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MONTHLY

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DO MALAYSIAN FILMS HAVE A FUTURE?

PENANG PROFILE

HASSAN MUTHALIB: A
LIFE LIVED IN DRAWINGS,
ANIMATIONS AND LOVE
OF VISUAL LANGUAGE

PHOTO ESSAY

FLAMES OF FORTUNE:
THE CHNEAH HOAY
CEREMONY AT PENANG'S
OLDEST CHINESE TEMPLE

LEST WE FORGET

WARSHIPS SUNK
OFF PENANG
IN WORLD WAR I





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DO MALAYSIAN FILMS HAVE A FUTURE?



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Organised by Ronald Vic De Leon, the **Fundraising Concert for Uncle Ray** is an evening of music and solidarity to support ailing Ray Rozells, one of Penang's iconic performers known for his electrifying presence and memorable stints from Las Vegas to local stages. Every contribution goes directly towards Ray's medical expenses.

Organised by Penang Art District, the **Penang Chamber Music Festival** features four unique concerts tailored to three different age groups, including a special concert designed exclusively for babies aged 0–3 years old. With performances by award-winning artists and interactive sessions for families, this event aims to enrich Penang's cultural landscape and promote classical music appreciation across all ages.

DATE	4 May
TIME	12pm (for babies); 3pm & 5pm (for kids and family); 8pm (for adults)
VENUE	Wawasan Open University
FEE	From RM30
WEBSITE	cloudjoi.com/shows/penang-chamber-music-festival-2024

WORKSHOP

Support the Trap-Neuter-Return (TNR) project and learn how to make a cosy scarf for your furry friends by signing up for the **Learn How to Crochet a Doggy Scarf With Dian** workshop! The proceeds of the workshop will go towards supporting the Independent Aid for the Protection and Welfare of Animals (IAPWA) Penang's TNR project. For enquiries and registration, get in touch with Catherine via the contact number below.

DATE	11 May
TIME	10am–1pm
VENUE	The Hive Co-Learning Space, 17 Lebuhraya Maktab
FEE	RM80 per pax (includes materials)
CONTACT NO.	+6016-415 0921 (Catherine)

THEATRE



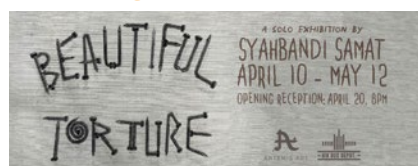
Leela Jhansi is a 13-year-old girl who leads a happy and contented life in a remote village with an ambition to get educated in order to secure a better future. Destiny, however, has ordained otherwise. When the richest man in the village, Damodaram proposes to marry Leela, promising wealth and a secured future, Leela's father Palwankar begins to dream of riches—after all, why must he deprive his daughter of such an opportunity?

DATES AND TIMES	3 and 4 May at 8pm; 5 May at 3pm
VENUE	Auditorium A, Level 5, Komtar
FEE	RM28
WEBSITE	cloudjoi.com/shows/leela-jhansi

CALL FOR SUBMISSIONS

The Malaysian Writers Society (MWS) is compiling an anthology of food writing! Submissions can cover any part of the Malaysian food experience: ingredient science, culinary history, rituals, cooking processes, eating and so on. The call is open to the public. Authors do not have to be members of the MWS to be included for consideration. The deadline is on 15 May 2024, 6pm Malaysia time. Visit <https://malaysianwriterssociety.org/portfolio/mywriters-anthologies> for details.

EXHIBITION



Building upon the profound exploration of self and surroundings witnessed in his previous solo exhibition, Syahbandi Samat returns with **Beautiful Torture**, an evocative journey through the complexities of existence, reminding us of the fragility of life and the beauty found within its complexities. It is an exhibition that challenges us to confront our own vulnerabilities while celebrating the resilience that lies within us all.

DATE	Now until 12 May
VENUE	Hin Bus Depot

CONTEST



Celebrate Mother's Day through creativity and expression! **The Makers Market** invites participants to join its art competition to honour the amazing women who have shaped their lives with original works of art with the theme "My Mom". Participants are free to choose any art medium, including but not limited to drawing, painting, collage or mixed media. The art competition is open for children aged 6 to 12.

LINK TO REGISTER forms.gle/3iKi2N7F1dLpzNYt8

BLOOD DONATION

Roll up your sleeves and make a positive impact together at MPKK Kampung Sireh/ Kebun Nyior's **blood donation campaign**, organised by MPKK Kampung Sireh/Kebun Nyior in collaboration with JPWK Pulau Tikus and Island 88. You'll never know whose life you might save!

DATE	19 May (Sunday)
TIME	11am–4pm
VENUE	Mezzanine Floor, Island 88
LINK TO REGISTER	tinyurl.com/ytvhnjsv

RUN



Whether you're an experienced runner or just starting out, the **Raya Run 2024** is perfect for people of all ages and fitness levels. Participants can expect a t-shirt, finisher medal, a chance to win the lucky draw and a fun aerobic Zumba session.

FEE	From RM29.90
WEBSITE	howei.com/event_details/rayarun2024butterworth

penang MONTHLY

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

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

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Penang Institute is a non-profit organisation, relying mainly on research grants and donations. To keep us up and running, and to continuously give you the latest scoop on economic and cultural trends every month, you can make a contribution to Penang Institute. Tax exemption receipts will be given for donations above RM100. Please contact business@penangmonthly.com for more information.



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By Azmi Hussin

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THE CREATIVE INDUSTRIES REQUIRE MORE ORGANIC SOLIDARITY AND LESS MECHANICAL SOLIDARITY

BY OOI KEE BENG



IF YOU WISH to enhance material production, be this of electronic chips, fish and chips, or arts and crafts, the contemporary wisdom today is to aim for the establishment of a supportive ecosystem.

Until recently, the word “hub” was the cool term to throw around in this context. That word, once used in transportation contexts, has expanded in usage to signify a centralised point of activity and of collaboration across domains.

Today, ecosystem is a more popular and appropriate word to use. I am furthermore told (by ChatGPT) that “While both hubs and ecosystems involve the concentration of activities or entities within a system, hubs tend to focus on central points or nodes facilitating connectivity or exchange, whereas ecosystems emphasise the interconnectedness, interdependencies and systemic nature of the entities and interactions within a broader system.”

Let me repeat that last bit about ecosystems, about them being a consolidation of “the interconnectedness, interdependencies and systemic nature of the entities and interactions within a broader system”. An “ecosystem” is organic, in short. It is inherently more dynamic than whatever deserves to be called a “hub”.

At the risk of confusing the issue, let me analogise this dissimilarity to the distinction between “mechanical solidarity” and “organic solidarity” proposed in 1893 by one of the fathers of Modern Sociology, Emile Durkheim, in his book, *The Division of Labour in Society*.

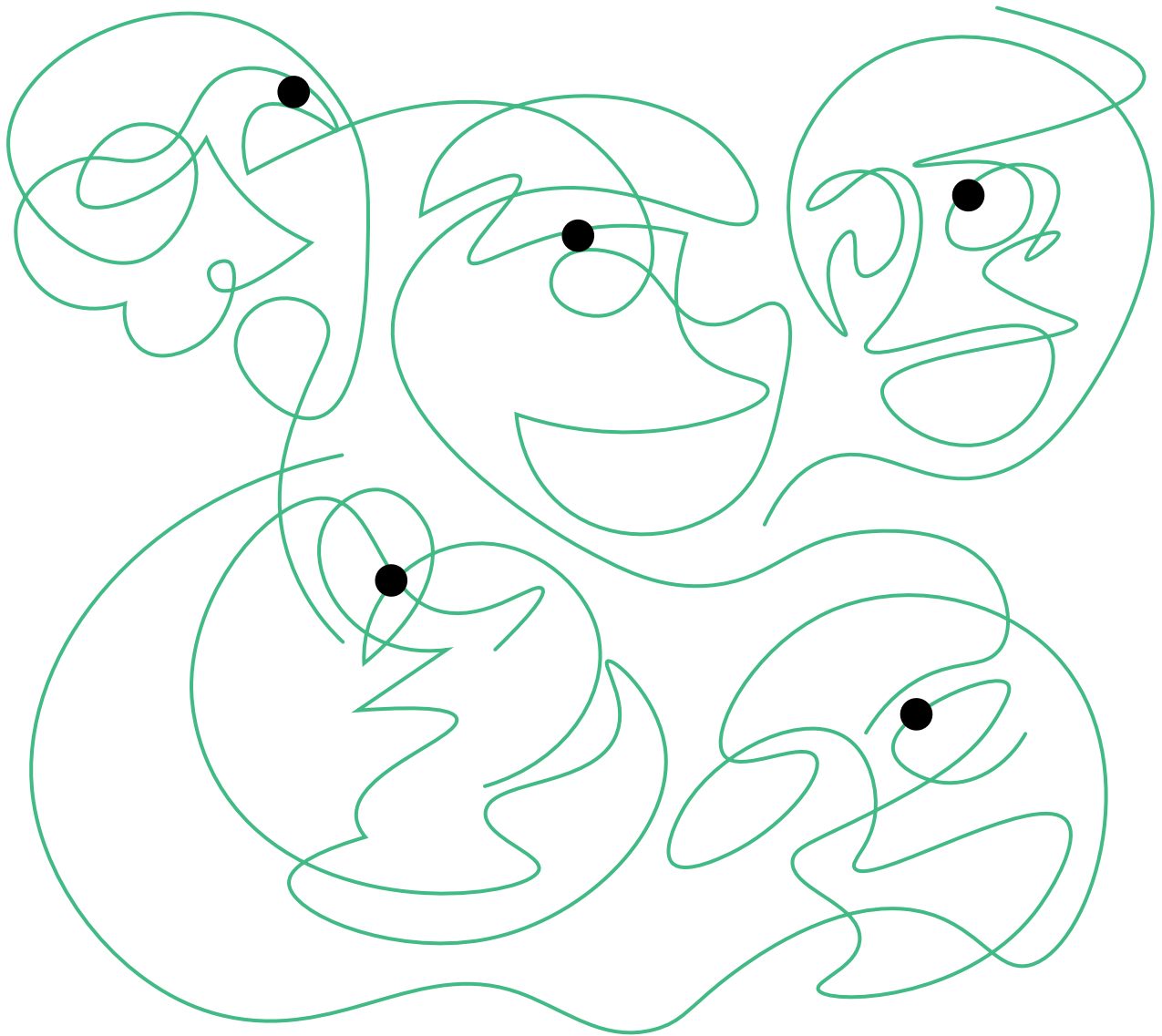
Durkheim differentiated between two forms of social cohesion, the first stemming from individuals feeling connected through similarities in their work, educational or religious training, or in their age, gender and lifestyle; and the other from interdependence between people with

specialised skills and from how this diversity in skills coalesces in a complementing fashion.

Why is this difference important to us today—to decision makers especially? Well, they do connote different mindsets and therefore different ways of understanding and manipulating a situation.

If one is building a hub, the measures needed would essentially be more mechanical, concrete and physical. The measures of success would be more quantitative and economic. If one is creating an ecosystem, however, then inputs have to be more subtle and sophisticated.

For the latter, the points of intervention would require more historical and anthropological knowledge, and the measures of success would be more qualitative and socio-cultural in nature. Much more patience and empathy would be needed in the latter case because more diverse



personalities, skills and values would be involved.

In policymaking, the first mindset might be good in certain areas, like creating an industrial zone perhaps, or a special financial district, or even a tourist attraction. Where measures are aimed at society as a whole, the human interdependencies involved are both an asset and an annoyance.

GLOBAL REPUTATION

Enter the creative industries.

The term “creative industries” has entered popular usage in Penang, significantly emanating from the vibrant nexus between local artistic creativity and extensive technological innovations. The global recognition of George Town’s rich heritage in 2008, together with the fact that Penang has for decades been the Silicon Valley of the East, intermix the two policymaking

mindsets against each other, confusing all involved.

While developing the cultural heritage and creativity of Penang requires a mindset anchored in organic solidarity, the manufacturing prowess of the state encourages a stiffer kind of policy thinking among decision makers which understands mechanical solidarity to be sufficient.

Without a doubt, the manufacturing capacity of Penang has been well-grounded since the beginning, in the 1970s.

As Penang’s cache of creativity regains its global reputation and becomes common knowledge again since 2008, the need to separate a mindset based on mechanical solidarity and on “hub thinking” from one based on organic solidarity and “ecosystem thinking” becomes an imperative.

Creativity in all its forms, to be properly supported, will require policies and activities that provide space for the com-


mitment of many societal actors to develop, and for their activities to adapt and connect, and to complement each other.

Film-making, highlighted this month is a case in point. For it to grow, an ecosystem of enthusiasts with spaces to meet, discuss and argue must be conceptualised at policymaking level, and realised at societal level with the participation of artists, entrepreneurs and audiences alike.



DO MALAYSIAN FILMS HAVE A FUTURE?

BY
**BADRUL
HISHAM ISMAIL**



Badrul Hisham Ismail is the director and screenwriter of *Maryam Pagi Ke Malam*, a 2023 film about a Muslim woman's struggles with religious bureaucracy and societal norms in her desire to choose a marital partner. The film, which touches on sensitive themes ranging from feminism, xenophobia and racism, is not outright banned in Malaysia, but has been largely ignored by the government and the general populace. The movie premiered at the prestigious International Film Festival Rotterdam (IFFR) 2023, but was not shown in Malaysian cinemas.

JANUARY 2023. The cold winter breeze sent chills down my spine even though I was indoors. The war in Ukraine had led to energy shortages across Europe, and public buildings like the cinema I was in had cut their central heating down to the minimum. But it was not just the cold that gave me goosebumps; it was also the extremely long line of people waiting to be admitted into the cinema hall to watch my film.

I don't know about others, but showing one's own film to the world is scary business. It is even more so if it is the first screening—what is called a “World Premiere” in the film industry—of your debut film. And even more so if it is in a sold-out IMAX theater. Your entire being—your thoughts, beliefs, emotions, tastes—is projected onto a 22m x 16m screen; in front of 500 pairs of eyes and ears, watching, listening and judging.

When I had to introduce my film, *Maryam Pagi Ke Malam*, to the audience before it started, my body almost failed me. When the film started rolling, I felt like hiding under my seat, or making a quick dash out of the cinema hall—I was already seated near the exit door. But as the movie started, the audience stayed, engaged, connected and responded to it. I noticed only one person leave the hall and not return, so I stayed too.

When the film ended, the post-screening Q&A session with the audience was interesting. It almost became a debriefing session for members of the audience who shared similar experiences with the film's protagonist. A third of the audience were of the Malaysian diaspora—a rarity in my previous experiences at international film festivals—and they were already familiar with characters portrayed in the film. Two more screenings followed in that festival, with a similarly enthusiastic crowd and with positive responses, albeit in smaller cinema halls (thank God).

Most importantly, I survived unscathed.

Mine was the only Malaysian film at the IFFR that year. But later in April, a Malaysian film was showcased at the Udine Far East Film Festival in Italy, followed by yet another at the Semaine de la Critique in France in May and one at the Busan International Film Festival in October; by the end of the year, back-to-back screenings at Jogja-NETPAC Asian Film Festival and Singapore International Film Festival featured six Malaysian films, some of which won prestigious awards.

A NEW WAVE?

An old friend, who is also one of the programmers at the Singapore International Film Festival, said to me one day over lunch during the festival, that there seemed to be a new wave of Malaysian filmmakers. He was not far off the mark—most, if not all, of the films that premiered at these festivals were directed by first-time directors. The portal, Asian Movie Pulse, wrote that 2023, in particular, seems to be one of the greatest years for Malaysian films.

If this were any other country, there would be ample media coverage and write-ups on this encouraging trend, but in Malaysia, media coverage celebrating the local film scene as a whole seemed lackluster. Yes, the National Film Development Corporation Malaysia (FINAS) did hold an event late last year to recognise successful local films—mine was not invited, of course, for obvious reasons. But in the public realm, discussions about the films or the local independent film scene, whether good or bad, seemed absent.

This echoes a conversation held quite recently at Riwayat Bookstore, an indie bookstore in KL's Chinatown, about the state of local music journalism. The general consensus from the conversation was that journalistic writings and reportings on local music have failed to celebrate it as an art form and as cultural products—instead, they focus heavily on personalities, entertainment and celebrity. The same is true of film journalism.

In an essay published in *Svara*, a Malay language arts journal, Norman Yusoff, who teaches film theory and appreciation, wrote that to have a robust film scene, it is important to sow the seeds of love for cinema. It is not enough to merely show films in multiplexes and streaming platforms; you need film clubs, film education, film critiques and good writing on films as well. It is this ecosystem that contributes to a vibrant film scene, be it mainstream or independent. Like music, film needs to be celebrated as culture, not mere entertainment.

FILM AS CULTURE

Often regarded as a quintessential form of entertainment, film transcends this role to become a powerful medium that reflects, shapes and generates culture. Indeed, it holds a mirror to our society, acts as a vehicle for our cultural expression, and functions as a catalyst for social change. Its importance lies not only in its ability to captivate audiences but also in how it provokes thought, evokes emotion and fosters a deeper understanding of human experiences.

Filmmakers draw inspiration from the social, political and historical contexts of their time. Whether depicting the struggles of marginalised communities, exploring complex interpersonal relationships or confronting pressing social issues, films offers a lens through which audiences can interrogate the intricacies of the human condition. They serve as a repository of cultural knowledge, preserving and disseminating stories that might otherwise be overlooked or forgotten.

Moreover, film transcends linguistic, racial and cultural barriers and speaks to audiences across the world. Filmmakers are well placed to communicate complex ideas and emotions in ways that resonate with viewers of all backgrounds. By exposing audiences to diverse narratives and worldviews, film cultivates interconnectedness and shared humanity.

But when all is said and done, a broad societal appreciation of film is essential to a vibrant and thriving film scene. Once audiences and stakeholders recognise film as cultural heritage, they are more inclined to support and engage with diverse cinematic expressions; it is this condition that generates an environment conducive to creativity, innovation and growth for the film industry.

But how can this be done? Norman Yusoff laid out at length the ecosystem needed in his aforementioned essay. I will add two other aspects based on my own experience.

“LIKE MUSIC,
FILM NEEDS TO BE
CELEBRATED AS
CULTURE, NOT MERE
ENTERTAINMENT.”

FUNDING AND CREATIVE FREEDOM

It took a global pandemic for me to be able to make my first feature film. During the lockdown, as many industries—including the creative industries—were in dire need of a lifeline, support did come. The Pelan Jana Semula Ekonomi Negara (PENJANA) was established as part of the government's Covid-19 aid programme. Funds to make films were allocated and administered by three (as far as I know) agencies—FINAS, Astro and MyCreative. Each grant programme by these agencies was tailored differently. I was informed about the grant administered by MyCreative by a friend, who also encouraged me to apply.

The grant programme is called the Creative Industry Recovery Grant, Art Film or Festival Grant. As the name suggests, it was dedicated to the production of art films for international film festivals. The best thing about it was that the funding came with no strings attached—no prior approval by the national censorship board or FINAS, no requirement to have a local cinema release or to make a profit. The only required “KPI” was that the film needed to be selected and screened at at least one international film festival from a list of about 30 provided by MyCreative.





I just want to get married, Jen.

It was a rare opportunity for local filmmakers to receive this kind of support without the burden of ensuring commercial success, *and* without the pre-approval of the censorship board. So, I decided to pitch a story that had been on my mind for some time but would not have been able to secure funding for under “normal” circumstances—a story about the reach of religious and social institutions into people’s private lives.

Funding and creative freedom are the twin pillars upon which a vibrant and dynamic film scene stands. Without adequate financial support and the autonomy to pursue artistic vision, filmmakers face significant barriers to realising their creative potential and contributing to the cultural tapestry of society.

Funding initiatives can amplify diverse voices and stories that might otherwise be overlooked or diminished, and enrich the cinematic landscape with a breadth of perspectives, experiences and storytelling styles.

Equally important is creative freedom—the autonomy for filmmakers to explore bold ideas, take risks and push the boundaries of artistic expression. Creative freedom empowers filmmakers to tackle challenging subject matters, experiment with unconventional techniques, and defy genre conventions, resulting in works that are innovative, provocative and emotionally resonant.

Sadly, the funding programme (and the creative freedom that came with it) that provided opportunities for films like mine to be made is no longer continued. Things have returned to the norm, where public funds and grants for film are available through the usual channels, requiring prior censorship approval. In fact, certain parties in the country were upset that films were made using public funds without pre-approval. It seems that creative freedom is again being severely restricted, and the authorities are intent on stifling whatever creative air remains by tightening the pre-approval process.

FILMS ARE PROVOCATIVE BY NATURE

The biggest excuse against creative freedom in Malaysia is “national security”—the belief by authorities and other like-minded parties that, if given too much freedom, filmmakers will provoke and hurt people’s feelings, and trigger social disorder and violence. The censorship board exists to guarantee that films eventually released to the public are not provocative in nature and will only promote themes that are in accordance with “societal values”.

First of all, as someone who also works on peace and security issues, I find that the idea that these are ensured by controlling thought and creativity is utter nonsense. In fact, one can say that violence erupts when we do *not* have opportunities to express our thoughts and emotions in a safe space.

Secondly, indeed, at its heart, film is inherently provocative. It often pushes the boundaries of societal norms and conventions. It dares to confront uncomfortable truths, challenge ingrained beliefs and stimulate thought-provoking conversations about the state of society. In this capacity, film serves as a safe space—a cinematic sanctuary—where audiences can engage in difficult dialogues and confront contentious issues in a controlled and mediated environment.

Films have the unique ability to broach sensitive topics that might otherwise be met with resistance or defensiveness in other mediums. Whether exploring

“IN FACT,
ONE CAN SAY THAT
VIOLENCE ERUPTS
WHEN WE DO NOT
HAVE OPPORTUNITIES
TO EXPRESS OUR
THOUGHTS AND
EMOTIONS IN A
SAFE SPACE.”



Photos courtesy of Anomalous Films, Rhu Graha

race, sexuality, religion or politics, filmmakers have the creative license to delve into the complexities of human existence with nuance and empathy. They invite viewers to step outside their comfort zones, question their assumptions and empathise with characters whose lives and experiences differ from their own.

Moreover, the immersive nature of the cinematic experience—being surrounded by darkness, enveloped by sound and transfixed by imagery—is conducive to introspection and reflection. Within the confines of the movie theater or the privacy of one's home, audiences have the freedom to engage with challenging subject matters at their own pace, without fear of judgment or reprisal.

WHERE ARE WE NOW?

Unfortunately, despite the positive reception of Malaysian films on the international circuit throughout 2023, the situation back home was not as favourable. Of the films shown at the festivals, when it came to screenings at local cinemas, at least one emerged heavily edited, and two opted out of local cinema releases entirely to avoid dealing with the censorship board. Even on streaming platforms—often considered a “safe

haven” for local films—one of them was forced to be taken down by the Malaysian government—something unprecedented. The filmmakers behind this film were then harassed and threatened by religious zealots. They, instead of their attackers, were also charged in court for hurting religious feelings.

This environment undermines the confidence and sense of security, both in existing and potential filmmakers. Instead of focusing on their craft, filmmakers may find themselves preoccupied with navigating potential risks and self-censoring, diverting energy away from creative endeavours.

I recall overhearing an interview between a filmmaker friend and a journalist a few years back. He said that the Malaysian film scene is the most interesting in the world because there are so many untold stories. I agree with the sentiment—the films released in 2023 truly put that statement to the test by being as diverse as the country itself, telling stories that we have not seen before in local films.

The pressing question remains: How do we continue telling our stories if we are not allowed to, and if we do not feel safe doing it?



BADRUL HISHAM ISMAIL is the director and screenwriter of *Maryam Pagi Ke Malam*.



1

RAGING AGAINST THE MACHINE: REFLECTIONS ON PENDATANG, ABANG ADIK AND MARYAM PAGI KE MALAM

BY YEE HENG YEH

WHAT DO (a) a family living in a speculative, segregated Malaysia; (b) two brothers squeezed into a Pudu flat and; (c) a woman of royalty who owns an art gallery, all have in common?

Actually, more than you would think.

These are the protagonists of three Malaysian films released last year: *Pendatang* (directed by Ng Ken Kin), *Abang Adik* (directed by Jin Ong) and *Maryam Pagi Ke Malam* (directed by Badrul Hisham Ismail). It would be reductive to view them only through a political lens—yet it is interesting to note a common thread: each film explores the ways in which individuals survive, navigate or challenge the socio-legal systems they are trapped in.

Pendatang presents a future where Malaysia is parcelled off into race-specific areas. We learn that this development was triggered by an incident that happened on a particular September 27 (the characters refer to this as “927”, the same way May 13 is simply denoted as “513” in Chinese). In this segregated society, supplies are strictly rationed, the friendly neighbourhood watch is an armed militia, and movement is limited by curfews and barbed wires, Kampung Baru-style. The world-building is deliberate, evoking spectres from the past to warn us about the future.

A Chinese family moves into a Malay *kampung* house, still haunted by the belongings of its past inhabitants, where they later discover a Malay girl hiding in the attic (nicknamed “Panda”). The

dilemma is clear: to turn her in and save their own skin, or try to smuggle her into the Malay area? As personal morals clash with official policies, the film suggests that what is legal is far from being right. The title also subverts the derogatory rhetoric surrounding the term “*pendatang*”, so often weaponised against racial minorities; here, the Malay child is the outsider who requires protection from the majority.

On the other hand, *Abang Adik* shows us the dystopia that exists here and now—of Malaysians who fall through the cracks of the nation’s identity registry. The power dynamics are brutal but complex. In the first scene, we see Adi, himself a stateless individual, working with a crime boss to extort more money in a migrant smuggling deal. When the cops come raiding, Adi is markedly a less vulnerable victim, since a photocopy of his birth certificate allows him to slip through the net that ensnares the undocumented migrants. (The Chinese title translates to “The Youth of Pudu”, which allows a more expansive interpretation than “Abang Adik”: throughout the film, we see migrant workers leap off rooftops, share food with Abang and rounded up like cattle during a midnight raid—we wonder: aren’t they, too, the youth of Pudu?)

Abang (big brother to Adi) encourages him to apply for an IC in order to obtain official citizenship; but Adi is vehemently resistant to the idea, since he would have to meet his estranged father to do so—this resistance leads to an abrupt turn to violence in the second act. The film’s core question: What kind of humanity can pre-



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vail in a system like this? And so it is most moving when it surprises us with tender moments: Abang's short-lived romance with a girl from Myanmar, or the birthday party of a neighbour who acts as their mother figure—in this world, joy is not only possible, but also necessary.

Marginalisation, however, does not just happen on the margins, as *Maryam Pagi Ke Malam* reminds us. The eponymous Maryam enjoys every privilege afforded to a woman of her standing—but she also suffers from the shackles of the same identities that bestow so much social status. The Kafkaesque process of getting approval for her marriage—because she is Malay, of royal blood and a woman—is documented over the course of a day. We experience Maryam's growing frustration as she is subjected to demeaning questions and doubts, even from her closest friends. Racism, too, can be intersectional.

The film is incisive as satire, revealing the hypocrisies of those in power who proclaim moral superiority just to profit from it—this best exemplified by the Starbucks-sipping, Palestinian-flag-bearing ustaz. Notably, the only characters who sympathise with Maryam are those employed by her or her family: her personal assistant, the family tailor and her spunky lawyer. In the end, unable to even talk to her partner about her day, she is unutterably alone, even more so than Panda or Adi. (A friend pointed out how this comparison brings up questions of class solidarity—or the lack thereof...)

HOPELESS OR NOT

So, if you are entangled in such a system, is there no way out? *Pendatang* suggests that such an artificial system would eventually collapse on itself. This collapse, though violent, seems like the only solution—hence the plot swerving into a barrage of shootouts, complete with a Mexican standoff.

In *Abang Adik*, no such dismantling occurs. The system is too big and merciless; the characters, ultimately powerless, can only take things one day at a time. *Maryam*'s final shot shows her the next morning, having to do battle all over again. Her raging against the machine continues; she, too, waits for a Godot of her own.

Though these three films may share thematic ground, their releases are starkly different. *Abang Adik* had a conventional cinema release (with unconventional success) after a triumphant run in Taiwan. *Pendatang*, billed as Malaysia's first crowdfunded movie, premiered freely on YouTube—co-producer Amir Muhammad had to emphasise that this was not done to avoid censorship so much as to make it widely accessible. And *Maryam*? Given that it unabashedly tackles the three R's (race,

1. *Pendatang* (Photo courtesy of Kuman Pictures and Tapir Films)

2. *Maryam Pagi Ke Malam* (Photo courtesy of Anomalous Films and Rhu Graha)

3. *Abang Adik* (Photo courtesy of MM2 Entertainment, More Entertainment and New Century Southward Development)

“It would be reductive to view them only through a political lens—yet it is interesting to note a common thread: each film explores the ways in which individuals survive, navigate or challenge the socio-legal systems they are trapped in.”

FOOTNOTE

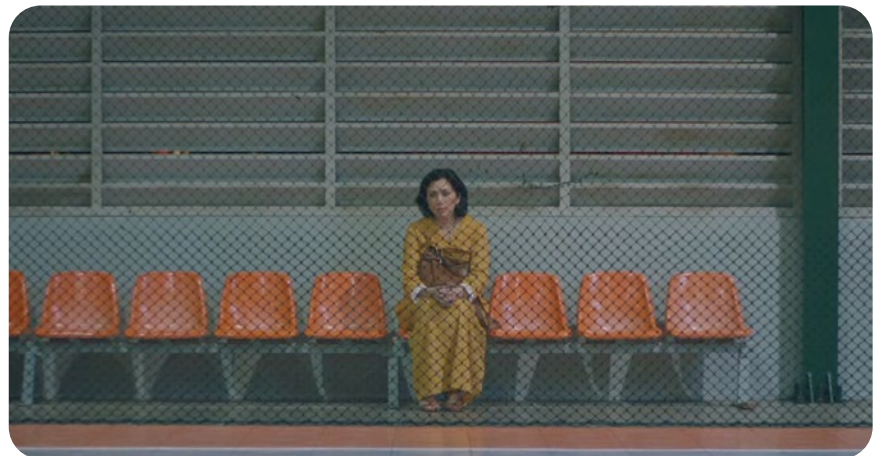
[1] <https://variety.com/2023/film/news/tiger-stripes-director-amanda-nell-eu-denounces-malaysian-censorship-film-release-1235761726/>

religion, royalty), it is no surprise that it has only been shown at international film festivals and private screenings.

Like these characters, Malaysian filmmakers also employ their own strategies to navigate the systems they inhabit. I think about the online vitriol directed at *Pendatang* even before its release, purely on its title. I think about Amanda Nell Eu's statement denouncing the censored cut of *Tiger Stripes* released in local cinemas.^[1] I think about how, just this January, the director and producer of *Mentega Terbang* were charged in court for “hurting religious feelings”—over a film that came out over two years ago.

Most of all, I think about the recent proposed amendments to Malaysia's citizenship law that would further disempower stateless groups. I think about the continual reports of raids carried out by the immigration department. In all three films, there is a tragic resonance—these characters crushed by the system do not just appear out of thin air; they are borrowed from life, and remain even after the credits roll. They remind us that deeper tragedies continue happening, off-screen.

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VULNERABLE AND EXPOSED

SAW TEONG HIN

ON THE TRAVAILS OF FILMMAKING

BY
LIM WAN PHING

WHEN SAW TEONG HIN started his filmmaking career in KL, he began at the bottom rung. But to even get a foot in, he had to leaf through the Yellow Pages from A to Z. Thankfully, he got his break at O—at an advertising agency named Ogilvy & Mather.

This was the mid-1980s, when telephone calls led him to face-to-face meetings and to a production assistant job not at the agency but elsewhere. Throughout the nineties and noughties, Saw's work ethic and willingness to try new things would take him from producing to directing to scriptwriting, and eventually to setting up his own company, Real Films.

He put Malaysia on the map with box-office success *Puteri Gunung Ledang* (2004) at the Venice International Film Festival and KRU's music video *Fanatik* (1997) at the MTV Video Music Awards in New York. What else is left for the Penang-born director after four decades in the industry?





PURSUIT OF HAPPINESS

Saw's journey as a filmmaker will resonate with many. It is sobering to realise there is no shortcut to success and that good old-fashioned hard work and perseverance—coupled with a bit of luck and timing, of course—is what it takes.

Growing up in George Town in the 1960s and living in a pre-war shophouse on Lebuhraya Victoria, he is the youngest of six siblings. After completing his Upper Six education at St Xavier's Institution, he went to Singapore but failed at being a scholar. He then left for KL at age 24 to make something of himself.

"I enjoyed watching movies as a child, but I never thought I'd be in that line of work." Saw also faced the usual Asian parent dilemma of doctor, lawyer or engineer being the only career options. "Filmmaking is challenging with its ups and downs, but now it's the only thing I know how to do, and want to do."

His persistence in his early 20s paid off, and he remembers his time as a production assistant as "good training ground"—making coffee, sweeping floors, carrying lights and learning every aspect of film production. But midway through a busy and lucrative career doing television commercials, Saw hit a point in his mid-30s when he wanted to make films instead.

"I came to a point where I told myself I had to stop doing these other things and actually focus on what I like," he says. So, Saw wrote his first script and tried to get it off the ground, attending film festivals, networking and looking for investors—all on his own time and savings. But reality was harsh, and his efforts were unsuccessful.

Thankfully, a call came one day from actress Tiara Jacquelina, who was looking for someone to direct *Puteri Gunung Ledang*. Saw turned the action-heavy script into a romance, and the result was Best Director, Best Screenplay and Best Actress wins for the film.

SAW'S WORLD

It was then that Saw ventured into theatre, alternating between the screen and stage. That was when he appeared at George Town Festival (GTF), staging *Emily on Emerald Hill* (2010), *Silat* (2012) and *Hai Ki Xin Lor* (2014). His last theatre project was a semi-autobiographical play about a mother's love for a mentally-challenged son, which was adapted into the film *You Mean the World to Me* (2017), both of which received positive feedback and left audiences in tears.

"This was a story I had to tell," explains Saw, "from family baggage I had been carrying for so long. I came to a point in my career where I thought, 'What film

would represent me?' and this was it. It was something I knew from personal experience and it was a way for me to honour and apologise to my mother for having misjudged her love for my brother all these years."

Saw recalls that audiences at the 2014 play came up to thank him for telling such a personal story. "Back in my day, mental health was not discussed in families, and any kind of disability was attributed to spiritual possession," he says. "In hindsight, my brother could've gotten the appropriate treatment, but we just didn't talk about it and I ended up resenting him for so long. Everybody is so ashamed of having a mentally disabled family member, but once you tell your story, you are so relieved. You realise that it's common in many families, and you're not the only one."



As the first Malaysian film to be done entirely in Penang Hokkien, Saw explains that he wrote the script in English and phonetic Hokkien. A self-confessed "banana", he then worked with translators at the Penang Hokkien Language Association to create a trilingual script in English, Mandarin and Romanised Hokkien for the cast.

"When you make a film, all your vulnerabilities and sensibilities are exposed," he says, recalling how he was initially so embarrassed by *Puteri Gunung Ledang* because it was a deeply romantic film and all his soporifics had been exposed on screen. "Once you put your work out there, it is for the public to judge."

A LEGACY OF WORK FOR ALL TO ENJOY

It has been 10 years since his last GTF appearance, and Saw is not done telling stories. He is currently filming a Malay horror movie titled *Laknat*, and hopes that, as a filmmaker, he can leave a legacy of his craft for the next generation to appreciate. For anyone trying to break into the industry, he only has one word: tenacity.

"You need mental strength to not give up so easily and to know why you're doing something," he says. "It all comes back to intentions. There are so many ways to express yourself, so why film? If you're in this for the glamour and money, it is best to do something else. You'll be more famous being an influencer!"

After *You Mean the World to Me*, Saw says he would not hesitate to film in Penang again. "Penang is so photogenic and picturesque, and it has such a strong personality. One look and you know where you are. Penang will always be special to me as it is where I spent my formative years, and I will always look back on it fondly."



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.

HASSAN



MUTHALIB

A LIFE LIVED IN DRAWINGS, ANIMATIONS AND LOVE OF VISUAL LANGUAGE

BY RACHEL YEOH



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.

HE IS THE Father of Malaysian Animation, a title bestowed on him by former Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak. He was also a recipient of the 2018 Merdeka Award under the category of Education and Community. Earlier in his career, he had won the Best Idea Award by Anugerah Sri Angkasa in 1981 and Best Documentary by the Asia-Pacific Film Fest in 1987.

Hassan Abdul Muthalib had no prior education about film, and animation then was nascent, often appearing as part of the titling in documentaries or commercial work. However, Pak Hassan (as he is called) was able to create long-form animation and caught eyeballs, giving the government reason to invest in this field, thus paving the way for locally made animation films we see today. *Penang Monthly* was privileged to sit down with him to chat about his journey.

Rachel Yeoh: Can you briefly tell me how you entered the film industry and what inspired you to keep creating while in Filem Negara and even after you left?

Hassan Muthalib: I came to KL in 1964, and I was working in the Robinsons department store after failing my Form Five. In 1967, I decided to retake my exam. Surprisingly, I passed with a distinction in English and a so-so pass in art. I managed to scrape through, is all I can say.

At that time, I applied to work as a graphic artist at Filem Negara, but I didn't know what the job was about. 10 people came, and I was the only one chosen. 25 years later, I met one of those who interviewed me, the Deputy Director. I asked him, "Mr. Wong, why did you choose me even though the others had better qualifications and their artwork was much better?" He said I had three things that they didn't have. "(1) Distinction in English, which we had never heard of; (2) You were doing a job that we had never heard of—window display; (3) You taught yourself and you did not want to be sent for training—that was the kind of people we were looking for.

I was a graphic artist going through titling manually, learning everything on the job. In 1972, I was asked by the new Director General, John Nettleton, to animate a 30-second to one-minute festive trailer. It was for Christmas in 1972. I had never animated before!

My storyboard had the star twinkling, and the three kings were on the camels heading toward the star in Bethlehem, where Christ was born. It was only 20 years later that I realised—when I did the star twinkling—you know, in film visual language, if you have stars in a film, it means your story has something to do with destiny. For me, my destiny was to be in animation.

Today, the *Sang Kancil dan Monyet*, which I made in 1984, is being re-shown on Facebook again and again and getting positive feedback.

Only later, in learning the language of cinema, did I realise that I had been doing things instinctively, the way P. Ramlee's films affected people. He was using film language instinctively, and today, if you analyse his films academically, you will find that he really did understand—and this is actually coming from what the Malays call *firasat*, meaning something like intuition; but it's more than that. For instance, there are three scenes at the beginning, middle and the end of *The Lion King*, where there are stars in the sky. This means that Simba's destiny is to be the next Lion King, and you cannot run away from that. So, in a sense, I was continuously guided from the very beginning.

These are the things that I've been teaching all this while and I'm the only one in Malaysia teaching this. It is a very

basic aspect of cinema that you have to understand in order to communicate with audiences on a subconscious level. Without any words, they can grasp meaning. This is also noted in film theory.

Now, my *Sang Kancil dan Monyet* was the second short animation film that has been done in Malaysia. The first one was quite long, 13 minutes, done by one of my colleagues, a set designer, Anandam Xavier, during his free time. He began in 1961 and finally completed *Hikayat Sang Kancil* in 1978.

Now, I was quite lucky because in 1983, when a new Information Minister came in with a new Director General for Filem Negara, he happened to see this film and said, "Oh, this is good!"—even though it was not that good. He called and said, "Why is it not screened?" Of course, there's a political element to it. When the animation was completed in 1978, there was a corruption case involving a Menteri Besar—there is a scene in the film where an old mat that had been thrown away speaks to Sang Kancil and the crocodile that had caught hold of the leg of the buffalo. He says, "When we are useful, they use us, and when we are not useful, they discard us." The Home Minister then thought that it reflected on that case, so it was shelved.

By 1983, that issue was over and the film was screened on Hari Raya day. Mine was screened the following Hari Raya, which was a huge success because it was short and used humorous elements in animation, whereas the first one was a direct translation from the story without humour.

In 1974, we were actually already doing public service animations. One that was hugely popular was one where I had Aedes mosquitoes talking to the audience, indirectly getting across the message about the do's and don'ts. I took the comedic approach on serious issues.

Then, I did a live-action public service advertisement on the *dadah* issue—the first time I directed actors. I was hooked and wanted to be a film director. In 1987, I was given the opportunity to direct documentaries. My first documentary won an award in Jakarta, and I did two or three more.

Sang Kancil dan Monyet and *Sang Kancil dan Buaya* came out in 1987. I was doing the managing and the administration as well, I couldn't actually sit down and do the animation. I had to plan everything. At the same time, I was also lecturing at the Training Institute at the Ministry of Information. And within it, there was AIBD, the Asia Pacific Institute for Broadcasting Development, and I had to go to India twice under a UNESCO five-year educational training programme. In one month, we made four animation films in New Delhi.

Many years later, I went to teach in

Sudan TV, and we made a four-minute short animation film, which had never been done before. They brought in people from BBC and Australia. Nothing happened. But when I came, within four weeks, we made a short animation. So they called me again for the second year, this time to teach documentary film.

RY: You are the "Father of Malaysian Animation", and though you have not been hands-on for a while, what is the most drastic difference between then and now?

HM: Ah, very big difference! Now everything is done on the computer. You don't even have to draw anything on paper. When we started, it was all manual. Then, in 1983, when the minister asked to make short animation films, new computers for animators were released. It was called the QAR - Quick Action Recorder. It was a video thing that checks your drawings—you scan them—and it can playback within five minutes, so you know whether your animation is correct or not.

Before that, you put it under an animation camera, process the film, print the film, you screen it and only after two or three days could you see if it was right or not. If not, you had to redo the whole thing.

Software that could actually help with animation came out in 1988. I was the first animator in Malaysia to be trained in this 2D and 3D software.

In 1989, I was asked to do a commercial for Parkson Grand and Parkson Ria using the characters of Woody Woodpecker, Wile E. Coyote and the Roadrunner. We tested out the software and I was amazed that it could save you a lot of time, especially when it came to mouth movements, as these were different for English and Malay versions of the commercial.

When I did Malaysia's first animated feature film, *Silat Lagenda*, with another studio in 1995 after opting out of the government service at age 49, I was the only one who had any experience working on film. We bought a system called US Animation. This was another high-end, incredible machine—you can do visual effects, it can help you to composite, put the characters and the background together, enhance the background—all kinds of things. Animation then still had to be hand-drawn, and because we did not have enough animators, we had to go to Indonesia and the Philippines to work on it.

Now, we have Adobe After Effects that can do some incredible things. What we can do now, we could only imagine in those days. Today, those who are not talented in art but work using the software and understand its capabilities can become animators.

To me, they are not real animators, because you have to learn how to draw



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by hand first. There are things that you can do that the software cannot do. The animation is not in the drawing. It is the apparent movement between two images—an illusion of movement. The gap is what actually creates the movement in the mind. The retina retains the image for a fraction of a second. It does not disappear instantly. So that's what creates animation.

In 3D, we don't have that. That's why everything is very smooth. Why is it that Disney Pixar and the Japanese can do something that looks like it's hand-drawn? This is because they have learned how to do it manually. So, they apply it by using the software.

RY: Which animation projects have you been involved in that stand out as the most memorable for you and why?

HM: I haven't thought about it. When I look back and do a little bit of analysis, I can see that *Sang Kancil dan Monyet* made me famous. Until today, whenever I meet people, they can mouth the dialogue. This is very satisfying when people remember what you have done. This is after 38 years, almost 40 years!

I was told that during the time, school-children could remember the dialogue, not only from *Sang Kancil dan Monyet* but also from the public service advertisements.

RY: You mention people mouthing dialogues, were you the scriptwriter for those advertisements and shows?

HM: All the scripts were written by me.

RY: There must be something about how you string the sentences in your script then, that makes them memorable.

HM: I wasn't specifically thinking about what kind of dialogue I should write. But just a little about my background... when I was in primary school, Westlands School in 1955, there was an English teacher who would always tell stories. I became interested in reading comics—I was reading classics illustrated. I read one book a day.

In secondary school, I joined the USIS library, the United States Information Service Library on Beach Street. You know the building called India House?

RY: Yes.



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HM: The library was on the ground floor. From British fiction, I moved to American fiction and was enthralled by the adventure stories. I walked from Jelutong to Beach Street because I could not afford the five sen bus fare. I came from a really, really poor family.

I was also reading nonfiction, astronomy, geology, biology... the books had so many wonderful illustrations and photographs. The visuals made me want to read the text.

Can you imagine how reading must have affected me?

I failed my Form Five because I never read school books—only storybooks! But of course, I got a distinction in English—the only one in my school. The headmaster called me and said, "Hassan, you're a joke! How can you get a distinction in English and fail all the other subjects when it should be the other way around?"

I was also studying civilisations. So once you know about other civilisations, you will begin to appreciate your own and that diversity actually helps you—this is what Mark Twain said, "Prejudice and bigotry are the enemies of travel"—these are the things that you learn in anthropology. And writers need to have this knowledge.

The other thing was drawing. I was not born with talent, but I loved art so much that I copied it and suddenly, I was an artist. The same thing happened when I got into animation. I was copying the animation from other Disney films I borrowed from RTM (Radio Televisyen Malaysia). I used a magnifying glass to look at a 16mm film and copied the walking effects, birds flying and so on.

I was training myself—copying the artwork of famous painters and animation of famous filmmakers. Now, if you're copying the masters, how can you go wrong?

RY: How accessible are resources, training and funding for aspiring animators in Malaysia? You had to learn on the job. But after all these years, do you think that access to technology for budding animators has improved?

HM: Our biggest drawback is the market. If we are just animating for our audience, we have to keep costs very, very low. But animation has a long shelf life, which means after a certain number of years, it



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can be reshowed or sold to other countries. Suppose you have cooperation among ASEAN countries or with other Asian countries, we could actually create a market for all these countries because they need content for their TV station.

And I always say that we cannot train animators now. Because the software and technology has made it so easy for almost anyone to be an animator. Therefore, the next level is to create animation filmmakers. Even if you don't become a creator, you will be able to work better with a director because you understand his crowd, you understand directing, writing, acting and so on. It is not about drawings that move but movements that are drawn. Therefore, we are talking about acting, the story, directing, cinematography and editing.

If you look at the syllabus of European countries or Disney Studios or the Sheridan College in Canada, they teach students to be animation filmmakers, not animators—and they will become the best in the world. This calls for a totally different kind of thinking.

We now have to focus on training our trainers—they are the "frontliners".

RY: Then what do you think are the key challenges faced by the Malaysian film industry in terms of production, distribution and promotion?

HM: I am happy to see that *Upin & Ipin*, *BoBoiBoy* and *Ejen Ali* have already made it internationally. They have a large staff; I cannot imagine the overheads every month. If you're making a feature film, it will take two to three years. Imagine how much you're paying them a month. Let's say, at a minimum, you're paying RM200,000, and in 10 months, it is RM2mil. Even if you made RM30mil at the box office, you still have not made a profit yet.

I know the producer of *Upin & Ipin*, Haji Burhanuddin. He is a very astute businessman. His team is very good at what they do. But there is a lack on the story aspect, especially in getting across the story visually. This is where understanding visual language is very important. If you want to go global with animation, these are the elements that are needed.

There is storytelling and there is story-making. Storytelling is the story of



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characters and so on. Story-making is the technique of putting that story onto the screen. And it cannot be done only through dialogue. You have to use visuals to support them. And this is what is very much lacking in all our films. I can say that, for me, *Ejen Ali* is so far the best when it pertains to the story. And if you notice, *Ejen Ali*'s eyes are very detailed. You may not notice this, but your subconscious mind picks it up, which is why he appears more lifelike compared to other characters.

RY: How do you think the socio-political climate of Malaysia has influenced the industry?

HM: Actually, I can say that the animation industry flourished because of government support. In 1983, when Mahathir Mohamed became the Prime Minister, one of the first things he said was, "We want to reduce the number of television clips on our TV." I remember there were 35 TV series at the time; not a single one was local. So in 1983, the Information Minister came and he said, "We have to have our own TV series. So go ahead and make 13 episodes of *Sang Kancil*." At that time, I had just been promoted to be the head, so I could not say, "Sorry sir, we don't know how to do that." So I just crossed my fingers and said, "No problem". But then you see, if I had not accepted it, I'm sure our industry would have taken very, very long to develop. But when things moved, other people got inspired by what I had done.

Mahathir got things moving at the very beginning, and by 1994, I was asked by the Ministry of Information to present a paper to the Parliamentary Secretary about animation and how to get our own TV series. He thought it was just getting a cartoonist to do animation. I said, "No way!"

I presented my paper, then he began to realise that it was not going to be easy. But at that time, they were already thinking of creating our own series and going to the Ministry of Finance to get a special grant to pay for local episodes. I was on a panel together with other people to look at two pilot episodes; one was *Sang Wira* and another was *Usop Sontorian*.

They then asked, "How much should we pay for a half-hour episode?" I said RM60,000 and they nearly fainted! They said that the Ministry of Finance will never



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approve. So they asked "Why don't we give just RM45,000 and as it improves, we can increase?" So that's how the TV series started in 1995 with *Usop Sontorian*.

They wouldn't give more than RM45,000 because buying shows from Disney or Warner Brothers only cost USD500 per episode. They could charge very low because they were on the world circuit.

This is why I said that if you have a deal with either ASEAN countries or Asian countries, then our shows could go from country to country. But there must be a unit specifically looking into this. And we will generate jobs for all the animators, the directors, the writers, and so on. Right now, we don't really have a proper industry. We just have different people doing different things. There has got to be some political will.

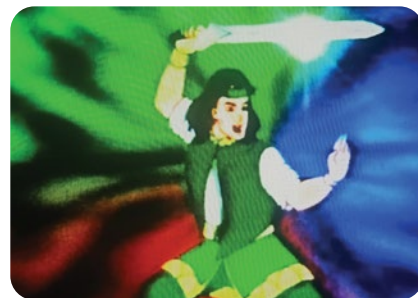
For *Upin & Ipin*, there just happened to be two characters in a feature film, and the studio decided to take the two characters to make short episodes for TV—it became a huge hit; in Singapore, in Brunei and Indonesia, especially.

So all that money that was spent by the Multimedia Development Corporation (MDeC) in the 90s to train animators and provide them with work did help. They also understood about marketing overseas and distribution. They brought in people from overseas to advise. So actually, we are making a lot of money every year; I think two years ago, the biggest box office hits were animations.

RY: That's so encouraging to hear. Let's talk about multiculturalism and film. How do you think animation films can be used to help the country achieve the unity that Malaysia covets?

HM: The Ministry of National Unity should work with the Ministry of Tourism, Arts and Culture to develop a special budget for how to unite the nation through animation films.

Since *Upin & Ipin* has crossed boundaries, together with *BoBoiBoy* and *Ejen Ali*, they should make use of this but also create new characters from our folktales, from our legends and our literature. I've spoken about this to some relevant people, but I don't see anything happening. We need a separate department. And yes, it should be government-funded at the



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beginning, then they should go on their own, and look at the commercial aspect of it.

Writers also need to be trained because not everyone knows how to write for animation—that is totally different from writing for live-action films. It's not about fast-moving, fast-cutting and so on, which is more like any video game. They need to know how to tell stories cinematically—they need a deep understanding of cinematography, editing, the use of sound and, of course, *mise-en-scène*—how the director arranges everything within the frame—all this has meaning. For example, if a character stands on the left during a fight, he will lose; if on the right, he will win. This is visual language. If you put a person in the centre, you're breaking the rule. Our animation filmmakers have to understand visual language.

RY: What are your hopes for the animation industry?

HM: I truly cannot see where we are headed. I think they should study the European approach to animation. But ultimately, they need to have a strong foundation in filmmaking—understanding editing and so on. Otherwise, when they do a storyboard, they are just imagining it—they don't know the actual rules. Film dynamics is a very important area but it is not being taught in Malaysia.

I can say that the funds given to the animation film producers have been properly utilised, and you can see that on the screen. That is the good thing about it. So I hope they will increase the budget for animation feature films and help it rise to the next level.

RY: Thank you so much for your time, Encik Hassan.

HM: Alright!

CAPTIONS

1. Hassan painting the signage for the Robinsons Dept Store, 1967.
2. Photography for a women's magazine, 1972.
3. Painting posters for a party at Filem Negara, 1977.
4. Directing a documentary in Terengganu, 1988.
5. Drawing the storyboard for *Sang Kancil & Bucaya*, 1989.
6. *Silat Legenda*, Malaysia's first feature animation, 1998.

FLYERS FROM THE GOLDEN AGE OF CINEMA

BY PAUL AUGUSTIN

THE GOLDEN AGE of Malaysian cinema, spanning the 1950s to the 1970s, saw moviegoers lining up to catch the latest releases. For more popular shows, scalpers would purchase them when the box office opened in the morning to sell them at a higher price before the show starts.

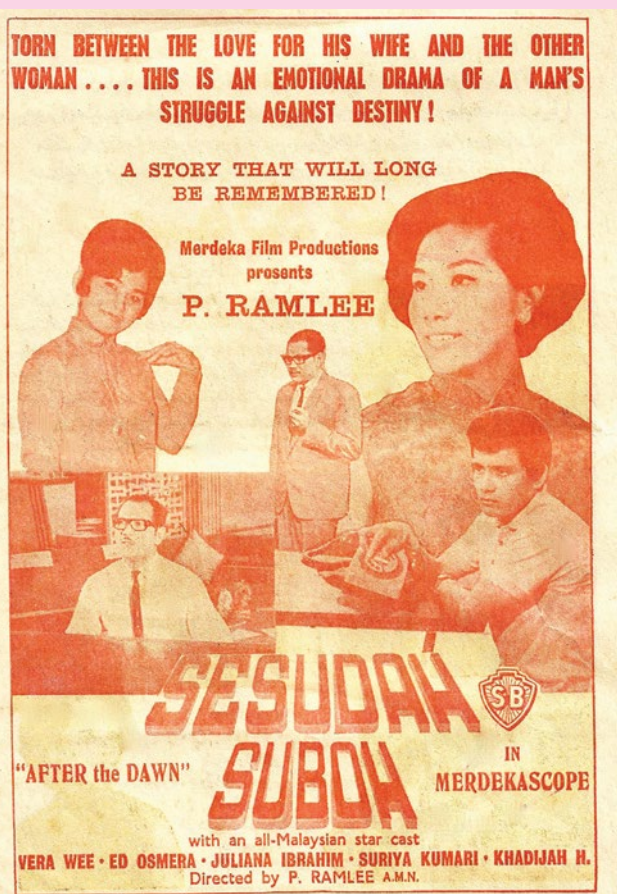
Besides billboards and posters plastered around the walls in the vicinity, cinema flyers (sometimes referred to as leaflets or handbills) were one of the methods used in the early years to promote upcoming films. In a budget-conscious approach, the flyers were distributed at prime locales, sometimes utilising vans or trucks with billboards and loudspeakers to get attention. The flyers would contain information on upcoming movies (often with

the heading “Next Change”) with the relevant screening dates and times.

A common practice by cinemas’ promotions department of that era included creative promotion “bursts” on the flyers, describing a movie with its title and synopsis in at least two, or sometimes three, languages.

An interesting fact to note is that due to Malaysia’s multicultural and multi-ethnic nature, films of various dialects and genres were often shown with subtitles in several languages. An English movie would have Malay and Chinese subtitles, and a Chinese film would have English and Malay subtitles.

Here are some of the posters found in Penang House of Music’s archives.



A Story Of Eternal Love Between A Man And A Woman Of Different Racial Origin....Isolated And Outcast By Their Own People....
....Their Laughs And Their Sorrows Will Run Deep Into Your Emotional Heart!

P. RAMLEE and a new find **CHANDRA SHANMUGAM**

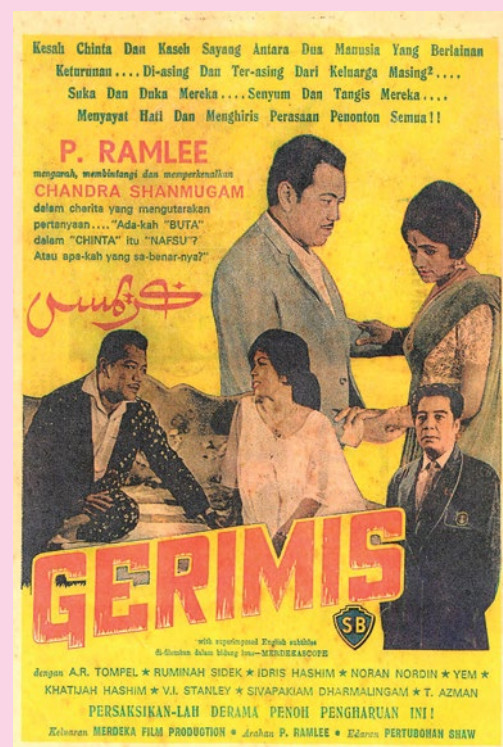
IN

GERIMIS

in
MERDEKASCOPE
with
Superimposed
English
Subtitles

with A.R.Tompel - Ruminah Sidek - Idris Hashim - Noran Nordin -
Yem - Khatijah Hashim - V.I.Stanley - Sivapakiam Dharmalingam
Produced by Merdeka Film Production
Directed by P.Ramlee

2a



2b

1. *Sesudah Suboh* is a Malay film produced by Merdeka Film Productions and screened in cinemas on 20 September 1967. The front of the poster is written in Jawi; on the flip side, the poster is translated into English.

2a & 2b. In 1968, Merdeka Film Productions released *Gerimis*. Differing from *Sesudah Suboh*, the Jawi type is only used for the title of the film, and Romanised Malay text is used for the rest of the poster. On the reverse side, similar information is translated into English.

4. This Taiwanese martial arts show titled *Flying Swallow* debuted on 24 November 1978 at Cathay Cinema Muar. While the Chinese text highlights the stars of the show with catchy blurbs to inform readers of what to expect, the Malay words tell of the show's title, and show times are stamped in English.

5. Movie flyers of this time period often include a brief synopsis in English and Chinese printed behind.

6. Pre-independence, the movie flyers were in the English language. This is a flyer by Rex Theatre KL from 1956 that highlights English-language pictures in English and Chinese-language ones in Chinese.



REX THEATRE PENANG Now Showing 半點九。半點六。半

PELARIAN SA-ORANG KEKASEH

Li Kuo-tai dan Tien Chun-tung yang menjalankan perniagaan
 syarikat penerbangan, mendapat sa-orang pelanggan baru, Hsu
 Siu-chin. Ayah gadis ini telah mati di-suatu nahas udara oleh kapal
 terbang yang besar yang ditunggang oleh Hsu Siu-chin. Hsu
 pindah dari kampung asalnya-nya. Siu-chin bekerja menjadi penyanyi
 di-Golden Castle, sa-buah kelab malam di-bawah naungan Chien
 Chur-sang. Kuo-tai dan Chin-yang sama2 menchantal Siu-chin.
 Kedua-nya juga ahli seni judo yang terkenal di-negeri Jepun.
 Siu-chin berkahwin dengan Chien Chur-sang, dan Chien Chur-
 sai dan Kuo-tai terpaksa berundur diri.

Ku-to-tjoalan sarikat penerbangan Ku-to-lak mendapat sangahan kerana Chur-sang telah merancang komplot bagi menjatuhkan pemerintahan nya itu. Dan suatu ketika, bila Ku-to-lak menyelamatkan ayah saudara-nya dari pengaruh jahat Chur-sang, dia telah di-serang serta mendapat luka. Hari pertandingan judo antara Ku-to-lak dan Chin-yang tiba. Dan dengan tak di-sangka, Ku-to-lak menewaskan lawan-nya, walaupun diri-nya berdarah semula dengan luka yang baru semboh.

Saat kemenangan ini saudara di-sambut dengan kegembiraan oleh Kuo-tal sebab ayah saudara-nya di-beritakan di-cholek oleh Chur-sang sa-telah kereta yang di-pandu oleh orang tua itu rosak di-pertengahan jalan. Kuo-tal bersama dengan Chung-tung dan Siu-chin berangkat segera ka-tempat perkumpulan musuh-nya itu, di-mana terjadi satu serangan dari kumpulan yang telah di-puahkan oleh Chur-sang. Pertemporan itu di-sambut dengan kegembiraan bila Li Chin-yang tiba dengan bantuan. Dan ketika meng-hembuskan nafas akhir-nya, Chung-tung, yang mendapat luka terok itu mengaku kesalahan-nya yang menyebabkan kematian ayah gadis itu, sa-telah mendapat arahan dari Chur-sang. Saat kekalahan ini di-sambut oleh isteri-nya dengan ratap tangisan. Isteri-nya merayu kepada Kuo-tal dan orang tua supaya men-berikan anak kecil-nya yang di-serang, sakit tenat, ke sebuah rumah sakit di-Tokyo. Maka terbang-lah Kuo-tal, Siu-chin dan anak kecil itu dari medan pertemporan yang bersejarah bagi mereka. Maka lebih berat-lah kekalahan yang di-tanggung oleh Chin-yang, kerana kini orang yang di-kaschi-nya selama itu telah lari buat selamanya-nya dari-nya.



3



FLIGHT OF THE FURY

(COLOUR AND SCOPE)

Li Kuo-tai and his friend, Tien Chun-tung, run an air taxi business and, today, his customer is the lovely Hsu Siu-chin, who has asked him to fly over the site where her father had met a tragic death when the brakes had failed while testing his high-powered engine for his company. Through the help of Li Chin-yang, who had returned from Paris on the same plane with her, Siu-chin is asked to sing at the Golden Castle, an exclusive night-club. Chin-yang's sister, Tsin-fang, runs the place for Chien Chur-sank, her patron.

Trin-fang, runs the place for Chien Chur-ang, her patron. Kuo-tai and Ching-yang—the two top contenders for the All-Japan Judo Championship—both have their eyes on Chien Chur-ang. Ching-yang, the more articulate and aggressive of the two, has proposed to Siu-ching, but Kuo-tai for some reason holds back from declaring his love. Kuo-tai is staying with his father, a minor technician who is in charge of composing the music for the film. Chien Chur-ang is a woman of great strength and character, but she is in her death throes. Siu-ching, who has been very uneasy over the thought of his impending retirement age, and led on by the easy promise of Chien Chur-ang, who runs a rival movie company, he decides to steal the secrets of the film from Chien Chur-ang's company. He plans a fake crash after substituting his own spring for a dummy.

When Kuo-tai is about to be involved in a brawl at the night-club over Hu-chin, Chinyang comes to his rescue. But there is no love lost between them, and Chinyang itches for the day he can flatten Kuo-tai on the mat.

One night, Kuo-tai sees his uncle with Chien and guesses what is going on. He takes his uncle away, and on their way home, the same hoodlums who had attacked him in the night-club surround him again, and he is forced to fight. Great concern is shown over his injury, for it is feared that he may drop out from the title match. But he mends rapidly, and makes his appearance at the Judo hall on the day of the big match. Kuo-tai's opponent is a 4th rank in Judo and a 3rd rank in the Chinese martial art. Kuo-tai's wound breaks open and with the aid of his uncle's blood, he wins the game almost by a miracle.

Kuo-tai sleeping through his thick Judo coat, he wins the game almost by a miracle. Kuo-tai has no time to feel happy over his victory, for he knows that his uncle has disappeared. He is so worried that he does not even notice that his uncle has disappeared. Guessing that his uncle may be at Chien's country home, he takes off in his plane, with his partner Tien Chun-tung and Su-chin. He arrives in the nick of time, for Chien has no intention of hiring a plane to go to the mountains. Chien and Tiao-tai, who has just recovered the blue-prints from Chien and tries to take his uncle back to the plane, but they are surrounded by Chien's hired gangsters, which turn out to be the same bunch who stabbed Kuo-tai earlier. During the fierce fight that ensues, Li Chin-yang arrives on

Tien Chun-lung, fatally wounded, makes a confession: It was he who had tampered with the brakes and thus caused the death of Siu-chin's father, in the course of Chien

Ironically enough, Chien's son is critically ill, and his wife begs Kuo-tai to fly her son to hospital in Tokyo. And so Kuo-tai and Shu-chin fly away with the boy, leaving behind the beaten Chien. Chin-yang has been beaten in another way: Shu-chin has turned down his proposal in favour of Kuo-tai.

幕字文英中上片



點三・刻一點一：場四夜日映起(20-12-64)天今☆院戲氣冷士麗城

情場角逐
柔道角鬥
爲名爲愛
誓不兩立

面偉大
故事
曲折情
節動人

功鄉本

郎次功鄉本

主領	康中	藤	叶
子	子	子	子

空飛行
心曲，
難當前
爲先。

有悅耳
動聽的
歌曲。

体合綜色彩

車謀計叔案

MIDNIGHT PREMIERE
ON SAT. (4-2-56) AT 11.30 P.M.


General Screening
FROM SUNDAY 5th FEB. 1956
4 Shows: 1.00 - 3.15 - 6.30 & 9.30 p.m.

場夜半 優 拜 四 二
 先 六 日 月
 半時一十：開時

相 廬
 REX 電影院

五號禮拜正起映 四時 一時 三時 六時 九時
神幽談寓深社諷別風香喜
戲點諧意刻會刺具格艷劇

◆ 軍 ★ 海 ★ 閘 ★ (嗶) ★ 神 ◆

登足堡橋尋 | 撞衝艇登領 | 新傑作
!先捷頭覓 | !直橫陸導 |
演主兒海黛瑪 | 納康奧納唐 |

MAN the LAFF-RAITS
they're sinking the fleet with **FUN!**

Francis
in the
Navy

Donald and Francis
are rocking the Fleet
with *Laughter!*

Francis in the Navy

STARRING
**DONALD
CONNOR**
**MARTHA
HYER**

with RICHARD ERDMAN • JIM BACKUS • MYRNA HANSEN and **Francis** THE TALKING MULE

ANALYST: JESSICA LUTON • DATA AND CHARTS BY LUCY HARRISON • ARTIST: JAMES HARRIS • INFO ON THE COMPANY: PIONEER PAPER, FOUNDED IN 1940, IS A LARGE-SCALE PAPER

今天 獻映四場

十二點三刻 三點 六點三刻 九點一刻

喜諧總旗溫金千公霍世二
劇趣愛旋譽園萬司士紀十

★ 體合綜藝新 ★

榮獲雙親什誌金像獎！
本年度普立茲文學獎！
名劇作家約爾福極力傑作

3 Coins in the Fountain
CINEMASCOPE
In the wonder of 4-Track, High-Fidelity Stereophonic Sound

羅馬七彩 戀之

◀ 攝拍地實利大意在部全 ▶

純，情戀成 難，火戀青 反，竇戀少
青爐蜜，年 收易燎，年 拙弄初，年
！火意濃之 ！放原星之 ！巧開情之

PATRONS PLEASE NOTE
Seats for all shows in the 1st. and 2nd. classes can now be bought also in advance for Cash only on day of screening, obtainable at the Reserved Seat Booking Office.

10.00 A.M. TO 12.00 NOON
WEEKENDS AND HOLIDAYS—11.00 A.M. TO 12.00 NOON
1.30 P.M. TO 2.15 P.M. 4.00 P.M. TO 6.00 P.M.

照下 止至一期週 刻午半下十起上 間勝省後續雙先康當上始天衆爲將
常午 十點上末 止二起午二至午 此票却觀簡定勝位日標無依起科者
時 二點午及 點至一點中十 佈之排衆便座要可各下驗時見便本
間 點至十點 一下點止午點 時除可此手對預場之機開每戲院

7

7. This flyer from Odean Cinemas announces upcoming shows that will be premiering. Chinese films are elaborated in Chinese. *3 Coins in the Fountain* was also part of the line up. It was one of the most anticipated films at the time, particularly for its colour, its CinemaScope widescreen cinematography and the film title song sung by Frank Sinatra.

8. This flyer shows a list of upcoming shows that were released at Carlton, a cinema in Taiping, Perak. It features Mandarin, Hokkien, Hindustani, Cantonese and English shows, a testament that this small town, in pre-Merdeka 1957, had audiences that speak and understand different languages.

9. This is a general poster of a comedy show entitled *Hú Tú Sān Xiá Kè* (糊塗三俠客). The titles were also translated in English and Malay, though viewers who have watched this film would say that it would be more apt to name it "Three Shaolin Stooges".

卡爾登 **CARLTON** 戲院
The Programme is subject to alteration at the discretion of the Management!

一九五七年七月二日(拜二)獻映
定七月二日(拜二)獻映
三場：三點，六點，九點一刻

媚獻花萬
「SPRING BLOSSOMS」(Color)
OPENS TUESDAY 2nd JULY '57 (ONE DAY ONLY)
3 Shows at 3.00 - 6.30 - 9.15 p.m.

“PANNA”
(Hindustani)
OPENS WED. 3rd & THURS. 4th JULY 1957
Daily 4 Shows at 12.45 - 3.00 - 6.45 - 9.15 p.m.

“LIVING UBDDHA”
(a super action Hokkien picture)
Cheap Matinees Sat. 29th & Sun. 30th June '57
Daily One Show at 10.30 a.m. Only
KUAN TUCK HENG
in
“DUEL OF 3 LIONS”
(a super action Cantonese picture)
CASH ADVANCE BOOKINGS
Tickets For Res. & 1st Class for All Shows For the Day Can Be Bought In Advance For Cash At The Cash Advance Box Office During The Following Hours:-
10.00 A.M. TO 12.00 NOON
1.00 P.M. TO 2.00 P.M. — 4.00 P.M. TO 5.30 P.M.

Opens Tuesday 2nd July
3.00 - 6.45 - 9.15 p.m.
Paramount presents
BING DONALD
CROSBY · O'CONNOR
JEANMAIRE
MITZI PHIL
GAYNOR · HARRIS

定七月二日(拜二)獻映
三場：三點，六點，九點一刻

When These
Shining Stars
Sing and
Dance To
COLE PORTER'S
Melodies...

“ANYTHING GOES”
COLOR BY TECHNICOLOR VISTAVISION

Opens Wednesday 3rd
Thursday 4th July
Daily 3.00 - 6.45 - 9.15 p.m.

ACTION...
A mobster's last
gun-blazing Stand!

THRILLS...
A kidnap Victim's break
for freedom!

M-G-M presents
Leslie Colleen
NIELSEN ★ MILLER
“HOT SUMMER NIGHT”

七月三日至四日
每天三場：三點，六點三刻，九點一刻

大小盜城
歌琳 納李
拉美 爾斯
主演

8

鑄鉅敵無劇喜趣逗作動義俠格風具別

導演
陳俊良

策劃導演
歐陽俊



院戲冷氣璇
半九點 一七點 三點 六點 九點
今大戲天

領銜主演
梁家仁 李平 陶大偉

領銜主演
羅烈 龍君兒 楊惠嫻 孟飛
客串主演
江島

出品人
蔡揚名
監製
戴振勳
導演
帥嶽峰
武術指導
小黃龍
攝影
廖慶松

JPFH/GS/TH11/78

聯合主演
龍少飛 李敏郎 余邦 馬場 林照雄 柳哥 史根亮 張宗貴 李登財 吳佳珊 恬娃



TIGA SEKAWAN SHAOLIN

客俠三途胡

THREE SHAOLIN MUSKETEERS

品出司公影電亞歐

10. This 1947 flyer by Rex Theatre Penang, located at the corner of Lebuh Kinta and Jalan Burma, is only in English. It is also one of the earliest flyers in the Penang House of Music archive.

11a & 11b. Front and back of a flyer featuring *Kasi Yathirai*, a Tamil comedy show from 1973. The poster probably designed by the movie's distributor in South India, has more information about the show in English and a short blurb in Malay indicating that it is a comedy film.

12. *The Love Bug* by Walt Disney, the second-highest-grossing film in the US in 1969, also premiered in Malaysia. The front of the poster features the film in English, while a brief translation can be found in Chinese and Malay at the back of the page.

இந்திருபுன் கனிச்சாத நல்லதோர் இன்னிசை நகைக்கவை சித்திம்!

அனைத்து நெகைக்கவை நகைக்கப் பங்குபற்றியுள்ள முழுநகை நகைக்கவை சித்திம்!!

கனிகுருப் பேரகுரு கருமம் திரும எவ்வுது பழுவேழி...

கவிதைக்கொப் பம் பார்த்தாக் கவிதை பேரகுரு எவ்வுது பழுவேழி...

‘பேய்த் தாமம் சித்தி’ என்ற பெயரில் சித்திரத்தை எழுதிய அந்த நூலுக்கும் இப்படியாக் கதை, வசனம் எழுதி பெய்திர்பேரத் சேவ்வுருமன் அம் பனத நெகைக்ககுறைய இத்திப்பம்.

வி. கே. ராமசாமி, மீனாட்சி, சோ. சா. - ஆர். வாக, உருளி ராஜன், நெகைக்கப் பினிசை, மனோரமா, விஜயநிர்மா, குமாரி பத்மினி, ஜெயா பற்றும் பன் இத்திப்பம் சித்தி

காசியாத்திரை

இசை: சங்கர் கணேஷ்

இருமச்சாவித்திம் தம்மெக்கை கன்னகைகள் மனதை மார்தி அன்னையம் காதல் விவகாரத்தில் மார்புணைக்கும் மனோபயின் இடபை மேடம் திருக. இருக்கிது.....பேகம் பம்

SEWAI FILM KOMIDI
YANKI PASTY BIKIN
ANDA KETAWAI

V. K. RAMASAMY, MANORAMA, SRI KANTH, NIRMALA,
M. R. R. VASU, CHO, KUANRI PADMINI, SURLIRAJAN
THENGAI SRINIVASAN etc.



KASI YATHIRAI

***** A FULL LENGTH COMEDY PICTURE *****

LATEST ROLLOCKING MUSICAL COMEDY OF THE YEAR!

All South Indian comedy stars combined together and make you laugh till the end of the picture!

FULL OF LAUGHTER! FULL OF DANCES!! SEE with your entire family. An absorbing story which no family should miss.

Kasi Yathirai

Story & Dialogue by famous writer
KUGANATHAN

The craziest happiest comedy in years!..... Cine magazine
V. K. Ramasamy, Srikanth, M. R. R. Vasu, Cho, Suruli Rajan, Thengai Srinivasan, Vijaya Nirmala, Manorama, Kumari Padmini, Jaya and many others.

Music by: **SANKER GANESH**

Do not blame us after seeing the picture if you have stomachache!

Picture, Music, Song, Lyrics



鬼馬神車

主演：赫巴 寧遜 大衛 美莉 斯鍾

國泰發行
笑劇
伏斯
笑劇
伏斯
笑劇
伏斯

青年貨車名手... 赫巴... 寧遜... 大衛... 美莉... 斯鍾... 鬼馬神車... 笑劇... 伏斯... 笑劇... 伏斯... 笑劇... 伏斯...

Walt Disney Mempersembahkan

'KERETA ASMAR'


warna warni

Dapatkan Herbie sabuan kereta kechil yang rajin, bahagia didalam dunia sekarang yang segala2 nya berubah? Sabuah kisah amat lucu!!!!!!



Dengan: **Dean Jones**
Michele Lee
David Tomlinson



edited by Sing Chew Press & Co.




Can Herbie, a clean-living, hard-working small car find happiness in today's hectic world?



A motion picture for anyone who has ever been in love... with an automobile?



WALT DISNEY PRODUCTIONS

presents

THE LOVE BUG

Herbie


STARRING: MICHELE DEAN JONES, DAVID TOMLINSON, BUDDY HACKETT, DEE FLYNN, FONG GRANATELLI, AND ROBERT STEVENSON

DIRECTED BY: BILL WALSH

12

உள்ளக்கள்பிற்றுகு -
கிறோ ஒரு சிரிப்புச்சத்தோம்!

கதை, வசனம்:
குருநாதன்



V.K. ராமசாமி, ஸ்ரீகாந்த், குருநாதன்,
M.R.R. வாசு, தேவந்தாய் சீனிவாசன்,
ஜெயா, குமாரிபத்மன், மருகுராஜா,
வெள்ளையா ஆடை, ரிமலா, சேர மற்றும் பலர்

காச் பாத்திரை

தயாரகன்:-
S.P. முத்துராமன்
தயாரகர்:-
S.S. சேதுராமன்

முழுநீள நகைச்சுவை படம்

11b



PAUL AUGUSTIN is the Director of the Penang House of Music (PHoM) and Founder and Festival Director of the Penang Island Jazz Festival (PIJF).

LIGHTS, CAMERA,

BY OOI TZE XIONG

CHEONG FATT TZE Mansion and Eastern & Oriental (E&O) Hotel were thrust into international spotlight in 2018, when Jon Chu's *Crazy Rich Asians* premiered with scenes shot in these localities. Naturally, fans of the movie have since pilgrimaged here, to Cheong Fatt Tze Mansion, where Rachel Chu faced off Eleanor Young in a mahjong match. The heritage hotel had even offered an extravagant accommodation package featuring "*Crazy Rich Asians*-like splendour" to capitalise on the hype.

George Town has, in fact, long been a filming destination. As early as 1992, in *Indochine*, Cheong Fatt Tze Mansion was turned into a set depicting French-ruled Vietnam. Later, George Town was once again the backdrop of another historical epic, *Anna and the King*—Armenian Street was passed off as 19th century Siam, while the Town Hall's interior was used in the movie's courthouse scenes. In Ang Lee's explicit period espionage drama, *Lust, Caution*, Penang depicted late 1930s and early 1940s occupied Hong Kong and Shanghai. George Town's unique British-era cityscape and old-world charm form the backdrop for movie producers seeking fictional representation for exotic oriental destinations.

"What inspired me (to pick George Town) was the well-maintained architecture with echoes of the British past," says Guy Sahibjan, the location manager who played a pivotal role in scouting for *Crazy Rich Asians*. The producers sought to capture the extravagance of the region's high society; but initially, Guy was struggling to persuade the producers to film in Malaysia.

"They almost went with Thailand for filming. Thankfully, with the support and advice from my dad and partners from Biscuit Films, we managed to convince them to come to Malaysia instead."

One particular location in Malaysia stood out to the producers—Carcosa Seri Negara, a stunning, colonial-era residence in KL. Once Guy got his foot in the



ACTION

PENANG'S NICHE IN MOVIE-MAKING

door with Carcosa, and the producers were introduced to George Town, with one of the largest collections of pre-war buildings in Southeast Asia, the decision was made.

“The interior courtyard of Cheong Fatt Tze Mansion was spacious, which was what we needed for props and camera movement. Meanwhile, the Calthorpe Hotel scene in the beginning of the movie was filmed at the E&O Hotel because it still has a concierge desk that fits the period of the scene.”

Not surprisingly, films like these inadvertently promote George Town as a tourist destination. In a survey conducted in 2019, a tourist from New Zealand shared that “My son has watched the movie, *Crazy Rich Asians*, multiple times... then did his research and read that this movie was partly filmed in Penang. We decided to also come to Penang and to my surprise, there is even more to see here than in the movies.”

WHERE HERITAGE MEETS DRAMA

The diversity in culture and architectural styles in Penang was what drew Raja Mukhriz Raja Ahmad Kamaruddin to Penang for the filming of *Nyonya Ronggeng*, a period drama that chronicles the struggles of a Peranakan Ronggeng dancer during the Japanese invasion of Singapore.

“Penang still retains its rich Peranakan heritage, which makes up one of the many vibrant cultures in the state. The Peranakan architecture here provides an authentic setting that resonates with the period the movie was set in,” says Mukhriz.

Filming took place in March 2023, featuring several locations in both George Town and Seberang Perai. Mukhriz was left with an enduring impression.

“Certainly the Pinang Peranakan Mansion was a stunning and evocative backdrop, but it wasn’t just the architecture. One particularly unforgettable moment was when we transformed Penang’s streets to depict Singapore in the midst of World War II. We captured

the tumultuous atmosphere with striking authenticity, reflecting the resilience and spirit of the locals during wartime.”

Like Guy, Mukhriz thinks that there are more genres that producers can explore in Penang.

“While Penang is famous for its history, culture and nature, there is a lot more beneath the surface. What comes to mind are food-centric shows, romantic movies, spy thrillers and comedies. Penang can leverage its unique character to a much wider cinematic preference.”

A WELCOMING CANVAS FOR CINEMATIC ARTISTRY

Reflecting on his experiences in Penang, Guy is also impressed with the hospitality of the people here.

“It’s always pretty easy-going, minus the heat and traffic. I’ve been filming in Penang since 2014 and every year after that, there’s always a project that ends up here; always at the regular filming locations. I’ve made friends with the locals.”

Mukhriz, too, found the amicable nature of the locals in Penang to be captivating and believes that it could boost the state’s appeal among movie producers.

“The warmth of Penangites has left an indelible mark on all of us who were part of *Nyonya Ronggeng*. Producers can and should leverage the local art community, as they can offer valuable insights and add authenticity to our production.”

That being said, Guy and Mukhriz are aware of concerns over the potential negative impact of movie production on heritage preservation.

“I have been rejected by property owners who have had bad experiences with previous producers. So I take care, and try to not ruin it for others,” Guy says.

Penang has always stood out as a canvas for arts and culture, and it is time it makes its mark on the silver screen. Perhaps showcasing Penang’s rich heritage and vibrant culture to the world will inspire greater appreciation and support for their preservation.

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OOI TZE XIONG

currently delves into content creation and enjoys piloting drones as a hobby. After years of sojourning in cities across Malaysia and Singapore, he eventually decided to call Penang home.

PENANG'S OPERATIC PAST

A LEGACY OF PASSION & DEDICATION

BY SHERYL TEOH

CAPTIONS

1. The cast of *Hansel and Gretel*.
2. Gerard Chan and Khoo Hooi Lay in Balinese costumes for *The Magic Flute*. Gerard played one of the priests and Khoo played Pappagena.



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

IT HAS BEEN two decades since the last big-scale Italian opera was staged in Penang; it is almost unthinkable now to imagine that this quiet little island would have witnessed something so grand. After all, the late Kee Phaik Cheen, whom *The Wall Street Journal* dubbed the “Godmother of Penang” and who had great love for the state, had griped about it being “a cultural desert” to Fumihiko Konishi, the Founder of the Texchem Group of Companies, but perhaps better known as the halal sushi magnate.

For a man of his accomplishments and social stature, Konishi is relatively low-profile; but his private residence in Taman Jesselton, an exquisite Italian villa-styled mansion called Villa Primavera, is widely admired and talked about—so much so that funnily enough, Google lists it as a tourist attraction.

There were many rumours about who owns this prime real estate. Among these, the residence of the Ambassador of Japan hit closest to the truth: for one thing, Fumihiko Konishi is a Japanese national who has lived, toiled and revelled in Penang for 51 years. For another, he is an “ambassador” of sorts—having been awarded a Certificate of Commendation from the Minister of Foreign Affairs in Japan for his contribution to the relationship between Malaysia and Japan. Curiously, Konishi has also been a passionate ambassador of Italian culture in Penang, especially classical operas.

A MATCH MADE IN HEAVEN

Lim Kean Siew & Co, a premier law firm in Penang, was not only churning out the best lawyers of its time, but was also the powerhouse behind the first opera production in Penang—possibly even in Malaysia. Headed by culture and arts enthusiasts Pamela Ong and Gerard Chan, who were respectively also the President and Secretary of Penang Arts Council (PAC), the office buzzed with activity come opera season—which, I have come to understand, took up six to eight months of the year.

The first operas produced by PAC were rudimentary; with only one piano in Dewan Sri Pinang, without substantial funding and the necessary technical know-how, Pamela and Gerard somehow managed to cobble together their first opera, *The Marriage of Figaro* (in 1987), and followed that up with *Dido and Aeneas* (in 1988). Initially, singers flown in were put up in people’s homes (Copthorne Orchid Hotel later became one of their early sponsors of hotel stays) and the entire production was contracted out of the UK, with English producers assembling the set, costume designs and the lighting and sound. They would send the blueprint and designs to Lim Kean Siew & Co, out of whose offices Pamela and Gerard operated, who would then source local carpenters and tailors to build the set and make the costumes. As part of PAC’s effort to promote young talents in Penang, these operas featured promising local singers in supporting parts, with the chorus being also entirely local.

By the third year running, classical operas were an annual affair in Penang. *Così fan tutte* (1989), Mozart’s rom-com opera, had a professional director for the first time, and had begun to resemble proper opera productions found in the UK. It was also *Così* that PAC took to Singapore—after which, Leow Siak Fah, hailed as a pioneer of western opera in Singapore, started the fledgling Singapore Lyric Opera and engaged Tom Hawkes as its first director. In some way, it could be said that *Così* kick-started the classical opera scene there.

Over time, more artistic liberties were taken and local idiosyncrasies were incorporated into the operas. The cast in Mozart’s *The Magic Flute*, for example, were completely decked out in Balinese costumes; meanwhile, *The Mikado* made use of Chinese opera costumes, and local humour and current affairs were injected into the dialogues, much to the audience’s delight. Gerard, who was involved in various capacities in the operas ranging from stage manager to chorus master, recalls renting the costumes from Lebu Keng Kwee and getting the makeup artists to do full Chinese opera makeup on the ensemble.



1 Although PAC engaged big names in the opera scene such as Mark Shanahan and Richard Stuart, the Penang coordinating team had by then started to get the hang of the business, and there was also much more local input in the operas; the backstage people, the prop mistress, the set designs were soon taken over entirely by local talents.

Being an opera and classical music buff himself, and a generous patron of the arts and culture in Penang, Konishi, through his company Texchem, started to fund the operas staged by PAC, allowing the productions to be much bigger and more elaborate than their earlier counterparts.

Impressed by the full-scale operas being put on in Penang, the Malaysian Minister of Culture, Arts and Tourism approached Konishi to replicate them in KL in the early 2000s. *Madame Butterfly*, held in Sunway Hotel in 2002, was attended by then-Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamed, who enjoyed the English-subtitled performance.

“Why don’t you do it again next year, in Istana Budaya?” Mahathir asked, keen on promoting the newly built cultural centre.

Unable to reject the Prime Minister, Konishi did exactly that—at an eye-watering cost of RM1mil. As part of its 30th anniversary celebration, Texchem, “as a way of giving back something to the community for cultural goodwill”, fully sponsored Puccini’s last opera, *Turandot*, in Penang and then in KL. The three-day production at each location featured two separate casts comprising about 140 talents backed by approximately 80 musicians from the National Symphony Orchestra. A colossal project indeed.

A LABOUR OF LOVE

Staging an international-standard opera is not for the faint of heart, especially in a place as small as Penang. As an art form prized and appreciated for its extravagance, intricacy and sophistication—last year, Italian opera singing was added to UNESCO’s list of Intangible Cultural Heritage—it is not very forgiving either. So, to pull off what PAC did in the late 80s and 90s was nothing short of magical.

“We had over 30 people in the office

including 10 lawyers and everyone was involved: the staff, secretaries, accountants... my legal office was like an opera house!” Pamela said.

When Texchem became involved, Konishi too, mobilised his corporate personnel to assist the coordinating team wherever necessary.

With the staggering sums and gruelling effort thrown into the productions, PAC and Konishi’s goodwill in bringing high culture to the country eventually became more painful than gratifying.

“The sale of the tickets can never be commensurate with the cost of production, of course. But when we did *Carmen* in KL, we sold only 30% of the tickets—even though you could get them for as low as RM50! In the end, we had to give the remaining seats out for free to Universiti Malaya students to make it a full house.”

Disheartened by the lack of appreciation and interest among the Malaysian public towards classical operas, *Carmen* (2004) was the last one to be produced by PAC and Texchem.

The operas were “a wonderful opportunity for our local vocalists, musicians and technicians to work on big projects with acclaimed and well-trained foreign professionals,” and “the Malaysian arts scene gains with every offering to the public,” Elaine Tan, who was part of *Turandot*’s production team, wrote.

Indeed, fresh and aspiring Malaysian talents who had performed in these operas did move on to do big things in their music and arts careers. In fact, the impact these performances had on the growth of the

Malaysian arts scene by raising the standards of local performers was unparalleled. Joe Sidek, best known for the curation of the internationally renowned George Town Festival, whom Pamela approached for costume design in *Turandot* and *Carmen*, also credits her for his big break in the arts industry. He is now the new President of PAC, with Gerard Chan as the Vice President.

“You are either a good or bad singer. Malaysia has some really excellent opera performers but they are not given enough opportunities to shine. Texchem’s sponsorship was definitely a much appreciated effort in helping promote opera as an art form here in Malaysia,” Cecilia Yap, an illustrious, award-winning soprano from Malaysia noted.

Konishi still holds classical concert performances and recitals in Villa Primavera, but to a more modest, private audience whom he personally invites. There have also been smaller-scale opera performances in Penang since, such as those by Pro Musica. While it still remains to be seen whether Penang is now ready for a revival in classical operas, this much is known—it takes passionate, spunky people like Pamela for it to be a worthy endeavour. But with veterans like Joe Sidek and Gerard Chan at the helm of the newly revived PAC, perhaps there is hope after all.

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FLAMES OF FORTUNE



THE CHINESE FIRE INVITATION CEREMONY AT PENANG'S OLDEST CHINESE TEMPLE

BY EUGENE
QUAH
TER-NENG



1



2

ON THE EVENING of 23 February, my friend—a heritage enthusiast from Penang Heritage Trust (PHT), Ganesh Kolandaveloo—and I went to see the venerable Chneah Hoay (Fire Invitation) ceremony at Hai Choo Su Tua Pek Kong Temple at Tanjung Tokong, held on the eve of Chap Goh Meh, which is the last day of the Chinese Lunar New Year. Since the early 20th century, the ceremony has been used by the Chinese in Penang to predict economic prospects for the new year.

This Tua Pek Kong temple is the oldest Chinese temple in Penang, having existed in one form or another since 1799. It is dedicated to the spirit of Chang Li, a Hakka scholar and political refugee who fled Chaozhou during the reign of the Qianlong Emperor and settled in Penang. Upon his death, he was worshipped as the Tua Pek Kong deity by the overseas Chinese.

Hai Choo Su (Sea Pearl Islet) was the Hokkien name for the nearby islet of Pulau Tikus (see *Penang Monthly*, May 2022 issue), just northeast of the temple. The Chinese also called it Pek Su, or White Islet, probably due to the distinctive light colours of its boulders, which probably led to the pearl moniker. The grand Thai Pak Koong (Ng Suk) Temple at King Street is a branch of the Sea Pearl Islet Temple.

Each year, the Poh Hock Seah (Precious Prosperity Society)—formed in the 1890s—organises a procession to bring a sacred incense urn from their temple at Armenian Street to the Sea Pearl Temple at Tanjung Tokong. This fire invitation ceremony has been observed for over a century, from around the time of the formation of the society. However, there are reports of a Tua Pek Kong procession from George Town to Tanjung Tokong as early as 1857.

Ganesh and I took many photos of the village and the ongoing festivities. As midnight approached, and the tide reached its highest, the lights of the temple were extinguished, and the gates closed. The temple committee members, who had been patiently waiting for this very moment, gathered around the huge incense urn. They fanned it and observed the height of the resulting flames. This process was repeated three times. The height of the flames indicated the economic prospects for each of the three periods of the new year.

This year's economy is predicted to range from average to good.

1. A child enjoying the fireworks. He is standing on a rock with an inscription that recounts the contributions of Madam Tan Say Seang (see *Penang Monthly*, July 2023 issue) who built a temporary water supply for the village after it was destroyed in a fire in 1907. Photo: Ganesh Kolandaveloo

2. The temple committee members, led by the Lor Chu (Urn Master), fan the incense and observe the height of the resulting flames to predict Penang's economic prospects for the new year. This close-up is from last year's ceremony when I was given a press pass by the Poh Hock Seah.

3. Fireworks were continually lit in the hours leading up to the Chneah Hoay ceremony around midnight.

4. Dragon joss sticks, ranging from 1.2m to 4.8m tall and costing up to RM800 each, offered by devotees were placed around the grounds of the temple. One is seen here being lit with a long stick.

5. Residents of the Chinese quarter of the Tanjung Tokong fishing village gather in front of their houses to celebrate and usher in the last day of the Chinese New Year. This part of the village was rebuilt in 1910 after it was destroyed by fire. The residents are still mostly fisherfolk.



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6. The dragon joss sticks are made of wood glue dust and eucalyptus powder mixed with water, which are then attached to a wooden stick layer by layer. The bigger ones can take up to a month to make. The building in the background is a World War II-era fire director tower built by the British.

7. This village's main road is the only road that leads to the Hai Choo temple at the cape. The name, Tanjung Tokong, or Temple Cape in English, refers to this. Seen here is a man dressed up as the Chinese God of Prosperity, entertaining a few children.

8. The crowd waits in anticipation outside the temple. Only temple committee members are allowed inside while the press are allowed to shoot through the gaps of the temple's gates.



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9. The temple has existed in one form or another since 1799, having started as a small shrine between big rocks which still stand behind the temple.

10. The roof of the temple features a traditional dragon and flaming pearl (dragon ball) motif.

11. Throngs of devotees making offerings and praying amid the carnival-like atmosphere with fireworks and street vendors.



10



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12. Each year, Poh Hock Seah organises a procession to bring a sacred incense urn (seen here) from their temple at Armenian Street to the Sea Pearl Temple at Tanjung Tokong.

13. Street vendors sell food, drinks and prayer paraphernalia on the grounds of the temple during the evening of the Chneah Hoay ceremony.



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

A PENANG COMPRADOR: “THERE WAS ALWAYS

1



ANNE TAN is a retired academic (Deakin University, Melbourne) with a publishing history both internal and external. She has published articles on East Asiatic Company's teak explorations in Siam and Laos at the beginning of the 20th century and has recently completed documenting a photo album recording an intrepid teak journey conducted by both East Asiatic Company personnel and an affiliated company, L'Est Asiatique Francaise. Anne has travelled to Penang from Australia more times than she can count and considers Penang her second home.

BY
**ANNE
TAN**

CARLSBERG IN THE HOUSE”



2



3

TAN HENG SOON (1894-1962), a Straits-born Baba, was a comprador for the Danish East Asiatic Company, a prestigious European company established in 1897 by H.N. Andersen with extensive operations in Southeast Asia. The company, where Tan served from 1930 to 1953, operated at No.3, Weld Quay in George Town, Penang.

The word “comprador” is derived from the Portuguese word for “buyer”, i.e., employed as an agent by European houses. A comprador was characterised by a proficiency in English, possessing of business connections, displaying personal trust and playing a special role as mediator. These bicultural middlemen were social leaders, cosmopolitan and their children were Western educated. As such, they fulfilled the role of critical agents in the colonial enterprise. Penang’s colonial society was very cosmopolitan with the strategic advantage of being on the route of the larger Western shipping lines.

Who was this Peranakan comprador, who, together with his large family, called Lone Pine in Batu Ferringhi, home? Dear reader, in seeking to answer this question, permit me to let you in on a little secret: This is the family I married into, and researching the history of my father-in-law, a comprador for the Danish East Asiatic Company, grew from a fascination with the connections between Europe and a Peranakan family in Penang.

Over the years as I informally did my research, my late husband, the second youngest of Tan Heng Soon’s 10 children, would often share memories of his father’s role as comprador, going to school in the large family car with a driver, the shipping and teak interests of the company, and the added detail that, “There was always Carlsberg beer in the house.” Indeed, the EAC

were the sole importers of the Denmark’s Carlsberg beer, according to an advertisement in *Pinang Gazette* and *Straits Chronicle* on 12 June 1934.

Tan Heng Soon and his large family lived at Lone Pine throughout the 1930s until the Japanese occupation prompted them to move further inland. Hearing rumours that the Japanese would invade Malaya by sea and were raping young girls, he sold his Lone Pine home to an Australian doctor. Fearing for the safety of his three young daughters, he bought the house at No.1, Ayer Rajah Road (renamed Jalan Tunku Abdul Rahman) and they moved closer to town; the house is now the Thai Embassy.

Family memories of Lone Pine were blissful, with the sea forming a backdrop for their many activities, water sports and escapades. The property remains a spiritual home to the Tans. The ashes of six of Tan Heng Soon’s children have been scattered at sea opposite Lone Pine—most recently in November 2023, when the youngest, Robert, passed. (Robert was born at Lone Pine in 1938). Meanwhile, Tan Heng Soon and his wife, Khoo Gaik Eong, are interred in the columbarium beneath the Reclining Buddha in the Thai Buddhist Temple at Lorong Burma, Pulau Tikus.

The family can be seen as a microcosm of that hybridity known as Peranakan. The migratory route which began in China, then moved south and would continue to ripple transnationally with my husband and a few of his siblings migrating to Australia and the UK. Successive generations have continued the migration trail and may be found in Europe, the UK, Australia, Canada, Singapore, Ireland and Indonesia.

CAPTIONS

1. With his family, the Penang comprador is formally framed in front of the colonial-style villa located at No.1, Ayer Rajah Road. The family was likely photographed during celebrations for the Lunar New Year and the photo dates from around c.1940-1941. (I can accurately date this because my future husband, the small boy standing in front of his father, was around four or five at the time). All the children were wearing Western-style clothes unlike the parents, she in a sarong and blouse and he, in merchant attire. His grandmother, Yeoh Hung Neo (originally from Fujian province in China), wore a recognisably traditional Chinese garb and with distinctive bound feet. Even though her feet were bound, she still chased after them as children, though rather unsuccessfully according to my husband! Their clothing reveals a subtle shift in cultural norms.

2. I have been able to source stunning EAC travel posters, from the 1930s and 40s, modernist in design, which visually evoke the allure and promise of the trading routes plied by the company’s ships. Travel to far distant places is imaged in the following example. A company ship, probably the *Selandia* or the *Jutlandia*, sailing across the sea. Large junks are positioned in front of the ship and a mountain rears up in the background, suggestive of destinations. These posters were used in promotional material such as brochures. (Source: Permission granted by Asia House.dk)

3. Positioned on Weld Quay, the EAC office was a hub in this mercantile precinct. (Photo courtesy of Marcus Langdon)

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MALAYSIA AS A GLOBAL EDUCATIONAL HUB: A WIN-WIN-WIN SITUATION

BY RAHIDA AINI



1

ACCORDING TO THE Ministry of Higher Education, there were 136,497 international students enrolled in Malaysia in 2019, with 93,569 enrolled in tertiary institutions (34,556 in public universities and 59,013 in private institutions).^[1] Many come from the Middle East, Africa, Southeast Asia and Central Asia, and a minimal number from Europe.

The Malaysia Higher Education Blueprint 2015-2025 has set a target of 250,000 international students by the year 2025; this was despite the fact that there had been a 30% drop from 2017 to 2019. The decline was subsequently exacerbated by Covid-19 pandemic restrictions limiting school operations, lowering international student admissions and causing the closure of many private higher education institutions.^[2]

The question now is; how far can Malaysia go in this post-Covid-19 educational landscape? Malaysia is already on the right track on that front; all that is required is an innovative strategy to achieve Malaysia's goal of becoming a global education hub.

HOW MALAYSIAN STUDENTS BENEFIT

Looking back on her freshman year in university, local student Maria* said the many international students on campus made her education experience one that was rich in cultural exchange.

"I was more of an introvert before I joined the postgraduate support group. I attended many workshops related to academic writing and research, and it was there that I made new connections," she said.

Her cross-cultural interactions with her international friends broadened her worldview. Just conversing with them improved her English proficiency level. She also picked up better time management and a positive attitude towards producing work of higher quality.

Maintaining these connections after graduation, Maria stays in touch with her friends and lecturers from England, Sweden, Nigeria, Indonesia, Pakistan, Bangladesh and India. "They had a profound impact on my life," she explained. "With so many things to learn from them, I continue to ask them about topics I am curious about."



2

HOW INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS BENEFIT

Adegoke Ojeniyi is an Assistant Professor at the Department of Computer Science, Maldives National University. He came to Malaysia from Nigeria in 2012 to pursue his PhD in Computer Science at Universiti Utara Malaysia (UUM).

When asked about the difficulties he encountered while studying in Malaysia, he admitted that he was initially very homesick. He started participating in extracurricular activities and meeting people with similar interests to alleviate his homesickness. He became the pioneer President of the UUM Postgraduate Scholar

Society (PGSS), a member of the UUM Toastmasters, the treasurer of the UUM Nigerian community and a publication officer at the Maybank Hall Residence, among others. Due to his academic performance, he won three research grants with his professors at UUM and was accepted as a Graduate Teaching Assistant (GTA) between 2013 and 2016 before he graduated from UUM. He said, “My experiences changed my life, and I’m forever grateful for this realisation. Malaysia is a second home to me, and I will always do my best to ensure impartation of knowledge and skills to the younger generation.”

Another student, Hillary Omatule Onubi, came in 2017 from Kogi state in Nigeria to pursue his PhD in Construction Management at Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM). He commented that some locals were “afraid of us because they didn’t speak English”. Adapting to Malay native speakers was difficult at first, but after taking a required Malay intensive course for one semester, “I can now understand a little bit of Bahasa Melayu.”

Though many graduates spend months, sometimes a year or two, to secure a good position in a university, this was not the case for Onubi. Upon his PhD graduation in 2020, he was offered a postdoctoral fellowship, which he accepted. He is currently a contract lecturer at Universiti Malaysia Perlis (UNIMAP).

For foreigners like Ojeniyi and Onubi, coming to Malaysia was (and is) one of the best decisions they had made. Their enriching educational journey in Malaysia’s higher institutions is something they treasure, as well as the industry-relevant skills and knowledge they gained, in particular, which prepared them for the global talent market.

Aside from their academic achievements, their mixture of soft skills—leadership, interpersonal and problem-solving skills, work ethics, time management, independence and commitment—are qualities that most employers seek. Another aspect that makes Malaysia a place for them to remain in is the memorable moments they have created, friendships formed, social integration, and intercultural knowledge exchange.

The role of higher education institutions is to bridge the gap between the education curriculum and current and future industrial needs so that students can compete in future job markets. Bringing young people from all over the world to Malaysia and having them intermingle with locals from different backgrounds and cultures allows them to live with and learn from one another. We often talk about a growing global workforce and about the challenges of globalisation. Still, for it to take place effectively and peacefully, the university is one of the prime areas to look at that can encourage the mingling of different cultures, customs, and characteristics from different countries.

*Note: not her real name

“HOW FAR CAN MALAYSIA GO IN THIS POST-COVID-19 EDUCATIONAL LANDSCAPE?”



CAPTIONS

1. Dr. Ojeniyi (left-most) on a conference tour.
2. Dr. Onubi (third from right) with his university cohorts.



RAHIDA AINI works as a Publication Officer at Penang Institute. She enjoys writing and strolling along Straits Quay, appreciating the beauty of mother earth.

FOOTNOTES

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A PAGEANT TO HIGHLIGHT BEAUTY'S DEPTH

BY
**IAN
MCINTYRE**

THE SAYING THAT beauty is only skin deep is evident in beauty pageant. But one stands as an exception in Malaysia as it calls attention to the self-empowerment of young women instead of relying solely on how they look and speak. Each year, towards the end of August, a group of 25 to 30 ladies are transported to the Centre for Marine and Coastal Studies (CEMACS) in Penang for their community and environment boot camp.



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



It is a no ramp, no glam programme for the national semi-finalists of the annual Miss MalaysiaIndian Global pageant. Here, they undergo a rigid routine from 6am until 10pm. The drill includes hands-on activities and lectures culminating in a series of tests and challenges that help determine if they are shortlisted as the finalists.

Herein lies the uniqueness of this personal empowerment pageant, which began in 2000. Its primary concern is to stir and stoke the minds of its participants, exposing them to as many valuable experiences as possible in their journey towards self-discovery and personal growth.

According to the founder Pushparani Thilaganathan, the pageant is a “seeding programme” that actively focuses on self-esteem, financial literacy and environment awareness alongside poise, adding that their challenge is in “ploughing through the preconditioned minds of our participants”.

Unlike conventional pageants, the winners of the Miss MalaysiaIndian Global do not represent the country in an international pageant. Instead, they are contracted to develop projects that will directly benefit a marginalised community or a social cause of their choice. While the winner is awarded a postgraduate MBA or MA scholarship from Veritas University, all the Top 5 winners also

receive international flight tickets with pre-determined destinations from Batik Air.

“It was a difficult decision at the time—to drop the international franchise for the US-based Miss India Worldwide competition which we held from 2000-2003. We were doing extremely well at the international pageant then. Still, we felt that all the money spent on one person was better given out as small scholarships for the girls struggling in public universities in the country and for some of our participants who have financial issues,” said Pushparani, who is also a former journalist.

She explained that when the pageant began in 2000; there was no social media and the issues girls faced then were different. “At that time, 60% of our girls were making it to tertiary institutions, but upon graduating, jobs were a challenge mostly because they lacked self-esteem, had poor delivery at interviews and other inadequacies. We understood this and worked on these essentials.” Pushparani also added that contestants were usually aged 18 to 28, with SPM as a minimum entry requirement.

The pageant has been organised by the Miss MalaysiaIndia Care Association (MMI-CARE), also known as Persatuan Prihatin Ratu MalaysiaIndia, since 2002, and is wholly dependent on the annual pageant’s grand finals for its funding (collected through sponsors, table sales and public support from



their on-the-ground projects). All members of MMICARE are past finalists and winners of the annual pageant, and every year, the pageant provides the non-profit NGO with a regular and fresh pool of volunteers for its ongoing community work.

The pageant's Small Education Grants programme began in 2006, the same year they started collaborating with CEMACS. Pushparani felt strongly that focusing on empowering young women on a personal level made more long-term sense than just an image makeover.

"We are committed to uplifting the minds and spirit of the girls. MMICARE's work is broad-based and covers all communities. We have ongoing meals and tuition for B40 children and conduct empowerment workshops at schools and tertiary institutions on invitation. We are currently actively involved in the National Cancer Society's HPV vaccine rollout for girls in the B40 community."

Over the years, the Miss Malaysia Indian Global and MMICARE grassroots programmes have been a subject of dissertations in public universities and case studies at international conferences in Japan, Thailand, Indonesia, and most recently in Hungary.

A majority of the participants have graduated high school or are diploma holders and, after taking part in the pageant, are inspired to further their studies. Most

of them hail from Penang, Klang Valley and Johor, and MMICARE is keen to expand its reach to other states in the country.

"We also have lawyers, doctors and other professionals interested in taking part as they can learn about many social aspects such as environmental care," Pushparani added. The pageant also differs in the sense that it cannot afford to pay for much publicity, so a majority of the sessions are done privately.

Seasoned pageant judge, Francis Yip Hon Cheng, highlighted that it takes hard work to participate in a pageant. "One needs to undergo training, have a fitness regime and eat right, often for months, to stay competitive for the judging process. Why? Well, its net value for beauty pageantry is worth millions with many multiplier effects from tourism to retail and consumerism," Yip, who is himself a journalist, remarked.

Miss Malaysia Indian Global is an exemplar of pageantry in Malaysia, which is fast evolving as it is no longer just about models strutting down catwalks and smiling before countless flashing cameras, but is also filled with substance, sacrifice, inner beauty and, more importantly, a cause to promote. The Miss Malaysia Indian Global pageant draws an average of 100 participants annually and will celebrate its 25th anniversary this year.

Evident from the recent Mrs Earth Malaysia beauty pageant in Petaling Jaya, the contestants were hard-pressed to dwell more on empowering the environment against the threat of climate change rather than on their bodies or swimwear.

Co-directors of the pageant, Ammetta Malhotra Bergin and Previtha Rajah, said that pageant contestants must now advocate for a cause, such as women's rights or conserving the environment. The seven finalists of last year's Mrs Earth Malaysia were asked to base their presentations on conserving the environment and conduct activities to appease Mother Earth.

They had to learn about what makes the environment tick, and how, as a beauty contestant, they could contribute towards warding off climate change. Ammetta also spoke about organisers discussing how the pageant's winners could become an independent environment and tourism ambassador for the country.

"We want our beauties to have a good sense of what is happening in the world. They cannot be disconnected, but conscious of what our society wants or aspires for."

With a growing focus on intelligence and personal well-being, Malaysian beauty pageants are contesting against traditional notions of beauty. This shift shows a renewed focus on what truly matters, demonstrating that beauty is not just "skin deep".

EMBRACING THE JOY OF

HAVING TOYS

BY
CHEAH
MI
CHELLE

AS KIDS NOWADAYS gravitate towards tablets and gadgets, the toy market is being kept afloat mostly by adults. According to data from NPD Group, a huge number of adults spend their disposable income on toys, figurines and other collectibles. [1]

Toy and figurine collecting is a happy pastime for some, much like stamp and coin collecting. There are many reasons why adults immerse themselves in the hobby: escapism, nostalgia, psychological healing, or seeking a sense of community, among others.

I collect robot figurines and model kits, and have done so since 2011. This hobby has been the source of some of my fondest memories, and has led me to meet new friends, and alleviated the stresses and worries of everyday life.

I have, of course, also wondered about the reasons others embrace this seemingly childish yet expensive hobby.

I spoke to teams at Penang-based toy shops, Liberty Toys and ToyPanic, about their collecting journeys. Based in Tanjung Tokong, the former specialises in collectible diecast toys, particularly model cars, while the latter focuses on toys, figurines, collectibles and video games.



1

NO LONGER FOR KIDS

“The majority of our customers are in their 30s. Ironically, we don’t have customers our son’s age; children nowadays don’t play with toys anymore and are more intrigued by digital games,” says Kenny P’ng Chun Loon, who runs Liberty Toys with his wife, Law Lih Pyng.

His words ring true, as I watch their child run around the shop with a smartphone in hand, eyes fixated on the screen and paying no heed to the countless shiny diecast cars lining the shop walls.

“Back then, we didn’t have technology so we turned to toys. Now, video games and the like attract kids strongly,” concurs Carly, Business Development Manager at ToyPanic, who has been collecting for 2.5 years.

CAPTIONS

1. Selected items from Carly’s collection of his favourite characters (clockwise): Tifa Lockhart from *Final Fantasy*, Power from *Chainsaw Man* and Komi from *Komi Can’t Communicate*.
2. Kenny P’ng Chun Loon (left) and Law Lih Pyng (right) strive to provide impeccable service for their loyal customers at Liberty Toys, having officially been in operation since 2017.
3. Influenced by her husband’s passion for the hobby, Law Lih Pyng began collecting model cars herself, captivated by their adorable yet detailed designs.
4. A selection of cards from Toh Jun Sheng’s collection. To protect their condition, he keeps the cards in albums or toploaders, thick plastic casings used to store cards.
5. Displayed prominently in a case equipped with lighting, this limited edition Ghostbusters Ectomobile is one of Kenny P’ng Chun Loon’s cherished possessions.
6. Selected items from Muhammad Farhan Azmi’s collection. On the right in bright red is Optimus Prime from *Transformers: Cybertron*.

REFERENCE

<https://www.cnn.com/2022/12/19/kidults-biggest-sales-driver-toy-industry.html>



CHEAH MI CHELLE is a Bachelor’s and Master’s graduate in English and Related Literature. A huge fan of sentient robot fiction, she loves volunteering with children and is interested in various topics, such as the study of emotions, embodiment and the relationship between image and text, particularly in comics and graphic novels.



2



3 A collector of scaled anime figurines, Carly realises that not every toy or collectible can be played with or appreciated by children.

There is also an economic reason to collecting toys. P'ng highlights that some get into the hobby with the intention to resell the collectibles; rare or older models do fetch a high price.

"I think fewer people now think toys are just for kids. They are realising that toys can be resold at a higher price," says Muhammad Farhan Azmi, another Business Development Manager at ToyPanic and a collector of robot figurines since he was six.

A COLLECTING COMMUNITY

Like any other hobby, toy collecting has been a way for collectors to meet and connect with new people. "I play at tournaments, and I meet new friends there," says Toh Jun Sheng from ToyPanic, who, like Muhammad, began his collecting journey at the age of six. His main interest is in Trading Card Games (TCG) such as Pokémon, and he attends regular tournaments as well as larger scaled ones like Comic Fiesta.

For Toh, collecting is not just a solitary hobby, but one that allows him to join large tournaments and engage with others who share the same interest.

As part of his work at ToyPanic, Carly creates videos for the shop's YouTube channel where he shares the joy of receiving an anticipated item and unboxing new purchases. "I love filming and editing videos. You get to share your thoughts and connect with fellow collectors. It's my favourite part of collecting."



4 The passion of the collector community cannot be understated. Despite its niche product offerings, Liberty Toys' selection of beautiful diecast cars attracts customers who are willing to travel thousands of kilometres to get hold of them.

"We've gotten customers from Sabah and Sarawak, as well as from Australia and Hong Kong. When they come to Penang, some will ask their tour bus to drop them at our shop," says P'ng. He notes with amusement that their shop has become an important stop on the itinerary of some of their overseas customers.

OF NOSTALGIA AND JOY

Many adults venture into the vibrant world of toy and figurine collecting out of a sense of nostalgia; owning miniatures of their favourite TV or movie characters brings them joy.

"One of my prized toys was from the first Transformers TV show I watched; I remember it aired on TV2. It is now almost 20 years old," reminisces Muhammad as he shows off a toy Optimus Prime from the cartoon, *Transformers: Cybertron*. He has always loved toys, and now, as an adult with disposable income, he is able to buy the very things that give him immense joy.

Similarly, Carly collects figurines and statues of his favourite characters, one of which is Tifa Lockhart from the video game series, *Final Fantasy*. "This Tifa statue is my favourite in my collection; she also happens to be the most expensive. I think she cost approximately RM3,000?" The statue stands tall, and the intricately detailed sculpt reflects the high price point.

Like Muhammad and Carly, P'ng enjoys collecting representations of his favourite films and television shows, owning model



5 cars from movies such as *Ghostbusters* and *Knight Rider*. His enthusiasm for the hobby is infectious, and has influenced his partner, Law, to begin collecting as well.

"I love their designs. The small cars are very cute, especially when displayed together," Law remarks fondly, excitedly showing off her humble collection on display in Liberty Toys.

Hobbies provide one with not only enjoyment and fulfilment, but also a reprieve from the trials and tribulations of daily life. Muhammad thinks that the Covid-19 pandemic brought many into the collecting hobby, especially those who have lost loved ones.

"Perhaps many of them realised how fragile life is, so now they just want to be happy and to go for the little things, like remembering their childhood and their favourite toys. I might die tomorrow so I might as well buy something that makes me happy," he says with a smile.



6

WARSHIPS SUNK OFF PENANG IN WORLD WAR I





**BY
ENZO SIM**

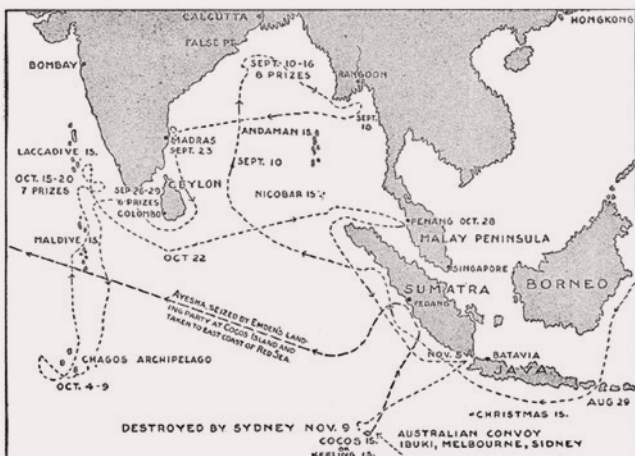
THROUGHOUT WORLD WAR I, Penang was indispensable to British war efforts as a hub supplying men, commodities and funds. Apart from being an important communication centre linking other key British outposts via telegraphic cables, Penang also played a significant role in securing safe passage for Australian and New Zealand Army Corps (ANZAC) troops transported to the ill-fated 1915 Battle of Gallipoli in Turkey.

During the first few months of the war, the German community in Penang were briefly detained by British authorities. However, they were released on parole two days later and only had to report to the police every day. While battles raged on ferociously in Europe and as tensions rose sharply in China, life went on as usual in Penang with German trading houses continuing their daily businesses uninterrupted. ^[1]

Nonetheless, growing suspicions about espionage activities in Penang eventually culminated in the arrest of 30 Germans, most of them private merchants. They were held overnight at the Penang Club and at Fort Cornwallis before being transferred to St. John's Island in Singapore.



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Meanwhile, along the busy shipping routes in the Bay of Bengal and the Indian Ocean, the German light cruiser, “Seiner Majestät Schiff” (SMS) *Emden*, had been successfully picking off Allied merchant ships caught unaware, and seizing most of their valuable cargoes. In mid-September, it even mounted a surprise attack on Madras (modern day Chennai), leaving bunkering tanks and facilities of the Burmah Oil Company and a telegraphic office ablaze. [2] By the end of September, four more British merchantmen were sunk by *Emden*, as reported in *The Times*.

Considering the disruptions *Emden*’s raids on the Allied war effort caused to the transportation of cargoes and delays in the deployment of ANZAC troops, Vice-Admiral Sir Martyn Jerram mobilised the Allied Far East Squadron at Penang under the command of the Royal Navy’s *Hampshire* to track down and destroy *Emden*—consisting of a Russian light cruiser *Zhemchug*; a French contingent with two destroyers, *Mousquet* and *D’Iberville* and two torpedo boats; as well as two Japanese cruisers, *Ibuki* and *Chikuma*. [3]

This mobilisation of forces reflects the effectiveness of German naval guerrilla warfare in tying down Allied resources; it had already sunk 23 merchant ships.

On board *Emden*, its commander, Captain Karl von Müller and his crew had been gathering intelligence through conversations with captured merchant crews and newspapers obtained from captured ships. Among the valuable information gathered was the fact that they were under hot pursuit by Allied warships on the Indian Ocean. With this, von Müller decided to launch a pre-emptive strike on the heart of Allied warship patrols—in Penang.

By now, von Müller had also learned about the Allied *Yarmouth*’s destruction of *Emden*’s tender ship, *Markomannia*, in the waters off Simeulue Island on the west coast of Sumatra, with her German crew’s capture on 12 October.

Four days later, *Yarmouth* arrived in Penang with 62 German naval crewmen. They were marched through the streets of George Town under armed guard to the Penang prison for transportation by rail to Singapore to be interned. [4] This further cemented von Müller’s determination to wreak havoc on the Allied warship base in Penang before moving on to disrupt Allied shipping lines around Socotra Island by the Horn of Africa.

SHOWDOWN IN PENANG

In the wee hours of October 28, 1914, as most of Penang’s inhabitants soundly slept, *Emden* slowly made its way towards the island’s harbour after arriving north of Muka Head at 2am. The Muka Head lighthouse and the harbour were brightly illuminated—a carelessness on the part of the British that would cost them dearly.

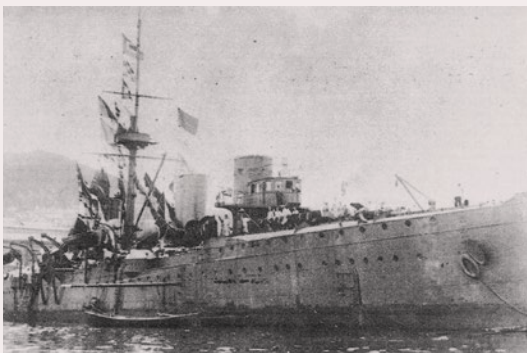
To disguise itself as *Yarmouth*, which had a fourth funnel, von Müller ordered for a dummy fourth funnel, which the crew had constructed earlier, to be rigged up. *Emden* made her way into the outer harbour unchallenged by harbour authorities.

At 5.04am, from a distance of 800m, the crew of *Emden* spotted the Russian warship *Zhemchug*, quietly anchored off the outer harbour. Under the cover of darkness, *Emden* opened fire on *Zhemchug* at 5.18am. The shells hit the heart of *Zhemchug* and plumes of black smoke rose into the air as fire broke out on board.

Despite managing to return some ill-targeted fire on *Emden*, *Zhemchug* exploded into flames and broke into two parts on being hit by several more rounds by *Emden*, before sinking into the sea. [5]

The commotion had awakened many Penang residents even from as high up as the Crag Hotel in Penang Hill. Residents scrambled to the best vantage points to watch the spectacle. People residing near the harbour, including guests staying at the Eastern & Oriental Hotel (E&O Hotel) were also awakened by the loud explosion off the hotel’s seawall—one of them was Ivan Cherkasov, the captain of *Zhemchug*. He watched helplessly from his room where he was spending the night with his wife, as his cruiser sank into the water.

As it began to steam northwards after destroying *Zhemchug*, *Emden* encountered *Merbau*, a harbour patrol boat which it mis-



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CAPTIONS

Photos from the Imperial War Museum, UK unless stated otherwise.

1. *Mousquet*, as photographed in 1902.
2. Karl von Müller, Captain of SMS *Emden*.
3. Route taken by *Emden* during her commerce raiding operations.
4. *Zhemchug* as photographed in 1909.
5. SMS *Emden* as photographed in 1910.

6. Map depicting the 1914 battle which was published in the *New York Times*.

7. Depiction of the Battle of Penang in a German postcard.

8. Memorial commemorating fallen French officers of the *Mousquet* erected in the churchyard of the Church of the Assumption. (Photo courtesy of Tan Khoo Beng)

9. Russian naval memorial commemorating fallen Russian naval soldiers of the *Zhemchug* cruiser which was erected in the Western Road Cemetery. (Photo courtesy of Tan Khoo Beng)



ENZO SIM is a Mass Communications graduate who has an unwavering passion towards international relations, history and regional affairs of Southeast Asia. His passion has brought him to different South-east Asian capitals to explore the diverse cultural intricacies within the region.

took for an enemy destroyer—possibly an optical illusion caused by the sea-mist—prompting *Emden*'s gunners to open fire. *Merbau*'s stern was damaged and an engineer on board was injured, forcing it to sail off as fast as it could towards the shores of Tanjung Tokong.

Emden immediately ceased fire upon realising its mistake and swiftly continued steaming northwest before coming across *Glenturret*, a British merchantman carrying explosives aboard. *Glenturret* was spared when *Emden*'s crews spotted a suspicious vessel far out to starboard—the French destroyer, *Mousquet*, which had just returned from patrolling the northern waters of the Straits of Malacca.

Upon reaching a suitable range of her guns, *Emden* fired her salvos, which struck *Mousquet*'s super-structure and boiler, obliterating it from the water 16km off Muka Head as the latter launched a counter-attack in vain. At 10.07am, after sinking two Allied warships, the victorious *Emden* managed to escape unscathed, and steamed west in the direction of Weh Island, northwest of Sumatra.^[6]

Before leaving the scene after sinking *Mousquet*, the crew of *Emden* managed to rescue 36 survivors who were all transferred, except for three of them who succumbed to their wounds aboard *Emden*, to a Singapore-bound English cargo ship.

At the end of the day, the Russians bore the brunt of the assault, with 86 lives lost and 250 rescued, while the French suffered 43 lives lost. Despite continuous efforts to rescue the Russian and French naval crew on the first day, bodies continued to be pulled from the water, with two bodies identified as Russian sailors washing up on the shores of Jerejak Island, where they remain buried today. 24 others were also buried at the Western Road Cemetery, where a Russian naval memorial stands to this day as commemoration of them.^[7]

The raid on Penang proved to be *Emden*'s final act of bravado. Thanks to the technology of radio transmission, *Emden*'s location, as it arrived at the Cocos Island on 9 November to sever the Allies' transoceanic telegraph cable and radio mast, was finally tracked down by the Royal Australian Navy.

Arriving at the scene the same day, Australia's HMAS *Sydney* shelled *Emden* with well over 100 rounds, forcing it to run aground before von Müller, together with his crew, came out surrendering. He would be interned as a prisoner of war until the end of the war, before being repatriated back to Germany.^[8]

A detachment of his crew led by *Emden*'s second-in-command, First Officer Hellmuth von Mücke, who had been sent ashore to sever telegraph cables, managed to evade capture and eventually escaped via sea and land routes. They reached Turkish-controlled Hodeidah in Yemen before making a lengthy overland journey back to Germany.

With the end of this hostile engagement—and the first for Australia's navy—the biggest maritime threat to Allied shipping in the Far East was finally cleared.

Today, although little has changed in places such as the terrace of the E&O Hotel where guests witnessed the naval battle, and as the *Zhemchug* wreckage continues to lie beneath the waters marked with a buoy, few in Penang will remember the only naval battle ever to take place here.

FOOTNOTES

- [1] Khoo, S. Nasution (2006), *More Than Merchants: A History of the German Speaking Community in Penang, 1800s–1940s*, (pp. 50–pp. 75), Penang: Areca Books.
- [2] Hohenzollern, F.J. (1928), *Emden: My Experiences in SMS Emden*, English translation (pp. 120–pp. 129), London: Herbert Jenkins
- [3] Navy List (1914), London: HMSO (pp. 23–pp. 50), London: J.J. Keliher & Co. Ltd.).
- [4] Penang Gazette, October 24, 1914, (p. 127).
- [5] Hohenzollern, F.J. (1928), *Emden: My Experiences in SMS Emden*, English translation (pp. 240–pp. 245), London: Herbert Jenkins
- [6] Huff, P. G. (1994), *SMS Emden War Logs*, English Translation, (pp. 140–pp. 154).
- [7] Kritskiy, N. N. Buyakov, A. M. and Shugaley, I. F. (2004) *Last Battle of the Cruiser Zhemtchug*. English translation, (pp. 25–pp. 49). Vladivostok: FEPU Press.
- [8] McClement, F. (1968) *Guns in Paradise: The Saga of the Cruiser Emden*, (pp. 90–pp. 105). Toronto: McClelland & Stewart.

ART EXHIBITION EXTRAORDINAIRE AT THE NG FOOK TEMPLE

BY IYLIA DE SILVA

CHINESE TEMPLES IN Penang serve as a place for worship, for ancestral prayers and for celebrations, such as the Mooncake Festival and Dragon Boat Festival.

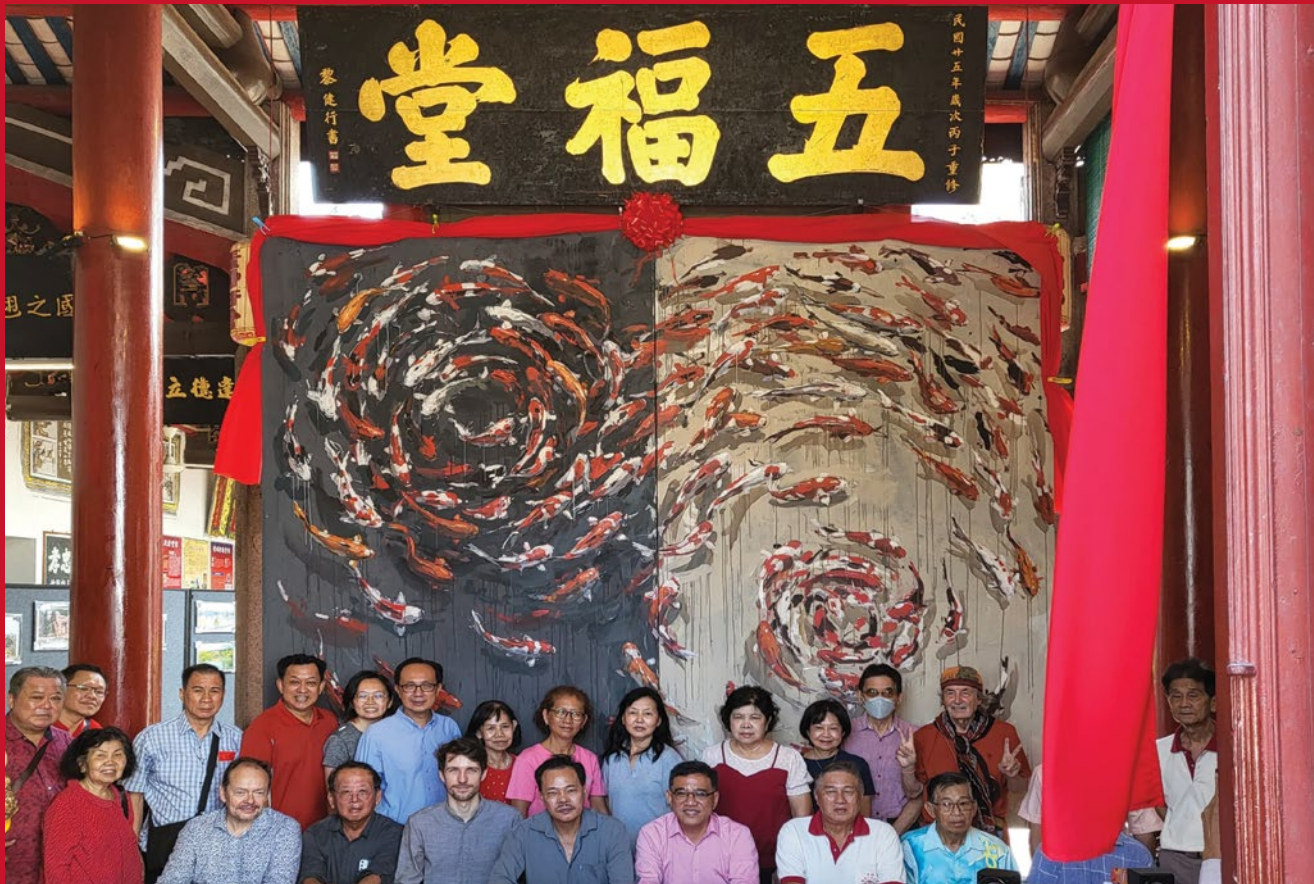
However, on the seventh day of the Lunar New Year (16 February 2024), the Penang Wu Fu Cantonese Association did something extraordinary, and organised the Ng Fook Thong Cultural and Art Exhibition at the Ng Fook Temple. Ng Fook Thong (or Five Fortune Hall in English, pronounced as Wu Fu Tang in Mandarin and Gor Hock Tong in Hokkien) is located along Chulia Street and has a history spanning 200 years.

CAPTIONS

1. Lee presenting the "C M 4 All" board to the Chief Minister of Penang.
2. The press conference on 16 February 2024.
3. Zacharevic carved this golden dragon on wood for this exhibition under Lee's tutelage. Zacharevic's girl in blue is seen riding the dragon, representing 2024 as the Year of the Wood Dragon.

REFERENCE

<https://www.buletinmuwtiara.com/%E4%BA%94%E7%A6%8F%E5%A0%82/>, <https://my.72dragon.com/2170/wu-fu-tang-penang/>





¹ This bold initiative served multiple purposes: inviting both locals and tourists to explore the temple's rich heritage, appreciate showcased artworks, and engage with participating artists.

The first thing one sees on entering the hall is a larger-than-life art piece of orange and white koi fish in a pond, hung from a mantelpiece. The artworks, totaling over 100 pieces, are placed around the temple's courtyard, and as visitors amble from one masterpiece to another, observing the blending of traditional and modern works such as paintings, calligraphy, wood carvings, handmade jewellery and sculptures, they soon forget that the gallery venue is a temple.

One of the most prized items on display is an approximate 2m-long Chinese calligraphy in the seal script style called *zhuàn shū* (篆书). An *objet d'art* that stood out in particular for its age was gemstones (an increasingly rare find in Malaysia compared to countries like Thailand and Myanmar) arranged intricately to depict the earth from which they sprung.

Renowned artists participating in the exhibition include Ernest Zacharevic, known for the hit-with-tourists mural "Children on Bicycle"; James Sum,

who is known for his Western abstract and traditional Chinese art; Fernando Cortes, a Madrid-based travel photographer; David Goh, tribal art collector and founder of Entopia; Charlyne Tan, winner of Malaysia's Most Outstanding Carving Arts Grandmaster Excellence Award; Loh Kooi Loong, the President of the Penang Chinese Brush Painting Art Society and Yew Swee Wah, Adelaide-based artist, among others.

Lee Chee Cheng, Vice Chairman of the Wu Fu Cantonese Association, was deeply moved by the warm response to this inaugural art-at-the-temple exhibition. Over the two weeks, hundreds of visitors attended daily. Despite falling short of the 20% sales target, the artwork for sale exceeded expectations at 10%. Therefore, he deems the exhibition a success, inspiring him to propose annual exhibitions in the future, perhaps with more specific themes to interest niche markets.

Besides being a devoted member of the association, Lee runs a business known as Sung Dynasty Wood Carving, which was established in 2010. He has crafted numerous wooden signboards, ancestral tablets and seal scripts, which he says are far more popular in Taiwan and China. He regularly hosts workshops spanning two to three days, allowing enthusiasts to learn wood carving and create their own pieces for display at home. In preparation for this exhibition, he taught and guided Zacharevic to properly carve a dragon on wood for display.

PRESSING ON DESPITE CHALLENGES

Reflecting on the lessons learnt from curating his first art exhibition, Lee emphasised the necessity of having at least six months to plan for such a significant event. Even seemingly simple tasks like arranging artwork for display require meticulous preparation. Lee also observed

that visitors tend to arrive later in the day despite the exhibition running from 11am to 8pm. Considering the possibility that the hot weather deters visitors during the day, Lee is willing to adjust the timing to suit visitors in the future.

Adapting to modern methods of publicity also proved to be a challenge. For example, social media's ever-changing algorithms make it hard for members of the older generation to keep up. However, they pressed onwards as the Association desired to attract younger members who could offer their valuable digital and technological skills.

FUNDING FOR A FACELIFT

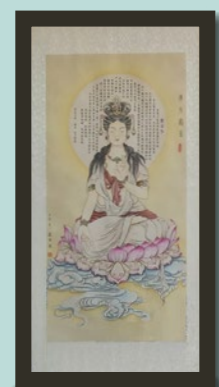
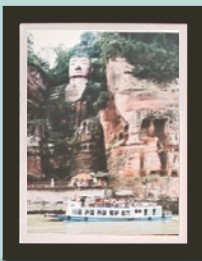
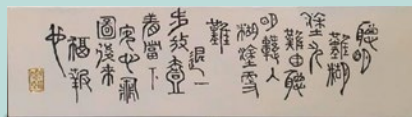
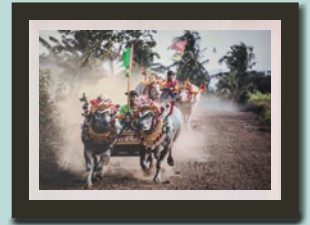
The temple's location within the heritage zone comes with a variety of constraints, which has limited the Association's flexibility in managing the building. Maintenance costs can be substantial, reaching up to RM200,000, with estimates of up to RM3mil for roof repairs to address leakage issues.

Founded in 1819, the temple was once known as Wu Fu Shu Yuan, functioning as a school with 12 classrooms. Today, the building is rented to hawkers at a reasonable rate. The 10% revenue generated from the art exhibition, along with other forms of donations or funds, is typically allocated to fund maintenance. This step is crucial because delaying repairs can lead to further deterioration, and higher costs.

Moving forward, the Association aims to explore diverse themes with a stronger focus on culture and traditions. While they are open to blending Western art with Asian themes, Lee is of the opinion that they must remain mindful not to dilute tradition. If the funds in hand permit, the Association might consider incorporating food sales during exhibitions or even performances like Chinese traditional orchestras. Ultimately, the objective is to preserve and pass down this culturally rich heritage to the next generation.



Several art pieces that were on display during the Ng Fook Thong Cultural and Art Exhibition.



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

SOUNDS AND SILENCE:

EXPERIMENTAL
MUSIC PERVADES
PENANG SPACES

CAPTIONS

1. Alvin Neoh, known by his stage name, Tupperware, performs at Ono's studio.
2. The free eclectic scene at Ono's studio.
3. Ono Kang preparing his set-up at his studio.
4. Kamal Sabran at his studio.

BY LIANI MK

PHOTOS BY
SHANKAR
LAXMINARAYANAND
COURTESY OF
KAMAL SABRAN

Scan the QR to listen



2

N AN ECLECTIC studio tucked in Ipoh, the figure of a bearded man is seen toggling keypads and buttons on his synthesiser (or synth, in short) in a room warmly lit by a table lamp. Under framed pictures of Sufi scholars, a curious cat tiptoes across dusty books and cassettes, a pothos plant curls in a corner. Prominently displayed are a vintage oscilloscope and Ace Tone analogue drum machine.

It is obvious that Kamal Sabran is not an ordinary senior lecturer at Penang's Universiti Sains Malaysia. The musician-researcher, who holds a PhD in Art and Design (New Media), is best known as a music tinkerer. Among his 2.47k YouTube subscribers and 237k Instagram followers, he has been described as a wizard of sorts; his gadgets spit out mind-bending sound-waves with intermittent silence—a space he likes to call “soundscape”.

If Kamal is a synth wizard, he has clearly fashioned for himself a spiritual terrain of meditative sounds, which he

also says is a remedial source for managing symptoms of dementia and Alzheimer's. Other than researching sound's healing potential, Kamal experiments a lot with cultural elements as well—even integrating traditional sounds of the Arab-Malay lute known as *gambus*.

Experimental music—a catch-all umbrella term for a genre that emphasises play and experimentation with sound—has been a part of Penang's underground music scene that, akin to modern art, has a specific audience; it challenges common notions of sound and structure.

CHAOS WITHIN ORDER

When controversial composer, Karlheinz Stockhausen, called for new kinds of concert halls to project sound differently in spaces (or “spatial music”), his deconstructed multimedia ideas shook the music world and redefined boundaries of what music can be in terms of sound, composition, production and performance.

“It is so fascinating to see people confused by your artwork, because as an art-

ist, you *want* people to be confused, to get away from the comfortable, you see?” says Kamal with a laugh. “Experimental music can provide that new-ness, or surprise element, that justifies the need to listen.”

Where technology and music intersect, experimental music influences types of other music such as electronic and noise music—an indeterminate, unmelodic musical style that features unconventional musical instruments and electronic signals like distortion and feedback. Aside from new technologies and free improvisation, experimental music can also include traditional musical instruments played in non-conformist ways.

While this genre of music seems like a modern creation, it has already been in the making since the 1920s. Then, with the introduction of digital computer music in the 60s, more electronic musical instruments developed, such as the oscillator (responsible for patterns of wiggly up-and-down electrical signals of sounds) and Moog synthesisers (which create textures of sounds).

Experimental music is therefore wildly broad, ambiguous and certainly limitless—it can range from experimental jazz, blues, rock and any other genre that uses electronic instruments, technology or software in the production of its sound.

IMMEDIATE RESPONSES

Penang musician, Alvin Neoh, adds that the musical output can depend on various factors that include the sound system or what musicians hear in the room—that is, how they pick up and then respond to the sound.

“You play to the moment. You decide there and then. And when you’re there, you also extract the room’s energy—also based on the people who are there,” says Alvin.

Alvin, who is also an architect and one of the brains behind Penang’s beloved Narrow Marrow café, was a bandmate of Penang’s endearing homegrown post-rock band, COMA. He has always been interested in experimental noise music, where he recently began performing under the stage name, TupperWare—a homage to American experimental techno-noise artist, Ren Schofield, or Container.

“There is feedback because of this energy,” says Alvin, recalling his experience in playing live. “And you can feel that energy in the moment. It’s the most beautiful thing.”



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In a way, it becomes a form of collaboration—between the music-makers, their contraptions as well as with the audience.

“Experimental musicians—most of the time, they don’t know what’s going to happen,” says experimental artist, Wei Kang Beh, who says that the experimental music scene in Penang is still in its “post-digital, embryo stage”.

“You have this kind of deconstructed position where there’s no stage and then the audience also becomes involved in these whole happenings,” adds Wei, who revels in both the music-making and academic aspects of experimental sounds.

Wei had been part of an experimental art laboratory/residency programme organised by the Europe-based, OutsideininsideoutinsideN, following his undergraduate studies in Electronic Music Production and Performance Arts.

“I got very inspired by my experience in Berlin, and I want to extend this experience, spirit and some core of it to Penang,” says Wei, who has been organising music events in Berlin, and more recently in Penang, together with other local collectives such as mid.heaven.

In March, Wei performed and helped to organise a line-up of underground experimental music at spaces such as Soundmaker Studio, and the community-based Ruas Record Store—which invited artists across different disciplines of techno, electronic, noise and improvisation music.

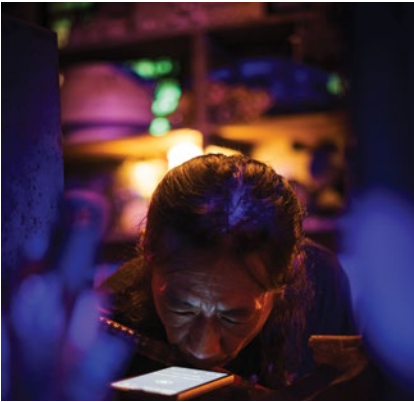
He also collaborates with sculptor artist, Ono Kang, who hosts informal music sessions at his art studio in George Town—where music-experimenting is the norm.

“I’m from Penang; I always want to bring something new to share in Penang. I have a beautiful place and I have a nice sound system. Why not keep it going?” says Ono, who is a musician himself.

His art studio is a hidden treasure not only of antique trinkets and collectibles strewn across the ceilings and walls—it has become a sort of hidden portal where music comes together and bends, meshes, then dissolves the rules of time, space and structures. There is no recording of these sessions, except for the occasional phones tapping away. One must therefore appreciate the present, as it is.

His last jamming sessions at the studio featured seven musicians—including Buddha Beat musician and Soundmaker Studio’s owner, Yew Kuok Cheong—and made use of a Bluetooth microphone app to get feedback sound from different musicians and the audience.

“It is always in that moment. It can create so many different sounds that we’ve never heard of, or understood before,” Ono says, proudly brandishing his own



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CAPTIONS

5. Soundmaker Studio and Buddha Beat musician, Yew Kuok Cheong, performing at Ono's studio.

6. Wei Kang Beh playing at Ono's studio.

FOOTNOTES

[1] <https://icareifyoulisten.com/2021/07/sonic-liberation-front-palestines-underground-music-experimentalists-are-resisting-erasure/>

[2] https://slought.org/media/files/s776-2022-03-11-dtp_one-hour-from-palestine.pdf

[3] <https://pitchfork.com/thepitch/how-experimental-musicians-are-soundtracking-the-end-of-the-world/>

[4] <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC8IP3wSuskFET-8AvLSH4g>



LIANI MK is an independent writer, journalist and artist whose works span areas of language, identity, indigenous rights and migration in Southeast Asia.

experimental, customised brown wooden flute played during these late-night sessions. "The whole experience is so magical."

MUSIC IN THE MAKING

In a similar event at Soundmaker Studio in March—"Georgetown Fusic"—musicians Buddha Beat, Banana Split, Jackson and Wei were stationed at different spots where they would perform. Often, these spaces play with visuals and lights as well. With bouncing neon pink and blue hues of light injecting flavours across the different sonic spaces, it is hard not to feel the overwhelming sense of wonder.

Dina Shukor, a frequent music-goer to these events, was completely blown away.

"I felt, just, WOW! I felt like an explorer," Dina enthuses on how audiences get to appreciate the different projections of sound in that space. The music almost engulfs you, she shares.

"It is like you explore the music *and* the place as well," says Dina. "You *tak boleh jumpa benda ni* anywhere," she says. *You can't easily find this in other places.*

There is indeed, something visceral and special experiencing music in the making. Because of this experience, Dina says that she has more recently gravitated towards experimental music shows. As much as the beats challenge her conceptions of sound, it gets to her in ways that courses through her entire being.

"Your body will move automatically when you listen to this music. You just have to close your eyes, and then the music makes you want to move. And everyone is moving as well! Nobody cares how," she says with a grin.

EXPERIMENTING WITH PURPOSE

While experimental music can seem like pure fun and technical, like all art forms, it is not just bound to artistic appreciation—it can also make a statement.

Living under Israeli apartheid, underground musicians in Palestine^[1] such as rapper Muqata'a, Ramallah electronic collective, BLTNM and the pan-Arab Sonic Liberation Front use not just electronic sounds, but integrate murmurs of political speeches, religious prayers, sounds of bullets (or a loading gun in Daboor's "Sheikh Jarrah" track, for example), and tear gases in their music as signs of protest^[2] and to document memories of years under occupation.

In a performance by American experimental electronic act, Matmos, they crumpled a plastic bag and added swishing sounds on their laptop while showing visuals of plastics across the ocean to draw attention to the climate crisis.^[3]

Meanwhile, some of these shows—like Extramoniumklub and Impuls Network's recently concluded, "We Stand Together"

in Bandung, Indonesia—have also become support spaces to generate donations for social causes.

Like how Kamal Sabran fuses electronic sounds with traditional lute in his Space Gambus Experiment collective,^[4] it can also be a way to appreciate culture and stay grounded in one's roots, according to Kamal, as a way to remember your "*jati diri*" (identity).

Besides testing limits with sound and structure, some musicians even compose with the absence of sound—like John Cage's famous composition, 4'33" (1952)—where on-stage performers sat silently for 4 minutes and 33 seconds.

But for Kamal, the quietude is in between creative-making that requires the musician to receive and listen, rather than make. The deep listening, as Alvin also calls it, or active listening, to this silent space is important before one can respond or desire to compose.

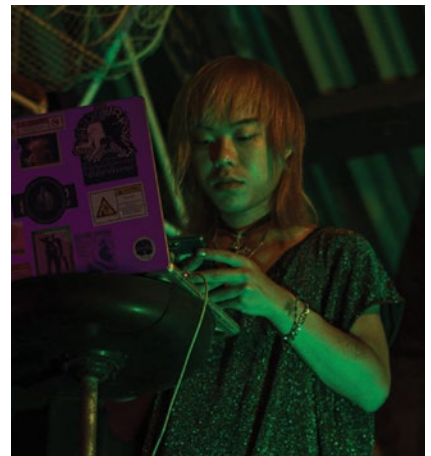
"As a musician, in order to be a good receiver you have to be in a lot of silence," Kamal says. "What I mean is less distraction. Then only can you recognise the sound, and then the sound enters you as a new perspective, new idea and new energy."

Kamal says that at the core of it is the need to let go of control. "By surrendering, you make your *deria* (senses) more alert. Then the alertness allows you to easily receive, and you create things, hoping that the listeners also discover something new."

"It's always also about this spirit of trying and experimenting with my practice, and how sound plays with different environments, people and media," Wei reflects.

The act of experimenting in this way changes our perception of music and society by expanding our music vocabulary and ways of listening.

"Experimental music celebrates the expressiveness of unconventionality in music," says Wei, before dropping a bombshell of a statement: "It's the chaos within the order."



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HERE'S WHERE YOU CAN FIND PENANG MONTHLY

PICK-UP SPOTS PENANG

1 George Town

Areca Books
Black Kettle
BookXcess Gurney Paragon
ChinaHouse
Gerakbudaya Bookshop
@ Hikayat
Gurney Plaza
(Information Counter)
Hin Bus Depot Art Centre
Huey & Wah Cafe
Le Petit Four Patisserie
More by Arang Coffee
Penang Institute
Penang Island Municipal Council
Pusat Harmoni
(Harmonico)—Reception
Ren I Tang Heritage Inn
Sin Seh Kai Artisan Bakery
Tourist Information Centre
32 Mansion

2 Bayan Lepas

Penang Skills
Development Centre
Spices by Yin's
Urban Republic

3 Tanjung Bungah

Gusto Cafe
Straits Mini Mart
Yin's WholeFood Manufactory
(Lembah Permai)

4 Tanjung Tokong

Blue Reef Straits Quay

5 Air Itam

Coffee Elements
Penang Hill—Lower Station
Tolk Cafe

6 Gelugor

E-Gate (Security Desk located
at the building's middle span)
Universiti Sains Malaysia,
Hamzah Sendut Library 1
(Main Entrance Foyer)

9 Batu Kawan

IKEA Batu Kawan

10 Bukit Mertajam

Seberang Perai Municipal Council

11 Juru

AUTO CITY Management Office

READING SPOTS PENANG

1 George Town

Bricklin Cafe Bar
Kim Haus
Komichi Tea House
Mugshot Cafe
Narrow Marrow
Wheeler's Cafe

3 Tanjung Bungah

The Hillside Cafe Bar
& Restaurant

4 Tanjung Tokong

Leo Books

7 Balik Pulau

Botanica Mansion

8 Butterworth

Artichoke Cafe

9 Batu Kawan

Peninsula College

PICK-UP SPOTS KL/SELANGOR

○ Kuala Lumpur

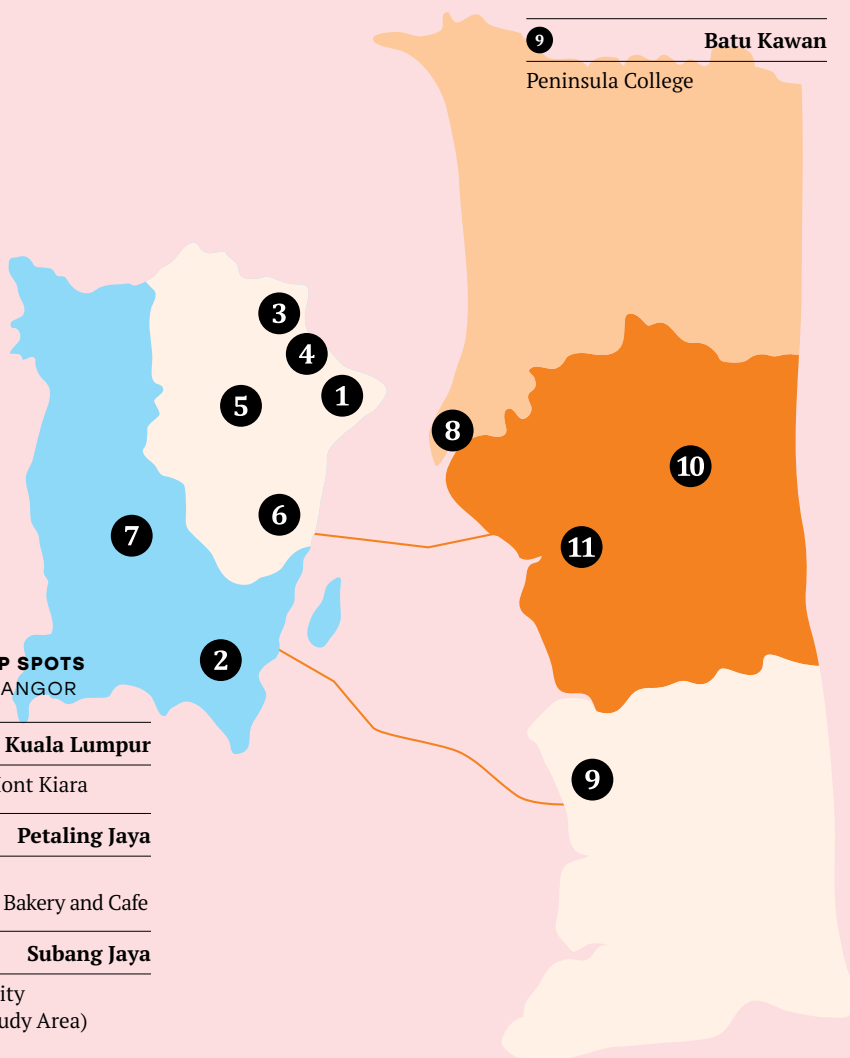
Hubba Hubba Mont Kiara

○ Petaling Jaya

Temu House
Yin's Sourdough Bakery and Cafe

○ Subang Jaya

Sunway University
(Students Study Area)



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