, exhibitions and live demonstrations. Visual artist Rebecca Duckett-Wilkinson shared her creative process, beginning from what inspired her to her completed paintings in "A Travelling Artist's Diary" at Hikayat. LUMA Art Studio and Hin Bus Depot celebrated the legacy of the late Azmi Hussin in the "Living the Tanjong Life" exhibition—a fitting tribute to honour the cartoonist and his witty illustrations. Other exhibitions within the Hin Bus Depot vicinity included "Rapid Change" by Chong Kok Choon at the O Sculpture Art Space and "Time-Places-People" by Joshua Foo at COEX's Book Island.

Moving with the times, "IMMERSIOx" was a platform to connect audiences to immersive new media experiences. It was held at Bangunan UAB and curated by Blackbody Emission & Filamen, featuring artists Ignatius Low, Elanor Tang Xin and Grasshopper. Close by at The Whiteaways Arcade, "Symbiosis: Crab Chronicle" showed Penang's shifting ecosystems from the perspective of its crabs through virtual reality. Other notable art installation pop-ups are "The City of Willows", a playable digital art installation inspired by the history and spiritual beliefs of 19th century Chinese secret societies housed in the historic Ng Fook Thong Temple. Presented by Cultprint, this digital art installation is a good example of Penang's art scene, the blend of traditional with contemporary. Last but not least was "A Debt of Time" by Neoh Shin Yen, a contemplative art installation in the lush Sia Boey Urban Archaeological Park, using shadow and words to capture the fleeting nature of memory, connection and gratitude.

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6. Pop-up art installation: "IMMERSIOx", is a platform connecting audiences to immersive new media experiences. Curated by Blackbody Emission & Filamen, this exhibition features artists Ignatius Low, Elanor Tang Xin and Grasshopper.

7. "The South Paradise; Rong-ngeng Folk Dance."

8. "Waris", a site-specific performance merging dance, memory and ritual was staged by the old Paramount Hotel.

9. Another scene projected during "IMMERSIOx".

REPRESENTING PENANG IN PENANG

The beautiful grounds of Cheah Kongsi hosted "Kongsi Party", GTF's closing event. This started with the lively and energetic dancers from "The South Paradise; Rongngeng Folk Dance" before making way for Kool Kongsi Listening Bar's DJs to get the crowd on their feet. The sensational Impatient Sisters roused the crowd with their haunting melodies and beautiful harmonies; their songs were inspired by the sea, memory and imagination, making them a fitting closing act to the wonderful party at the Kongsi.

All attention might be at George Town, but running alongside the main Festival were other shows and activities well worth mentioning. The venue for this year's outreach event was held in the Paya Terubong neighbourhood. Like previous outreach programmes, "GTF at Paya Terubong" was a great way to reach out to new audiences in this suburb without them having to travel to the city centre. This reinforces the idea that the arts are for everyone, not distant or elitist.

Despite its shortened run this year, GTF 2025 was a resounding success, offering a rich and varied programme that celebrated the power of art and its ability to connect people across cultures and generations. Whether through mesmerising dance performances or a thought-provoking art installation, the festival created moments of connection that resonated long after the final curtain fell.

As GTF continues to evolve, it remains a beacon of creativity and cultural exchange, reinforcing George Town's reputation as a must-visit destination for arts and heritage lovers. Planning for GTF 2026 is already underway and I am sure it will bring together another celebration of art, culture and community that is not to be missed!

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

PENANG AS MARTIAL ARTS CENTRE
LEARNING HUMILITY AND LEARNING THROUGH HUMILITY

BY NATASHA AMIR

ON A SUNDAY in March, Mushinkan Dojo came alive with the rhythmic sound of bodies meeting mats—not in aggression, but in discipline. Nestled in a peaceful corner of Wayton Court Apartment, Mushinkan Dojo is a Japanese martial arts school that teaches Mushinryuu (swordsmanship), Mushindo (meditative art) and Aikido. On this day, martial artists from around the world had gathered there, ready to begin a rare cross-cultural training session.

This international martial arts exchange organised by HanaBana Hobbies, a community hub devoted to building relationships through Japanese culture, brought together students and instructors from Penang's Mushinkan Academy and Melbourne's Loong Fu Pai. Over the course of several days, participants immersed themselves in the philosophies, techniques and traditions of Mushindo, Aikido and Kenjutsu, guided by Mushinkan's Sensei Franky.

Before beginning their training, they paused to pay respect to the pioneers who shaped their art: Morihei Ueshiba, the founder of Aikido, Shioda Gozo, the founder of Yoshinkan Aikido, and Hayakawa Sohoo, the founder of Wadō, who was also a disciple of Ueshiba. This act of reverence set the tone for the sessions, emphasising the deep spiritual and philosophical roots of their martial journey.

WHERE ROOTS AND ROUTES MEET

Loong Fu Pai was founded in 1981 by Master Terry Lim, a Malaysian-born martial artist who had relocated to Australia in the 1960s. His martial arts journey, however, began in Penang in 1956, when he trained in Combat Judo under Jacky Ooi, a member of his brother's police unit.

Master Terry expanded his training under the tutelage of Kaiso Francis Ramasamy, the founder of Mushinkan Academy, and also studied Hokkien Shaolin under Master Ang Ah Hock. While in Australia, he continued to cross-train, learning kung fu from Sifu Albert Lau, karate from Shihan Malcolm Lomax and weaponry from the Melbourne Kendo Club under Sensei Nagai.

Master Terry has over four decades of martial arts experience; he synthesised the systems he had learned into a freestyle martial art, incorporating karate, kung fu, kickboxing, Aikijutsu (Mushindo) and weaponry. Today, Loong Fu Pai operates throughout the southeastern suburbs of Melbourne and in Queensland, proudly maintaining a family-like atmosphere, where martial arts is both a path to personal growth and a community anchor.

Returning to Penang for a visit with his students wasn't just about training—it was about reconnecting with the roots of his own martial lineage.

"I want my students to see that I didn't learn martial arts from TV," he said with quiet conviction. "I want them to understand that there's a history, a lineage—that I trained here, and that this dojo was my starting point."

MUSHINKAN ACADEMY: A DOJO OF SPIRIT AND DISCIPLINE

Founded in 1965 by Kaiso Francis Ramasamy and now led by his son, Sensei Franky, Mushinkan Academy is a distinguished martial arts school dedicated to Aikido, Mushindo and Kenjutsu (Mushinryuu). The dojo upholds the traditional principles of Zanshin (focused awareness), Mushin (a quiet mind) and Fudoshin (an unshakable spirit), emphasising inner growth alongside technical mastery.

"At Mushinkan, we look East," said Sensei Franky. "In spirit, in culture, in discipline—we preserve a value system that resonates with Malaysia's Look East policy." The academy positions itself as a space where martial arts becomes a way of life, not just a self-defense discipline or a sport.

The exchange allowed students from Loong Fu Pai to experience this ethos firsthand. "It's not just about learning a new style," said one participant. "It's about learning a different philosophy."

Another participant reflected on the emotional resonance of returning to his teacher's roots. "It's very revitalising," he said. "Martial arts has always been a part of my life, but coming here made me realise how deeply it's connected to family and heritage. It's not just kicks and punches."

FALL AND RISE: ON THE MATS AT MUSHINKAN

As the students trained, they practised a range of techniques, including *hiji shime*, a forearm technique used to push an opponent's arm forward; *nihon goshin*, a military-style technique that requires precision to avoid excessive force; and *irimi nage*, which utilises a circular motion and hip movement to unbalance an opponent. One technique involves using a forearm to push the opponent's arm forward from behind—it is subtle, but requires precise timing and posture. Even simple movements hold deep lessons.

Watching from the sidelines, Devia from HanaBana—who had spent months organising the event—explained how crucial it is for the practitioners to learn the proper way to fall. If done incorrectly, a fall could lead to injury, but when practised correctly, it becomes an essential skill in martial arts.

The workshop was also a reminder that martial arts is not static. It evolves through interaction and interpretation. "Everyone will interpret the same move differently," Master Terry shared during a discussion. "But it doesn't mean one is wrong and the other is right."

This philosophy echoed across the room as students practised side by side, helping each other refine stances and strikes. Arnold, one of Mushinkan's senior students who began his martial arts journey eight years ago after enrolling his daughter in classes, noted the importance of such events.

"Seminars like these are like masterclasses," he said. "They offer an opportunity to bond, to learn from each other and to renew our sense of purpose."

Indeed, the event's atmosphere felt less like a formal seminar, and more like a gathering of old friends—some meeting for the first time, others reuniting across time and space.

THE GREATER GOOD: MARTIAL ARTS BEYOND TECHNIQUE

For Master Terry, martial arts has always been about more than combat. "It's about refining the individual," he said. "It teaches manners, respect and appreciation. It changes lives."

He expressed concern about the increasing commercialisation of martial arts back in Australia. "There are schools that turn it into a business model. They make a lot of money, but they forget the values. Martial arts should be like a priesthood. It's about having a moral compass."

This sentiment resonates in a world increasingly driven by speed and spectacle. At Mushinkan, the values of discipline and mindfulness are upheld not as branding, but as practice.

At the closing of the session, Sensei Franky shared a story about a student and his sensei having tea. As the sensei poured, the student continued speaking of his own knowledge, not noticing the cup had already been filled. The tea overflowed, spilling onto the student, and the sensei remarked, "You are like this teacup. You are already full. I have nothing left to pour into you."

Sensei Franky emphasised the importance of humility in learning, saying, "You must approach knowledge with an empty cup." He explained that this mindset helped him become a "peaceful warrior", reminding students to always remember those who have taught them. "You would not have gotten to where you are without them."

NURUL NATASHA is an intern at *Penang Monthly* with a passion for writing and graphic design. She enjoys crocheting, singing and occasionally making music—a ukulele is never too far from her reach.

1

LIVING IN STILL LIFE

REFLECTIONS ON TAN CHIANG KIONG'S ODYSSEY

BY TAN SHU MIN

AT THE HEART of Tan Chiang Kiong's "Odyssey—A Lifelong Journey Through Art" blooms a single, insistent motif: the lotus. Across 98 works, Tan returns to this flower not as a mere ornament, but as philosophy. In Buddhism, the lotus rises clean from mud, a symbol of resilience, purity and the stubborn possibility of beauty in adverse conditions. It is a metaphor Tan paints again and again, a quiet faith rendered in pigment and brushstrokes.

Penang's Soka Gakkai Centre is a fitting site for Tan's exhibition. The venue now houses 168 of his works, turning the space into both gallery and archive. The exhibition highlights Tan's long engagement with the lotus across mediums—watercolour, ink wash, acrylic and mixed media. More than decoration, Tan employs the flower as a symbol of resilience and spiritual clarity, urging viewers to see beyond technique to the values that define his practice.

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For many of Tan's former students, the exhibition is also a tribute. One of Malaysia's longest-serving art educators, he spent six decades teaching art after graduating from National Taiwan Normal University, mostly at Chung Ling Private High School until his retirement last year. To honour that legacy, selected works are being auctioned with proceeds directed to the Soka Education Fund, extending his impact beyond the canvas and classroom.

Across nearly 100 works, Tan painted the lotus. And almost always, at the base, a dark patch of mud. In pieces like *Lotus 2* (2023) and *Lotus 3* (2023), the flower rises in light pink against strokes of black that read as mud, shadow or weight. The repetition is striking: the flower is never allowed to float free. It is always tethered, always made to rise from darkness.

Seen as a series, the effect is less about beauty than insistence. Each painting rehearses the same truth: clarity is inseparable from stain. The lotus thrives not by escaping the blot, but by being in relation to it. The exhibition catalogue cites Zhou Dunyi's *On the Love of the Lotus*, the Northern Song essay that praises the flower for emerging from mud "yet remaining uncontaminated".

Yet, Tan's paintings return it to mess, insisting that the lotus will rise, but never without that mark; that beauty cannot be abstracted from the dirt that produces

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it. This is not allegory but practice, an artist repeating the same form. As Tan puts it himself, "To achieve a higher level of art involves infusing one's life philosophy into painting, it is an endless struggle."

The lotus, in his hands, isn't transcendence. It's the record of that struggle—a survival in relation to mud, never apart from it.

This same rehearsal of difficulty carries into *MCO Day-50*, made during Malaysia's first lockdown in 2020. Here, the challenge is not mud, but confinement: an apartment block in ink and watercolour, every figure boxed into a window or balcony. Some figures lean out, gazing longingly beyond their confined spaces, while others, visible through half-drawn curtains, are caught mid-task—tidying, cooking or sitting alone.

They are "still" in the literal sense, yet the painting resists stillness, pulsing with the same logic as the lotus series: constraint is not the absence of life, but the condition that makes its persistence visible. Much like Tan's lotus series, *MCO Day-50* emphasises that life exists even in static, isolated moments, and collectively, they form a larger composition of resilience. In *MCO Day-50*, still life is redefined—not as objects on a table, but lives held apart, bound by shared confinement and struggle.

CAPTIONS

1. *Lotus* (2024)
2. *MCO Day-50* (2020)
3. *Lotus 2, 3, 4* (2023)
4. *缘 Connections* (2020)
5. *Lotus* (2022)

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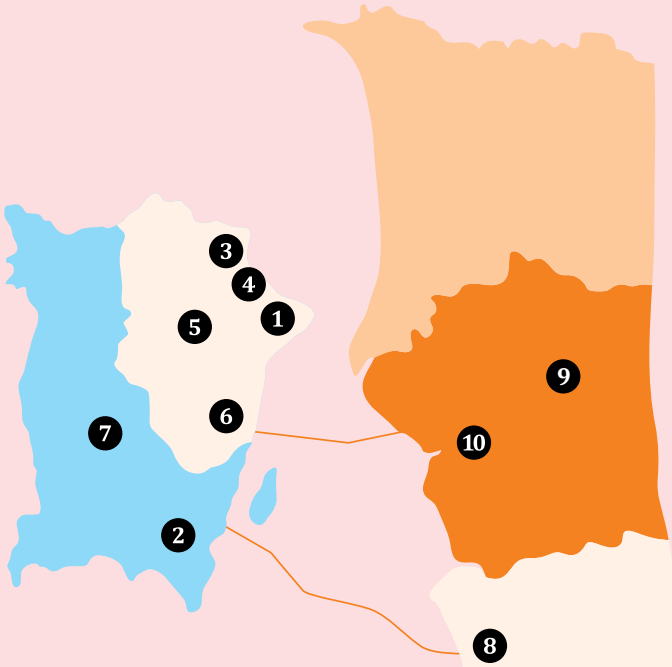
Among Tan's collection of works, 缘 *Connections* extends this meditation. It breaks from the disciplines of vases and flowers, turning instead to the unseen threads that knot people to each other. "缘" *(yuán)* often translated as fate in Chinese philosophy, is less destiny than connection. It is an invisible web of relationships and encounters—threads of interconnection that bind us, even when we are unaware of them. 缘 *Connections* follows this idea: lines spill and overlap, colours bleed, shapes collapse into one another. Instead of keeping subjects apart, it folds them together, so that nothing stands alone. Boundaries blur, edges soften and what remains is a field of relations—messy, continuous, alive, like a lotus rooted yet reaching, quietly resilient.

I find myself becoming the "still" one—pausing, breathing in a life that feels rarely settled. Shaped by an upbringing between countries, I once saw "缘" as distant, an idea tied to ancestors or cultural expectations I could not navigate. Returning to Penang, I see it differently: connections are not given, but carried, threaded through effort, tension and what came before. Relations extend outward, to people and histories I cannot fully untangle.

That is my mud—the blot anchoring my lotus. Tan's work maps these threads, revealing stillness as the labour of relation under strain. The ties I feel to strangers and family alike remind me that coming home, like a lotus rising through mud, is a struggle that shapes the self. In these fleeting moments of attention, care and recognition, life unfolds like still life: alive in relation, resilient through effort, never separate.

SHUMIN TAN is an educator who writes personal essays and poetry that wander through questions of home, language and identity. A third-culture kid at heart, her works have found homes in *Singapore Unbound*, *Jom Magazine* and at the European Cultural Centre.

HERE'S WHERE YOU CAN FIND PENANG MONTHLY



PICK-UP SPOTS
KL/SELANGOR

◯ Kuala Lumpur
Hubba Hubba Mont Kiara
The Godown Arts Centre

◯ Petaling Jaya
Temu House
Yin's Sourdough Bakery and Café

◯ Subang Jaya
Sunway University
(Students Study Area)

PICK-UP SPOTS
PENANG

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

2 Bayan Lepas
Arang Coffee
InvestPenang
Penang Development
Corporation (PDC)
Penang Skills
Development Centre (PSDC)
Urban Republic

3 Tanjung Bungah
Gusto Café
Straits Mini Mart
Tenby International School
Yin's WholeFood Manufactory
(Lembah Permai)

4 Tanjung Tokong
Blue Reef Straits Quay

5 Air Itam
Coffee Elements
Penang Hill—Lower Station

6 Gelugor
E-Gate (Security Desk
located at the building's
middle span)
Penang Youth
Development Corporation
(PYDC)
Universiti Sains Malaysia,
Hamzah Sendut Library 1
(Main Entrance Foyer)

8 Batu Kawan
IKEA Batu Kawan

9 Bukit Mertajam
Seberang Perai City Council

10 Juru
AUTO CITY
Shop-In D'Park

READING SPOTS
PENANG

1 George Town
Bricklin Café Bar
Consumers' Association
of Penang
Forward College
G Hotel
Kim Haus
Komichi Tea House
Mugshot Café
Narrow Marrow
Penang Public Library
USM Library
Wheeler's Café

4 Tanjung Tokong
Leo Books

7 Balik Pulau
Botanica Mansion
Nada Natural Farming

8 Batu Kawan
Peninsula College

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28 • 29 • 30 NOVEMBER 2025

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