PENANG MONTHLY

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FEATURE

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ARE WE READY TO BE AN AGEING NATION?

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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COVER STORY
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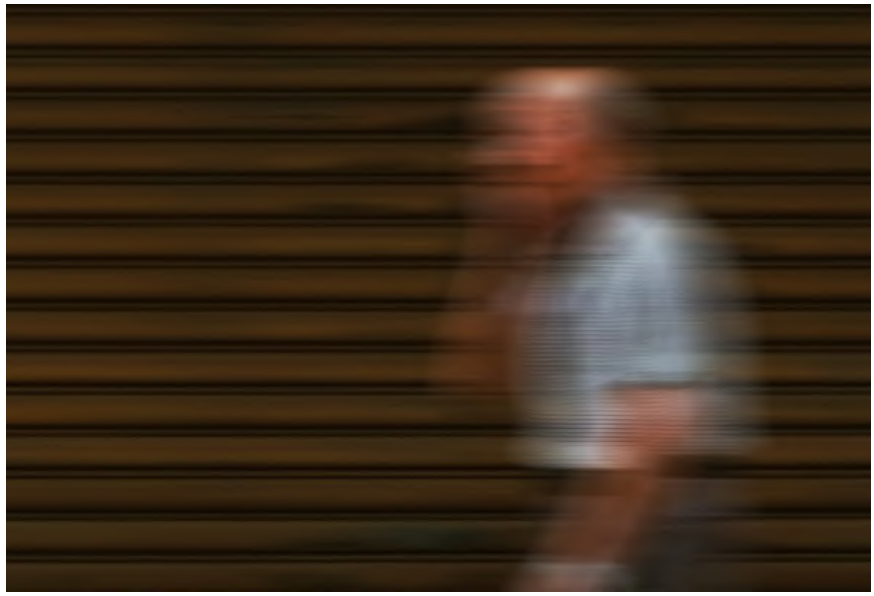
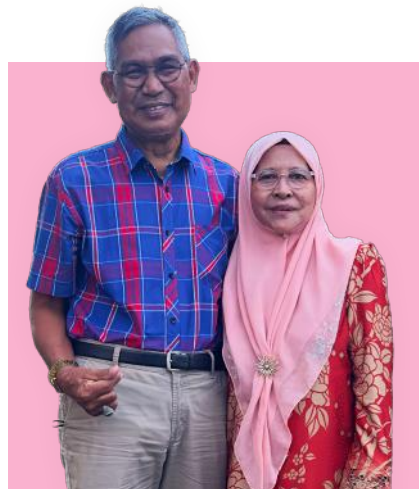
DEMENTIA

A DISEASE AN AGEING NATION CANNOT IGNORE

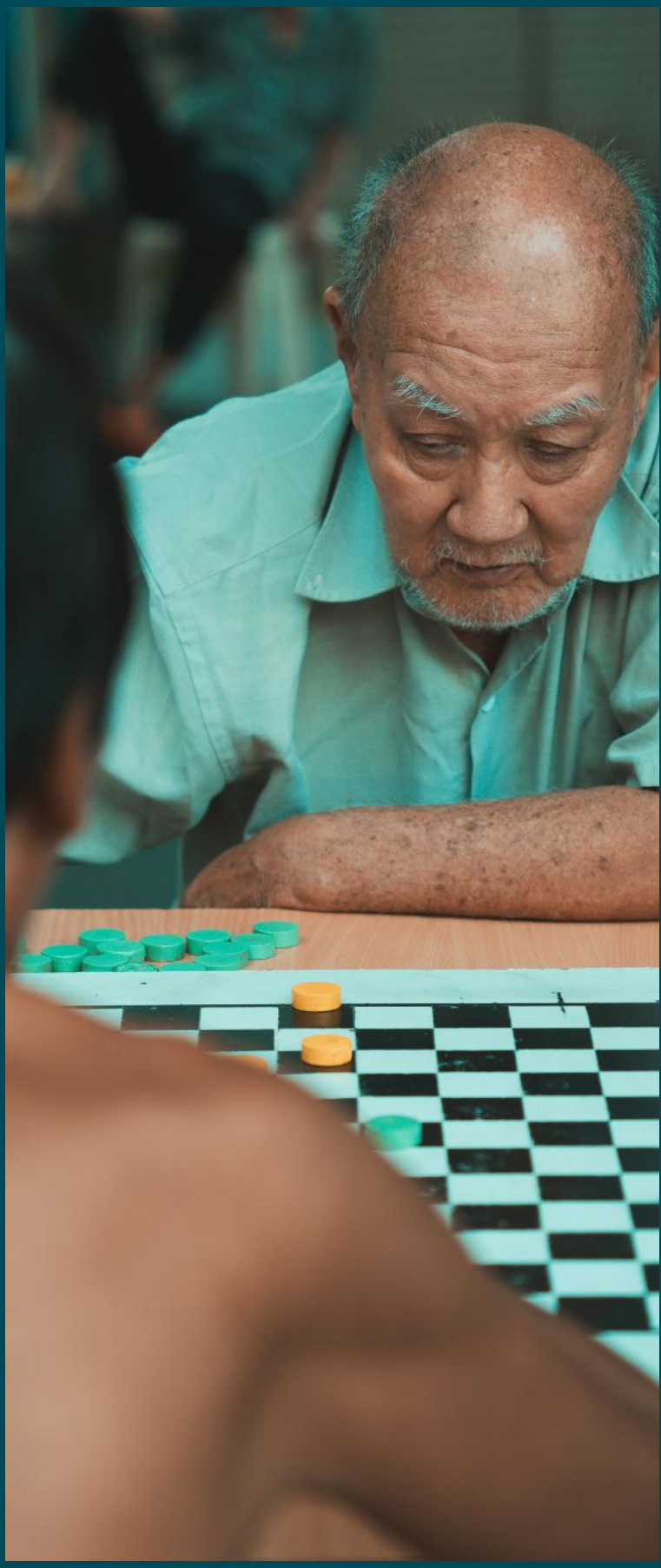




> **We are not trying to excel in old age. We just want to acquire late-in-life meaning in daily life that comes from rejuvenating our ability to mean, to give meaning to our actions..”**

—OOI KEE BENG (IN EDITORIAL)

FROM GARDEN TO PLATE AND TO CANVAS



ACQUIRING A PRO-ACTIVE LIFE SHOULD MAKE ACTIVE AGEING A WALK IN THE PARK

BY OOI KEE BENG

ACTIVE AGEING is a trendy term indeed. It is an inspirating notion, serviceable for policymakers and inspirational for ageing individuals.

However, and poignantly, it also implies that Passive Ageing is the default mode for most old people. This is probably because old people do become more vulnerable to accidents and mishaps, need care and constant support, and health issues begin to dominate their day. This is a depressing and potentially discouraging situation to be in.

We assume that what turns passive ageing into its active variety depends on measures society takes to provide general support to its older members on one hand, and on encouraging the ageing individual to get off the sofa on the other.

The pro-activeness of the ageing person is key, and on that front, external aids can only have limited effects. In that important sense, active ageing, in many cases, requires mental shifts in the person concerned.

To start with, we should not assume that an ageing person was a pro-active person before retirement or old age. They might have been a rather passive person all their life, and for such individuals to become an active person in old age would require much personal honesty, motivation and contemplation. More energy and contemplation than their falling energy level can provide.

Becoming pro-active in old age if one has been a generally passive person when young cannot be an easy task.

Now, by pro-active, I mean the psychological ability to feel and to exercise agency, to be an initiator of things. The parts of our mindset and lifestyle which have for most of our life been essentially passive, routine and reactive may need to be identified first. That can be tough.

But maybe we don't need to do that. We can go surgical instead of therapeutical.

We are not trying to excel in old age. We just want to acquire late-in-life meaning in daily life that comes from rejuvenating our ability to mean, to give meaning to our actions. That requires a pro-active attitude, and the acquiring of agency.

MANAGING REBIRTH IN OLD AGE

Back to basics then. Back to being a child again.

As we know, nothing makes a toddler happier than to toddle, than to realise that she can toddle. The old person needs to recover this joy. Enjoy waking up, enjoy walking, enjoy any physical activity as a miracle the way we did when we were children. Washing the dishes is something to celebrate if successfully done, sweeping the floor is a rewarding act of bodily coordination and of precision in movement. Whatever the child felt, the old should seek to rediscover, and not consider it banal and routine, and not worth shouting about.

Applying that perspective to any physical act the ageing person manages to perform is Active Ageing 101. Very Zen-ish. And why not? I would call it Liberational Ageing. Taijiquan, anyone? Gardening, anyone? Morning walks?

SPHERES OF EXISTENCE

Now, I believe that *Physical Prowess* is but one of three spheres of human agency.

As the toddler that we all once were grew, she quickly learned to play social games. She gained sociality beyond her birth-given physicality. She learned to interact, she learned to read the actions and reactions of others, she learned mutualism and morality. She learned to play. She soon took such physical acts for granted, she evolved into a cultural being, a social animal.

She learns to behave. And in gaining social skills, she enters the second sphere of human agency.

Social Prowess is what we strive for as social beings. This is also where agency can be drowned out—through endless compromise, through being constantly subordinate, through all-round coercion. In old age, when social pressure is low, we have a chance to rekindle that. Thus, we should welcome the low level of social encounters when ageing. Time to read, to write, to have long discussions on matters we were once interested in. Time for a new lifestyle that is not determined by income level and social climbing. Maybe try stand-up comedy. Join a book club. Learn a new language.

The third sphere of human agency is *Intellectual Prowess*. This is the realm of knowledge, of epistemic skills. This is where philosophy and religion beckon, where the sciences summon, where language and structure dominate. The goal is to seek order in the world, to make sense of all we see. Existence confounds and confuses, and our intellect is forced to find understanding and meaning. And all the forms and structures we adopt along the way articulate much of our individual identity.

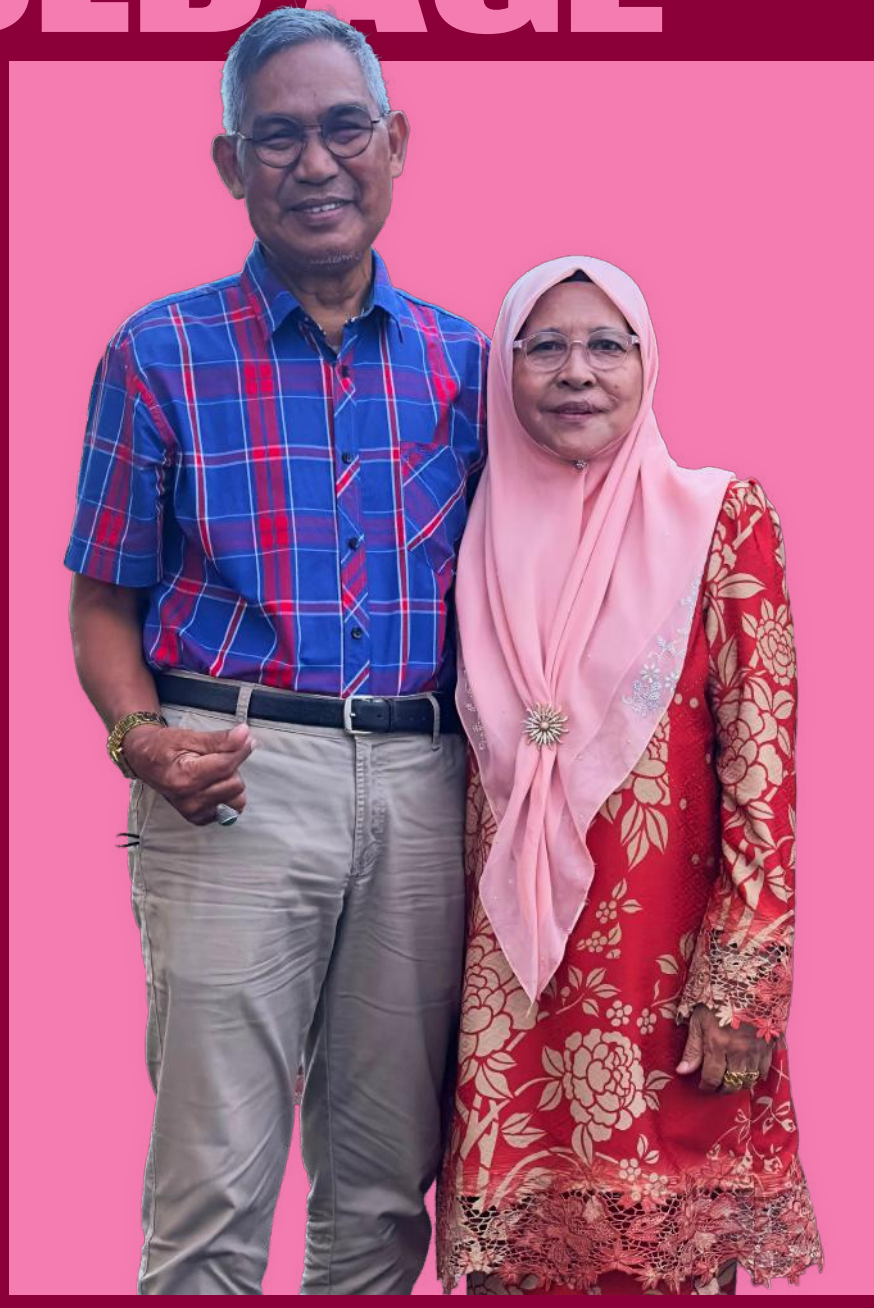
We collect experiences, and so the young often think that the elderly are either wise men—or idiots.

In times recently passed, the very fact of having lived gave us experience and wisdoms we could offer our grandchildren. That mentoring role is now taken over by online search engines, social media and AI. But no problem. Our knowledge is granular and not generalisable.

Realising that our identity is the result of our intertwined Physicality, Sociality and Intellectuality, we may develop or preserve our sense of agency by allowing for a second maturing—from infant to elderly. But this time, we do it on our own terms—and live pro-actively in old age the way we should have lived all our life.

FINDING LOVE AGAIN IN OLD AGE

BY NIDHAL MUJAHID



IN THE QUIET, sun-drenched paddy fields of Seberang Perai, 76-year-old Zainal Abidin stands still with his hands stained brown with soil. For decades, those hands also held the hand of his first wife—until death parted them in 2023.

Not far away stands Rohani Ismail, 65, a woman with steady hands and unwavering grit, who had dedicated her life to raising her children single-handedly after the passing of her husband 18 years ago.

THE STRUCTURE OF LONELINESS

For Zainal, the two years following his wife's passing were a lesson in what he calls "living alone while being surrounded". His three children and 10 grandchildren visited daily, filling the house with chaos and laughter. But when the cars pulled out of the driveway and the sun dipped below the horizon, the void returned.

"The heart seeks its twin," he says softly. "Children give a different kind of love. But a spouse… a spouse shares your silence. The tea you drink together at 5am. They are a witness to your remaining days."

For Rohani, the journey was even longer. Widowed for nearly two decades, she built her identity around motherhood and grand-motherhood. She drove her children to school, managed household finances and became the anchor of her family.

"I never thought of remarrying," she admits. In many ways, she had effectively "retired" her heart. She focused on religious classes and occasionally took what she called "healing" trips. Then, in 2023, she performed the Hajj pilgrimage to Mecca—an experience that became a turning point. It was there that she began to reconsider her future and the possibility of companionship.

On 21 September 2023, at the Pejabat Agama Daerah Seberang Perai Utara, Zainal and Rohani's paths formally joined in marriage.

THE ACCIDENTAL ENCOUNTER

Their story began at the Activity Centre for Older Persons (PAWE) in Sungai Dua. Often shunned by the younger generation, these community hubs have become the new town squares for Malaysia's silver generation.

It was during a PAWE-organised trip to Pulau Pangkor that the two had met.

"I never planned to join the trip," Rohani recalls. "My relatives encouraged me. And then, during the trip, Abang Zainal approached me."

Amid the salt air and the gentle lapping of waves, the rigid structures of their solitary lives began to soften. It was not the fiery passion of youthful romance, but a steady, slowly stoked warmth. They found that they shared a language of loss—and a shared desire for a spiritual partner, a *teman beribadah*.

Yet, elderly marriage is sometimes viewed as unnecessary, even embarrassing. The assumption persists that companionship in old age is indulgent rather than essential.

THE GATEKEEPERS OF LOVE

One of the greatest hurdles for seniors seeking remarriage is often their own families.

In many Malaysian households, the idea of a widowed parent remarrying can provoke discomfort. Concerns range from inheritance issues to preserving the memory of the deceased spouse—or simply the difficulty of seeing an elderly parent as a romantic being.

Zainal faced this head-on. Initially, his children were startled. The idea of their 76-year-old fatherremarrying felt strange at first. But as they witnessed his deepening loneliness, they came to understand that filial love could not replace romantic companionship. In a touching reversal of tradition, it was Zainal's children who eventually went to Rohani's family to "*merisik*"—to formally express his intention to marry .

"They saw that I was alone," Zainal remembers. "They realised that my happiness does not erase their mother's memory. It honours the fact that I am still alive."

> **"They saw that I was alone… They realised that my happiness does not erase their mother's memory. It honours the fact that I am still alive."**

BEYOND THE EMOTIONAL

Research by Nathaniel M. Lambert for the National Healthy Marriage Resource Centre (NHMRC) suggests that seniors who remarry after a loss report significantly higher life satisfaction than those who remain solitary. Even a decade later, the data shows sustained improvements in wellbeing—largely due to reduced social isolation.

Since their marriage in 2023, Rohani's life has changed markedly. Once content to remain at home, she now follows Zainal to the mosque opposite their house daily. Together, they attend exercise sessions and Tajwid classes organised by PAWE Sungai Dua.

"I feel more energised," she says. "Before, I did everything alone. Now, there is a rhythm to our days."

Their life reflects the "Active Ageing" philosophy championed by Malaysia's National Policy for Older Persons (DWEN). Emotional companionship, it turns out, is as vital as physical exercise. Social isolation has long been linked to depression and cognitive decline; partnership offers protection against what some call the "social death" of ageing.

CHALLENGING STIGMA

Within segments of the Malay community, a lingering belief holds that seeking love in old age is *tidak manis*—unbecoming. Critics argue that seniors should focus solely on the afterlife, as if human companionship and spiritual peace are mutually exclusive.

Zainal and Rohani disagree. Marriage has made them better Muslims.

"I feel more motivated to go to the mosque, to listen to the lectures and to perform *Qiamullail* (night prayers)," Zainal says. "Having a partner wake you up for prayer is a blessing."

For Rohani, companionship has deepened her joy in worship.

Their message to their peers is simple: happiness has no expiry date.

"Don't let your age dictate your heart," Zainal asserts. "If your intention is good and the path is halal, why worry what the neighbours say?"

"Only we know the coldness of our own beds." Rohani adds.

As the sun sets over Nurul Hidayah Mosque in Sungai Lokan, Seberang Perai, the call to prayer echoes through the trees. Zainal and Rohani walk by, hand in hand; a quiet reminder that even at day's end, something new can begin.

FUN FACTS

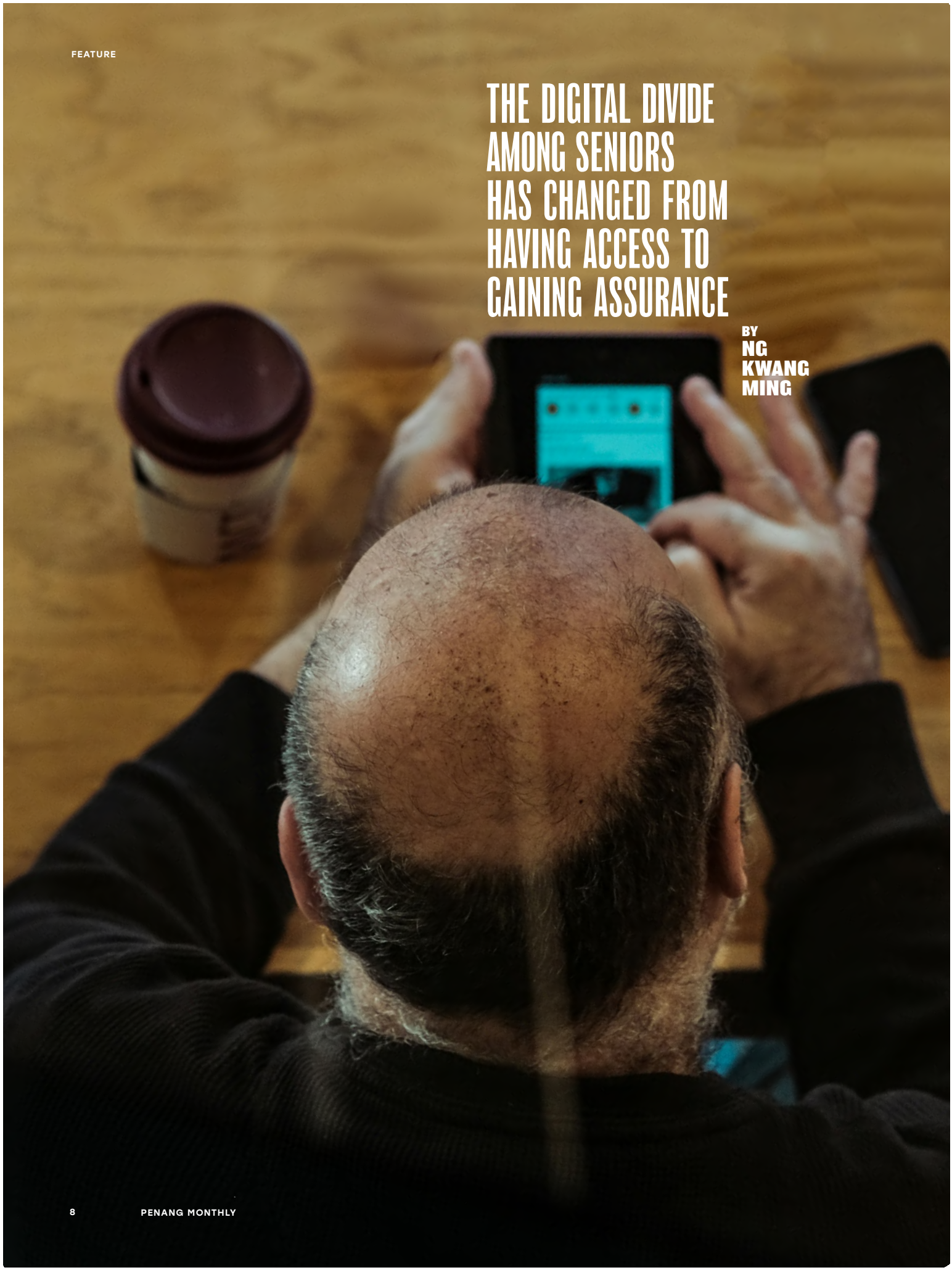
The Gender Gap
Women generally live longer than men, but are less likely to remarry after widowhood due to social pressures.

The "PAWE" Effect
There are currently over 140 PAWEs across Malaysia, serving as vital hubs for social re-integration for senior citizens.

NIDHAL MUJAHID serves as a Senior Programme Officer at PWDC, focusing on community development and Gender Inclusiveness advocacy. Beyond his professional work, he is a local indie music enthusiast and an avid ukulele player.

THE DIGITAL DIVIDE AMONG SENIORS HAS CHANGED FROM HAVING ACCESS TO GAINING ASSURANCE

BY
NG
KWANG
MING



WHEN THE COVID-19 pandemic pushed much of daily life online almost overnight, it exposed a reality that had long been overlooked in Malaysia—many older people were not part of the digital world.

Medical appointments moved online; information travelled faster than word of mouth; payments became cashless by default. For senior citizens who had never owned a smartphone, or who used one only to answer calls, the transition was disorienting and overwhelming. Digital exclusion was no longer an abstract concept—it affected whether one could see a doctor, stay in touch with family or access essential services.

In Penang, this moment became a turning point. DahDigital, a programme launched by the Penang state government through Digital Penang, was introduced to promote the use of digital solutions within communities as daily life shifted online. The programme placed trained digital coaches on the ground to help residents build practical digital skills and confidence within their communities. What began as an urgent response to a public health crisis soon became part of a broader effort to foster a digitally inclusive society.

By many measures, it worked. Yet, as Malaysia continues to age, a deeper question has emerged. Did we truly close the digital divide, or did we simply move it into a different and less visible form?

LEARNING TO GO ONLINE

Before Covid-19, the digital divide among seniors was straightforward. Many lacked devices, reliable internet access or the confidence to use devices. Technology felt unnecessary to some, and even intrusive to others.

The pandemic removed that choice. Digital tools became necessities rather than conveniences. Seniors learned to scan QR codes, send voice messages and make online payments, not because they were eager to adopt technology, but because daily life demanded it.

DahDigital responded by focusing on everyday digital use for seniors. Training sessions centred on practical needs such as messaging apps, e-wallets, navigation tools and access to government digital services. At a time when physical isolation and service access were urgent concerns, the emphasis was on reassurance and usability rather than technical mastery or deeper awareness of online risk.

As their confidence grew, seniors who once relied heavily on others began navigating digital tools independently. For many, this new competence brought a sense of dignity and autonomy at a moment when the world felt uncertain.

THE PROBLEM THAT FOLLOWED

Yet, as more seniors came online, another issue quietly followed them. Many entered the digital world without a strong understanding of its risks.

Online scams have become the clearest example of these risks. Phone calls impersonating banks, messages posing to have come from family members, and fake investment offers have grown increasingly targeted and emotionally manipulative. For many seniors, these encounters do not immediately feel suspicious—a call claiming to be from a bank may arrive shortly after a legitimate transaction; a message from someone posing as a child or grandchild often appeals to urgency, fear or a sense of responsibility.

In households across the country, younger family members are frequently drawn into the aftermath. They try to recover lost savings, calm distressed parents or explain how familiar voices, official logos or formal language became tools of deception. Financial losses can be severe, particularly for retirees, but the emotional toll is often heavier. Shame, anxiety and self-blame frequently go unspoken.

WHEN CONFIDENCE TURNS INTO VULNERABILITY

For many seniors, the internet carries an air of authority. Over time, official communication has shifted from physical counters and paper notices to screens and messages. Government announcements, bank alerts and service instructions increasingly arrive through digital channels. Gradually, the distinction between what is legitimate and what merely appears official becomes harder to discern.

Scammers exploit this familiarity. Messages are designed to look formal, reassuring and urgent all at once. What began as digital confidence can quietly turn into vulnerability.

The irony is difficult to ignore. Efforts to bring seniors online have succeeded, but in doing so, have also increased their exposure to digital harm.

Programmes like DahDigital were essential during the pandemic. Without them, many seniors would have remained digitally isolated at a time when connection was critical. However, these initiatives were designed for rapid inclusion rather than long-term digital safety. In a crisis defined by urgency, speed mattered more than safeguards.

Addressing online fraud is also inherently complex. Scams evolve quickly, often crossing platforms, technologies and even borders faster than regulation or public awareness can keep pace. What began as a public health response has since become a longer-term governance challenge.

DESIGNING FOR AN AGEING DIGITAL SOCIETY

As Malaysia ages, digital inclusion must evolve—teaching people how to go online is no longer enough.

Digital literacy today must also include awareness, verification and the confidence to pause before acting. Knowing when not to respond can be just as important as knowing how to use an app. Simple habits—such as checking with a family member before acting on urgent requests, recognising that legitimate institutions rarely pressure users for immediate action or knowing where to seek help when something feels wrong—can significantly reduce risk.

Digital inclusion, in this sense, is no longer just about competence. It is about judgment.

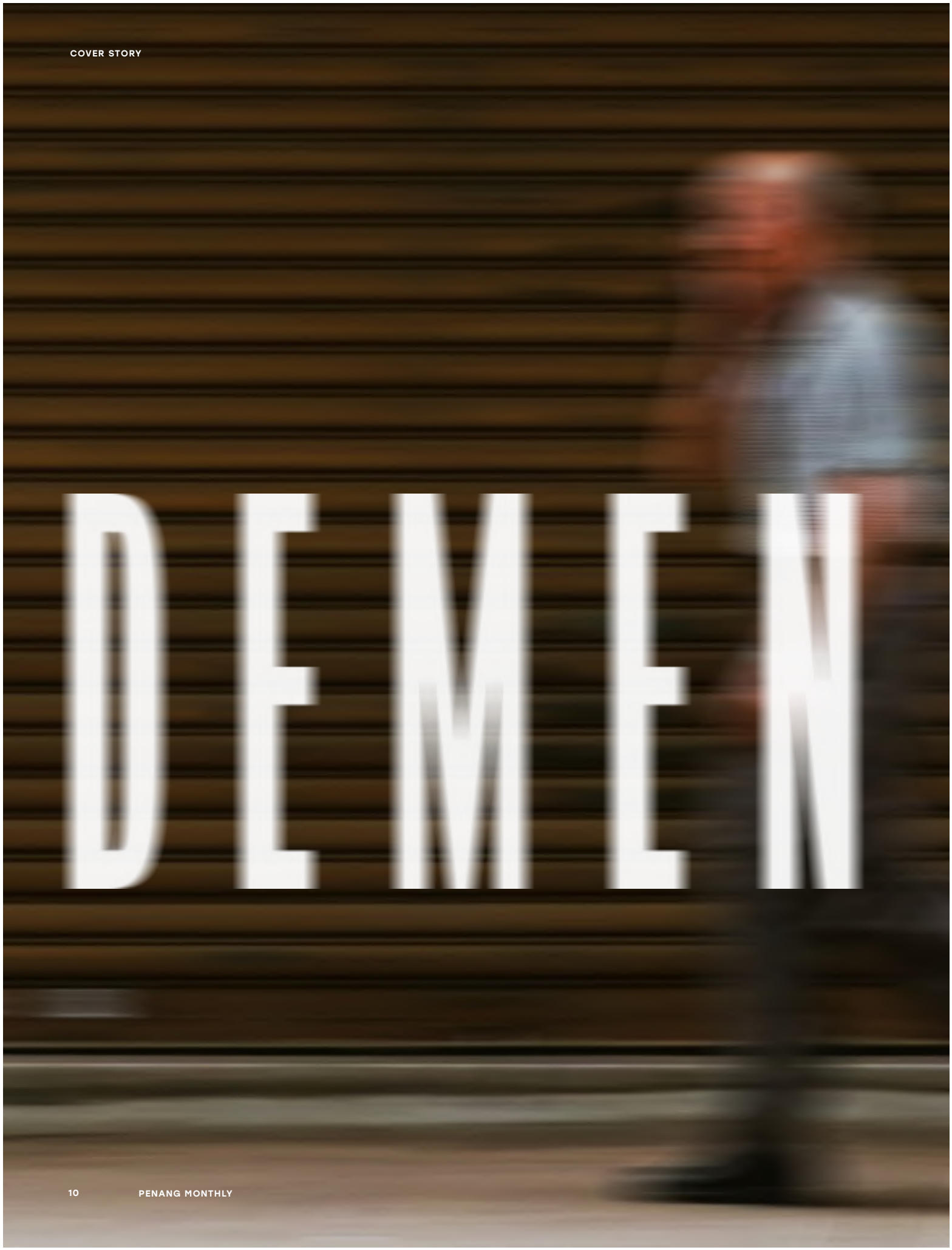
Protecting seniors online is a shared responsibility. Families, communities and institutions all have a role to play.

Digital safety should be an open conversation rather than a private embarrassment. Asking elderly parents about the messages they receive, discussing suspicious calls together and reassuring them that mistakes can be talked through without judgment are small but powerful forms of protection. Clear communication, peer support and accessible human help remain essential safeguards in an increasingly digital society.

DahDigital demonstrates that digital inclusion is not a one-time achievement, but an ongoing process that must adapt as risks evolve and users age.

As Penang advances its digital agenda, systems must be designed with clarity, safety and trust in mind. In an ageing society, true digital inclusion is not just about access; it is about assurance, and the confidence that participation in the digital world does not mean facing it alone.

TS. NG KWANG MING is a seasoned technology executive with over 30 years of experience, having held senior leadership roles at IBM, Motorola, and Malaysia's national applied research and development centre, MIMOS Berhad. He is a registered member of the Malaysia Board of Technologists with multiple patents.


DEMEN

MARY* LIVED WITH her husband and her son's family in Penang. Like her husband, she has dementia. As her condition progressed, Mary began to struggle with even housework, and she suddenly found herself unable to contribute in ways she once did. To her family, she was a burden; often reprimanded, corrected and yelled at for mistakes. She was eventually placed in a nursing home—in that foreign, clinical environment, Mary grew increasingly disoriented. Her condition spiralled downwards.

TIA

BY
CECILIA
CHAN

A DISEASE AN AGEING NATION CANNOT IGNORE

When I first met Mary, she was a portrait of anxiety—when she accidentally soiled herself, she panicked. I offered a calm, gentle hand and she soon relaxed, and we spent an hour chatting.

On paper, Mary failed her cognitive assessments. Categorised with early-advanced dementia, her language is affected and she struggles with complex tasks. Her world shrank as her friends and family began to pull away; people assumed that because she couldn't remember, there was no point in visiting. They didn't know how to handle her repetitive questions or her unconventional social behaviour.

Yet, when I looked into her eyes, I saw compassion, love and a profound yearning for human connection.

At my suggestion, Mary began attending a dementia-specific day care centre.

The transformation was immediate—she became relaxed, chatty and happy. She found joy in familiar rhythms: washing dishes, wiping them dry and joining us in the kitchen to prepare fresh produce. She now looks forward to every morning.

See, Mary isn't "cured", but she is thriving.

This story brings a clear message: We, as a community, can change the quality of life of those living with dementia by providing them with an environment that respects their agency and treats them as an equal.

In April 2025, former Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi passed away after living with dementia. That same week, the famous actor, Bruce Willis, reportedly lost his ability to speak due to frontotemporal dementia.

If it can happen to them, it can happen to us.

WHAT IS DEMENTIA, ACTUALLY?

Dementia is commonly and erroneously believed to be an inevitable part of natural ageing—often colloquially referred to as "*nyanyuk*". In reality, the syndrome is a complex neurological disorder, and differs from simple memory loss.

While the word "dementia" is often used to describe a single condition, it is actually an umbrella term for a wide range of neurodegenerative conditions that cause symptoms of cognitive decline—there are now more than 100 different types and causes of dementia which are recognised. Even as our understanding of the contributing factors evolves daily through new research, the prevalence of the condition continues to rise.

"Why should I care?", you may think.

Well, dementia does not discriminate—it does not care about your status, your wealth or your background. Crucially, dementia is not exclusive to the elderly; we are seeing an increasing number of diagnoses in individuals in their 40s, 50s and early 60s. This is known as young-onset dementia. While Alzheimer's is the most common form of dementia in older adults, frontotemporal dementia (FTD) is one of the most common diagnoses for those under 65. As of today, there remains no known cure, which makes it even more essential that we take it seriously.

As mentioned, Alzheimer's disease is the most common form of dementia, caused by the build-up of abnormal proteins in the brain. These proteins—amyloid plaques and tau tangles—damage and destroy brain cells, causing a gradual and progressive decline in memory, reasoning and language abilities.

The second-most prevalent type is vascular dementia, caused by reduced blood flow to the brain. It is typically the result of stroke or long-term damage to small blood vessels. Without sufficient oxygen and nutrients, brain cells become damaged or die. Vascular dementia commonly affects thinking speed, problem-solving and planning skills, and symptoms may worsen suddenly after a stroke or progress in a stepwise manner.

The accumulation of Lewy body protein deposits in the brain contribute to the third-most common type of dementia. These deposits disrupt normal brain function and affect both cognitive and motor systems. People with Lewy body dementia often experience fluctuating levels of alertness, visual hallucinations, movement difficulties similar to Parkinson's disease and sleep disturbances.

By 2040, over 80 million people will be living with dementia worldwide. Will we choose to see 80 million 'burdens', or seek to show empathy for 80 million vulnerable human beings?"

AN AGEING NATION

Malaysia became an ageing society five years ago. This means that more than 7% of our population is aged 65 and older. While that number sounds small, its implications are massive. It marks Malaysia's shift from a demographic dividend—where the working-age population is larger than the non-working-age population—to a country with a higher dependency ratio. This translates to a shrinking tax base, a strained healthcare system and a desperate need for a care economy that we are currently ill-equipped to provide.

What is more alarming is that Penang has one of the largest elderly populations in the country. Yet, many Penangites remain dismissive to the many issues that already abound—for example, there is a dire lack of resources, and the risk of abuse of patients is high because many caregivers are not trained in dementia care.

While the disease is biological, the tragedy is social. The stigma and exclusion Mary faces are more damaging than the cognitive decline itself. And in spite of her test scores, Mary still has much to teach us.

She has taught us how to grow and harvest sweet potato leaves, for example. She can spot a thirsty papaya tree by the dryness of its leaves, even if she can't recall the word "papaya". She may not remember my name, but she knows me. When I was ill and hospitalised, she noticed the adhesive bandage on my palm and showed genuine concern. She waits for everyone to have food before she eats.

By 2040, over 80 million people will be living with dementia worldwide. Will we choose to see 80 million "burdens", or seek to show empathy for 80 million vulnerable human beings?

With dementia rates rising globally and at home, society must adjust to the realities of an ageing population, which will inevitably include changes to the way we live. The question then becomes: How will we navigate these changes as family members, as neighbours, and as a society?"

DR. CECILIA CHAN
is an advocate who believes that the isolation of dementia can only be dismantled when we, as a community, commit to a shared journey of dignity and care.

CARING FOR THOSE WITH DEMENTIA

"But what can we do?" you may wonder. Perhaps my personal anecdote can help to inspire you. My team and I run an elderly daycare centre in Butterworth. Here, we operate a pop-up café called The Forgotten Mutiara Café, which is run entirely by individuals living with dementia and their care partners. It is a groundbreaking initiative in Penang. The "Mutiara"—pearl—in its name beautifully encapsulates our core message: to reclaim the inherent worth and potential of those with dementia.

This isn't your typical café. Here, our friends with dementia and their care partners work side-by-side, preparing delicious food and drinks, and even crafting thoughtful door gifts for their guests. This collaborative effort, supported by dedicated volunteers, is a powerful celebration of inclusion, dignity and community. It brings together diverse groups—individuals with dementia, volunteers, students and the public—to co-create a joyful and respectful environment.

The café directly challenges stereotypes surrounding dementia, and sparks crucial conversations about ageing and memory loss. It aims to prove that a diagnosis of dementia doesn't diminish a person's capacity to give and share. We strongly believe that a dementia-friendly community can support people with dementia to live in their communities in meaningful ways, and examples of this are increasingly evident in countries around the world.

In 2025, we also conducted Malaysia's first dementia retreat. The idea grew out of our frustration at seeing people living with dementia and their family members cope with daily challenges with limited resources and support. Many also have to navigate social and healthcare systems that can feel discouraging and unaccommodating. We hoped the retreat could help reduce stigma, offer family members a much-needed break, and give people living with dementia the opportunity to enjoy life beyond their homes or care facilities.

A retreat like this is not commonly done because of the assumption that patients with dementia get easily disoriented, anxious, agitated or aggressive when they are in unfamiliar environments. However, we chose to listen to our hearts; we know these people—they are our friends, family members and spouses.

As the retreat gradually became more than just a break, we started to feel a deeper sense of connection. By allowing ourselves to be more open—letting ourselves be playful, reconnect with our inner child, dance, and sing without worrying about how we looked—we found it easier to connect with one another. One of the most poignant moments for us was when we had to be with a couple (both living with dementia) whose daughter had a temporary work commitment. We were chatting with them in their rooms when they both offered us their beds to rest. The gesture was so genuine and pure we were deeply touched.

At the end of the retreat, when I asked participants about their experiences, the recurring theme that came up was connection. There was no separation between those who have dementia and those who don't. Some family members shared that for the first time in a long while, they were not reminded of the disorder at all.

These are part of our movement to promote dementia-friendly communities, in which people living with the condition are not excluded, but embraced. With dementia rates rising globally and at home, society must adjust to the realities of an ageing population, which will inevitably include changes to the way we live. The question then becomes: How will we navigate these changes as family members, as neighbours, and as a society?

Perhaps the more important question is what each of us can do at an individual level. Should we check in on a neighbour who may be lonely or living in isolation, even if she has a caregiver at home? Could we invite a fellow church member to attend services with us, helping them stay connected and included in the community? Beyond individuals, could we equip first responders—police, fire and ambulance services—with the skills to manage dementia-related crises? Could local *rukun tetangga* or Pusat Aktiviti Warga Emas (PAWE)—Senior Citizens Activity Centre—organise pop-up cafés staffed by individuals living with dementia to support them and their caregivers? Could corporations step up and support employees who are caregivers to parents with dementia? Could dementia care training be mandatory for all service providers so that rampant abuse in dementia care can finally be addressed?

Dementia calls to our shared humanity. It challenges the idea of the independent, endlessly productive individual and reminds us that we are, at our core, vulnerable and social beings. Yet, society often treats dementia as a source of shame. Changing that perception is not easy, but it is possible—and it starts with the way we speak and think about it. One truth I hold dear is that dementia is often less about forgetting and more about being forgotten.

By shifting our attitudes, we can create a community where dementia is met with understanding rather than stigma. Care should not rest solely on families or professionals—each of us has a role to play. Together, we can weave a network of support that preserves dignity, connection and humanity.

***Note:** Not her real name.*

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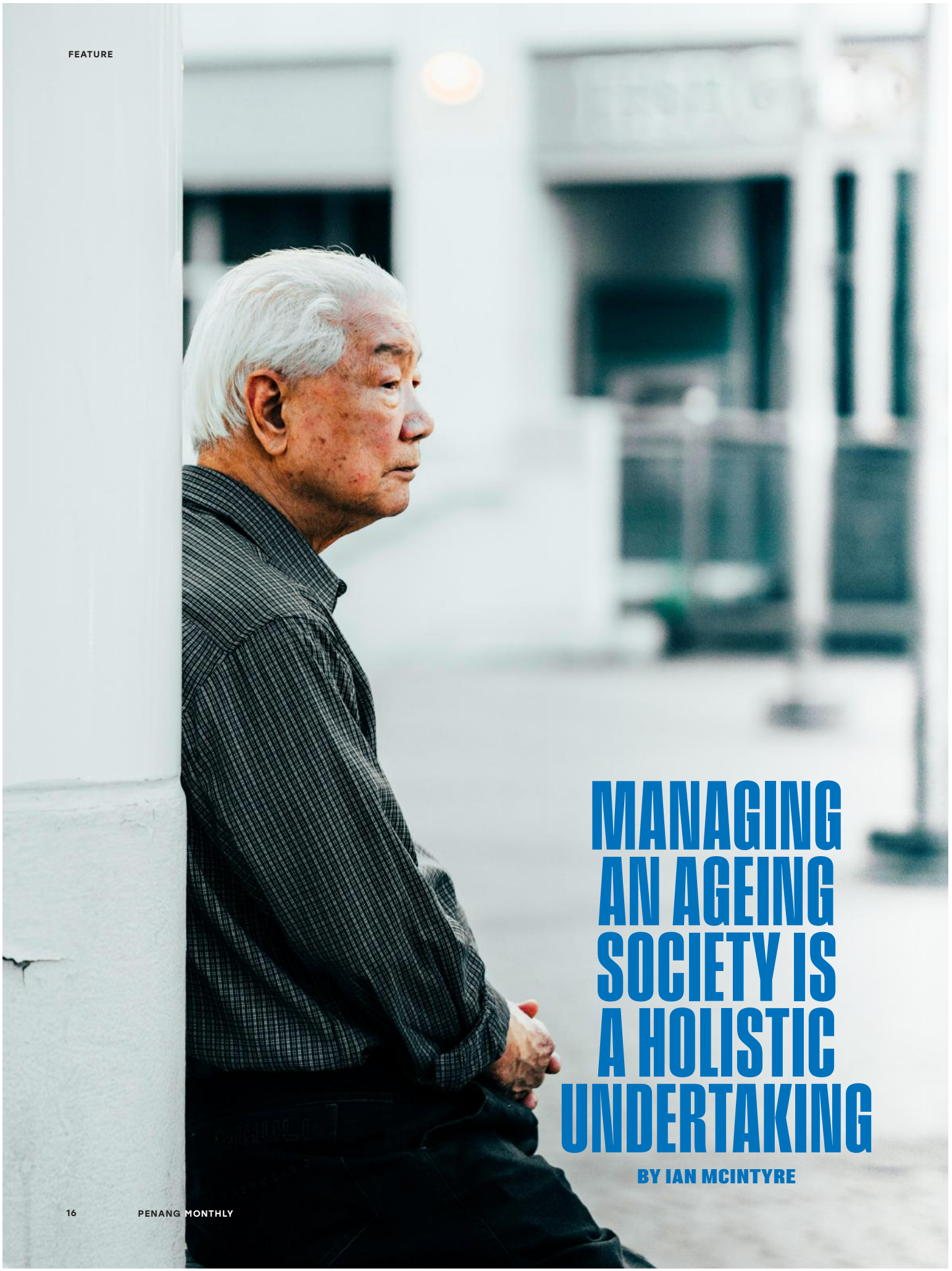

MANAGING AN AGEING SOCIETY IS A HOLISTIC UNDERTAKING

BY IAN MCINTYRE

AGE IS JUST a number—the cliché is often heard in Penang, where 10% of its estimated 1.9 million population are now aged 60 and above. These are retirees, nudged to the margins and encouraged to "enjoy" their golden years, which for many turn out to be more isolating than celebratory.

Even among those with financial security, ageing can be profoundly disorienting. It is the age at which society quietly forgets you. Many slip into depression, compounded by chronic illnesses and age-related psychological disorders. At the same time, seniors are being asked to adapt to a world evolving faster than ever: from the internet to the Internet of Things (IoT), artificial intelligence (AI) and social media—spaces where scammers are increasingly active and the elderly especially vulnerable.

Ask anybody with experience in dealing with ageing family members, and the response is often the same: a weary sigh, followed by a catalogue of challenges. These difficulties mirror how society at large treats the elderly—not as active citizens with agency, but as problems to be managed.

Terence Chow, who aids senior citizens with transport to places of interest and daily necessities, sees this reality play out in public spaces. "Go to any shopping mall and you'll often see the elderly strolling around or sitting in common areas," he said. "It's good that they're active, but it's also sad—there's nothing really occupying their time."

For Chow, policy responses tend to focus narrowly on meeting basic needs without sufficient attention to the people who support seniors day to day. He argues that caregivers and service providers should be better supported if the elderly are to enjoy meaningful lives.

For instance, he suggests tax or road levy incentives for vehicles used to ferry senior citizens. Any savings could go back into improving comfort. Mobility, he stressed, is one of the biggest barriers to ageing well. With worsening traffic congestion and limited parking spaces, many seniors are reluctant to go out. Even those who can still drive prefer not to.

If Chow highlighted the structural gaps, Lawrence Cheah Seong Paik embodies what active ageing can look like when seniors are empowered rather than sidelined. At 88, Cheah—a former chairperson of Rose Charities Malaysia—is widely regarded as one of Penang's most outspoken advocates for the retired.

Far from retreating from public life, Cheah remains socially engaged, often organising outings and dinners for widows and single mothers. At an event last year, his group even played host to younger delegates at the Commonwealth of World Chinatowns conference.

He is quick, however, to outline the challenges that intensify with age. One is social fragmentation—assistance is often divided along racial and religious lines. While some modern nursing and care facilities are inclusive, they remain the exception rather than the norm.

Another issue is distance—both physical and emotional. Many adult children in Penang are part of a globalised workforce, often working overseas or in high-pressure jobs that keep them away from home. Communication is reduced to video calls and occasional visits.

"It is hardly a humanised setting. What happens if the internet is down?" asked Cheah.

Compounding this is an acute shortage of quality nursing care for the old and having enough volunteers who are willing to spend time with seniors. "It is few and far between," stressed Cheah. In response, Cheah tries to empower seniors to look out after each other, organising digital learning lessons as well as singing, dancing, arts and colouring activities—initiatives designed to keep them mentally alert and socially connected.

Cheah has called for greater tax incentives for corporations and individuals to support elderly care. One proposal he floated is a co-funding model: If private donors contribute 80% and the government tops up the rest, seniors receive full support.

Medical perspectives echo the need to rethink ageing beyond mere survival. Gleneagles Hospital physician, Nidel Leong, argued that longevity must be matched with quality of life. Penang is projected to have the highest proportion of people aged 60 and above in Malaysia by 2040, crossing the benchmark of an ageing society and edging towards a population where more than a quarter are over 60.

While the Penang Island City Council (MBPP) has begun prioritising age-friendly services, Leong believes a deeper shift is needed. She framed the question simply: Are we just living longer, or living better?

"For too long, we've focused on lifespan—adding years to life," she said. "Now we must focus on healthspan: adding energy, function and vitality to those years." Health, she argued, underpins every human ambition, from personal fulfilment to economic productivity.

Leong advocates for integrative medicine, which combines conventional treatment with evidence-based complementary therapies, viewing patients holistically—mind, body and spirit. Though rooted in Asian traditions, this approach has been sidelined by healthcare systems designed to treat disease rather than prevent it.

"Conventional medical training is heavily influenced by pharmaceutical priorities, and often creates practitioners that specialise on a single organ. This overlooks the interconnectedness of the human body and lack a deep focus on preventative tools like nutrition and lifestyle," said Leong.

This limitation is especially evident in chronic disease management. Knee pain, often dismissed as inevitable ageing, is routinely treated with painkillers instead of addressing inflammation, degeneration and muscle weakness early. In heart disease, cholesterol remains the dominant metric, despite evidence that nearly half of heart attack patients have normal levels. Risks like insulin resistance, mitochondrial damage and oxidative stress are measurable decades earlier, yet rarely screened.

"Our mission should be to understand the person, not just the disease," Leong said. "Instead of asking what disease a person has, we should ask what kind of person has this disease."

The question of ageing also intersects with work. The official retirement age in the country is pegged at 60. With longer life expectancy and unsustainable pension funds, calls to raise it to 65 are growing. Recent data from early 2026 indicates that 64% to 71% of EPF active contributors aged 55 and below expect to continue working beyond the retirement age, with a substantial portion driven by financial necessity due to insufficient savings.

Cheah is all for the notion of working past the retirement age—provided safeguards are in place—as it keeps the mind active. Workplaces must be age-sensitive—installing mobility aids, encouraging intergenerational cooperation and keeping a watchful eye on older employees' wellbeing. Suitable roles might include administrative or front-facing positions, but even these are shrinking as AI automates routine tasks.

Property developers, such as MTT Properties and Development Sdn Bhd, have begun building integrated retirement villages, but affordability remains a major hurdle. Long-term solutions such as ageing insurance schemes that allow younger workers to save early for retirement housing is an option—though this raises a deeper question: are today's young earning enough to plan that far ahead?

In dealing with an ageing society, success should no longer be measured by how long its people live, but by how well they live.

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.

GROWING OLD IN A SYSTEM THAT ISN'T FORTHCOMING WITH SUPPORT

BY AADAH LEE AND SHERYL TEOH

SHE WAS NOT family, but it didn't make her death any easier.

The lady on the bed was Auntie Ong, a distant relative many times removed. Her room—where the walls may have been white at some point—smelled faintly of bleach and old age. The caretakers paid us no heed. They continued tending to her roommates like clockwork: by the hour, medication must be taken; at 10.15am, it is time for community games.

My mother described her as "classy" in her younger days, but her immediate family had cheated her out of her money and left the country. She was sustained by my uncle once-removed and a few other donors. Looking at her, it was hard to reconcile that description with the image of the old woman in front of me. Upon exiting the nursing home, my mother shuddered and made me promise to be her personal caregiver when she grows older. In that moment, I had smiled and nodded, but a deeper sense of unease lingered.

CAPTION
A community space in Penang Retirement Resorts. Here, residents can play mahjong, table tennis and socialise with each other.

DUTY MEETS REALITY

Filial piety is ingrained in Malaysian culture. It is not only an abstract moral value, but a force that shapes real decisions. Even within my own family, I have witnessed important life decisions that had been made out of filial piety: my mother chose to move back to Malaysia in 2018 to care for my ailing grandmother despite the two not getting along.

As Malaysia ages, this sense of obligation increasingly collides with economic reality. The proportion of working-age Malaysians is shrinking, while caregiving needs are growing more complex and long-term. For many adult children, the question is no longer whether children want to care for their parents, but whether they realistically can.

Caregiving is labour-intensive, emotionally draining and often invisible. Families who turn to retirement or assisted-living homes are frequently portrayed as negligent or ungrateful. That stigma is reinforced by policy rhetoric. In 2023, the Malaysian government discussed potential penalties related to placing elderly relatives into care homes for "irresponsible" children.

While the intent to safeguard seniors' wellbeing is commendable, there is currently no fully developed, comprehensive policy in Malaysia that explicitly supports caregivers with dedicated income replacement, structured benefits or long-term care financing at a national level, leaving many feeling stuck in place. Responsibility is moralised, but support is minimal.

The burden also falls unevenly. A survey by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) reveals that caregiving responsibilities are disproportionately shouldered by women. This helps explain why Malaysia continues to have one of the lowest female labour force participation rates in the region—only 55.8% in 2022. Care, in practice, comes at the cost of women's financial independence.

RETHINKING CARE HOMES

From another angle, filial piety does not necessarily contradict institutional care.

"Our customers pay for our services because they believe professional institutions like ours can take care of their parents better than they can," Dylan, from Hope Assisted Living Care Centre, explains. "Some of them work overseas. They can't bring their parents with them, so this is the best option."

He walks me through the facility, pointing out the wide windows in the residents' units. "Old shophouses usually don't have these. We made sure everyone here has access to sunlight and fresh air. It's good for mental health." He gestures toward one room. "There's a gentleman who drinks tea by his window every day. He says it reminds him of home."

Care homes, at their best, offer social interaction, routine and professional supervision—things that isolated seniors living alone often lack. Loneliness, after all, can be as damaging as physical illness.

CARE BEYOND THE FAMILY HOME

"Personal caregivers usually care for one elderly individual," JJ, a staff member of Penang Retirement Resorts, says. "Here, we care for many seniors at once, each with unique needs, expectations and health conditions. Maintaining consistent quality of care requires proper staffing and coordination."

Dylan adds that conflict often arises between what residents want and what their health requires. "They are old, and most don't put a lot of thought into their health. For instance, someone who needs a tube feeder might demand for Char Koay Teow. Obviously, we want our parents to be happy, but caregivers have to prioritise certain needs above others, and that can create conflict."

Still, flexibility exists. "We have a resident who likes eating five coffee sweets a day. We checked with her doctor and she is not diabetic, so her son is happy to let her continue this habit, even though it may be unhealthy," he laughs.

Care homes themselves operate under strain. Licensing processes are slow and costly, and government financial support is minimal. "If we are renting the space, we have to fork out a lot of money first before we can even run." Those expenses are inevitably passed on to residents and their families.

"In countries like Japan, the government funds most of their nursing homes. So why can't we do it here?"

LIVING TOGETHER, APART

Some families are experimenting with informal alternatives. In Ipoh, I came across a townhouse designed as two self-contained units—one above the other. Such an arrangement might make it easier for adult children to have more autonomy, while still remaining close enough to elderly parents to respond in emergencies and preserve familial bonds. As the property developer told us, "a lot of families would live with their parents on the ground floor, and themselves on the second."

Yet, this arrangement has limits. As health deteriorates, supervision often needs to become medical rather than familial. "Families would still need to hire a private caregiver or place them in a facility with medical support," JJ says. "The top priority is ensuring the elderly person's overall well-being."

But well-being is not a single, measurable outcome. Emotional and physical well-being do not always align—particularly as bodies decline and independence narrows.

"We can't always find the perfect balance, but what matters most is listening to what the elderly want," Dylan tells me.

In our focus on fulfilling our duties as loved ones, it is easy to lose sight of what should matter most—their happiness. Dylan recounts when a son chose to take his father off life support. "He was very unhappy in the hospital. The doctors wanted to keep him on his meds and continue dialysis, but he was suffering. Eventually, his son decided that it would be better to take him home and have him die peacefully surrounded by friends and family."

AN UNANSWERED QUESTION

Filial piety is often framed as sacrifice. But sacrifice without support becomes unsustainable.

We worry about our parents. We worry about money. We worry about making the "right" choice in a system that offers few good ones. Until caregiving is recognised not just as a moral obligation, but as a shared social responsibility, families will continue to navigate these dilemmas alone—guided by guilt rather than support.

Clear communication helps. Planning helps. Health helps. But these are individual solutions to a structural problem.

The real question is not whether Malaysians care enough about their parents. It is whether the country cares enough to build systems that make that care possible.

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AADAH LEE is currently an intern at Penang Institute. When not writing articles, she is constantly talking about biology and aims to be a researcher in the biomedical field, much to everyone's chagrin.

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.

AN AGEING PENANG

WHAT THE NUMBERS SHOW

BY HAJAR ARIFF

AS PEOPLE LIVE longer and families grow smaller, the state's age profile is changing. Penang now has a larger share of older residents compared to other Malaysian states. Understanding these numbers is the first step toward preparing our communities, services and cities for an ageing society.

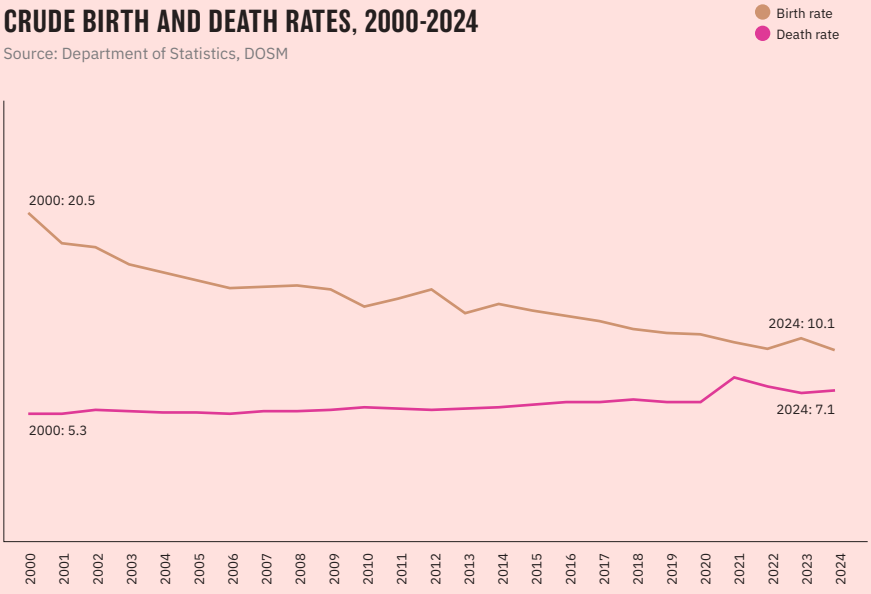
HAJAR ARIFF graduated from Universiti Tun Hussein Onn Malaysia (UTHM) with a Bachelor of Science (Hons) in Industrial Statistics. She is an introvert who lends her time to activism whenever the need calls.

WHY IS PENANG AGEING?

Penang's crude birth rate has fallen from about **20.5 births per 1,000 people** in 2000 to just **10.1** in 2024. At the same time, **crude death rate** has edged **upward** as the share of older adults increases. While births still outnumber deaths, the gap is narrowing. This long-term shift explains why **population growth is slowing,** and marks Penang's steady transition into **an ageing society.**

CRUDE BIRTH AND DEATH RATES, 2000-2024

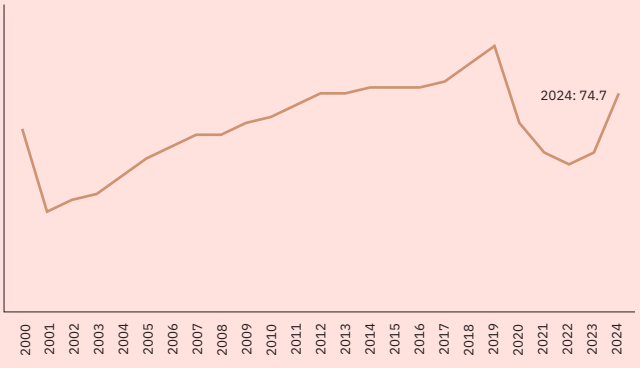
Source: Department of Statistics, DOSM



This demographic change is driven by **smaller family sizes** and **longer lives.** Penang's **total fertility rate** has **declined steadily** over the past two decades, falling well below the replacement level, meaning each new generation is smaller than the one before it. At the same time, **life expectancy** at birth has **increased,** reflecting **longer lives** than in the past, despite a temporary setback during the pandemic years.

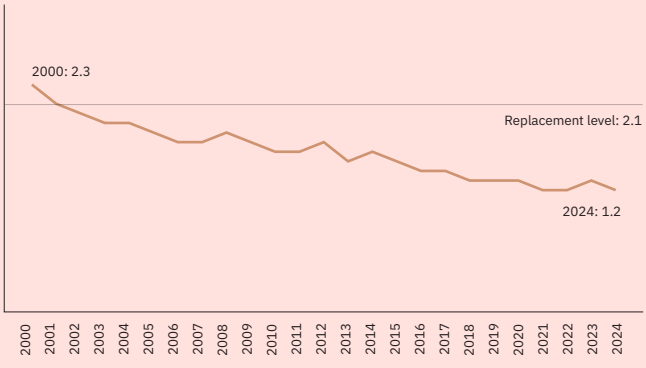
PENANG'S LIFE EXPECTANCY AT BIRTH, 2000-2024

Source: Department of Statistics, DOSM



PENANG'S TOTAL FERTILITY RATE, 2000-2024

Source: Department of Statistics, DOSM

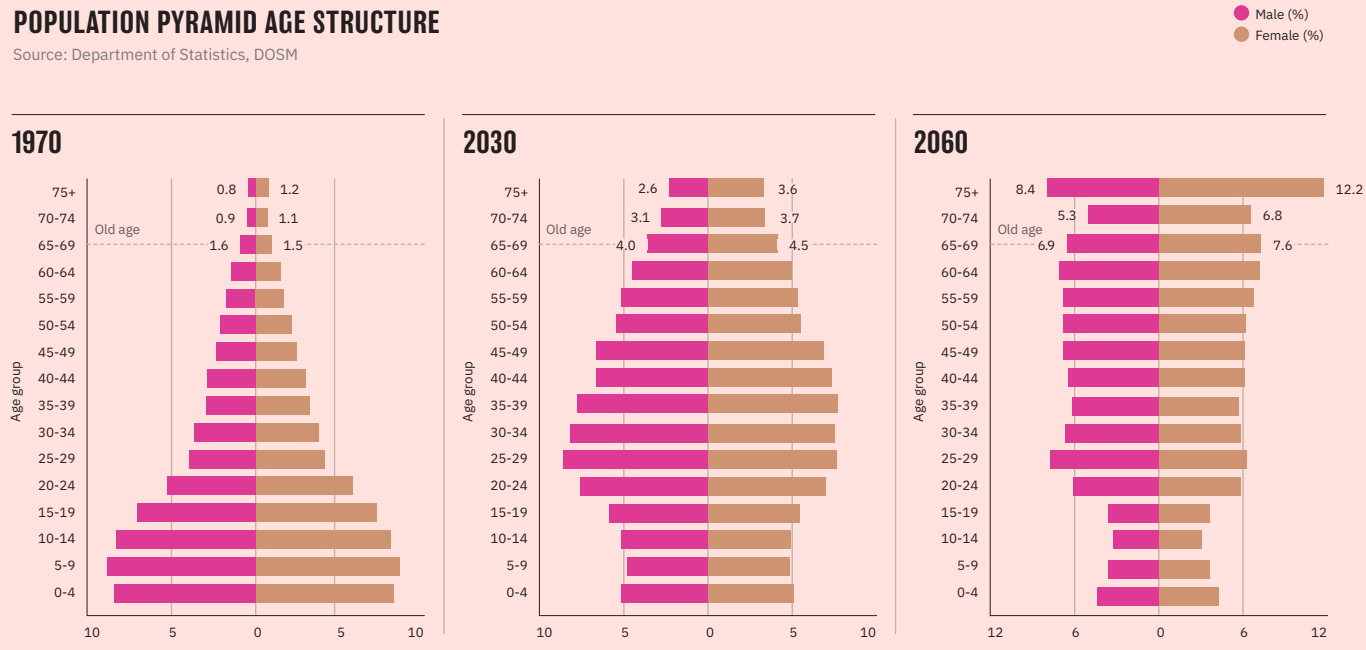


WHO ARE THE OLDER PENANGITES?

In **1970,** Penang's population was **youthful.** By **2030,** the age structure will become **heavier in the middle,** reflecting **smaller families** and **longer life spans.** In **2060,** the population is projected to be **top-heavy,** with a **much larger share** of **residents aged 65 and above;** this is especially true among women, who tend to live longer than men.

POPULATION PYRAMID AGE STRUCTURE

Source: Department of Statistics, DOSM

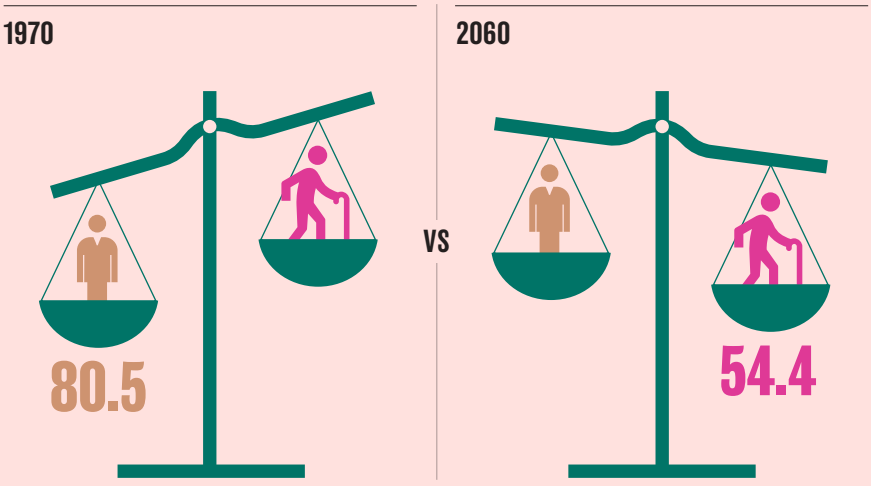


Penang's **high dependency ratio** of **80.5** in 1970 was driven mostly by **younger age groups.** By 2030, it will drop to **37.4,** but by 2060 it rises again to **54.4**—this time, largely due to **older adults.** This shift shows how the focus of social and economic support is moving from young families toward the older population.

TOTAL DEPENDENCY RATIO*, 1970-2060

Source: Department of Statistics, DOSM

*Note: Total dependency ratio is the ratio of dependents for every 100 persons in the working age population (15-64 years).



MEDIAN AGE, 1970-2060

Source: Department of Statistics, DOSM

1970	2030	2060
18.9	35.9	46.2

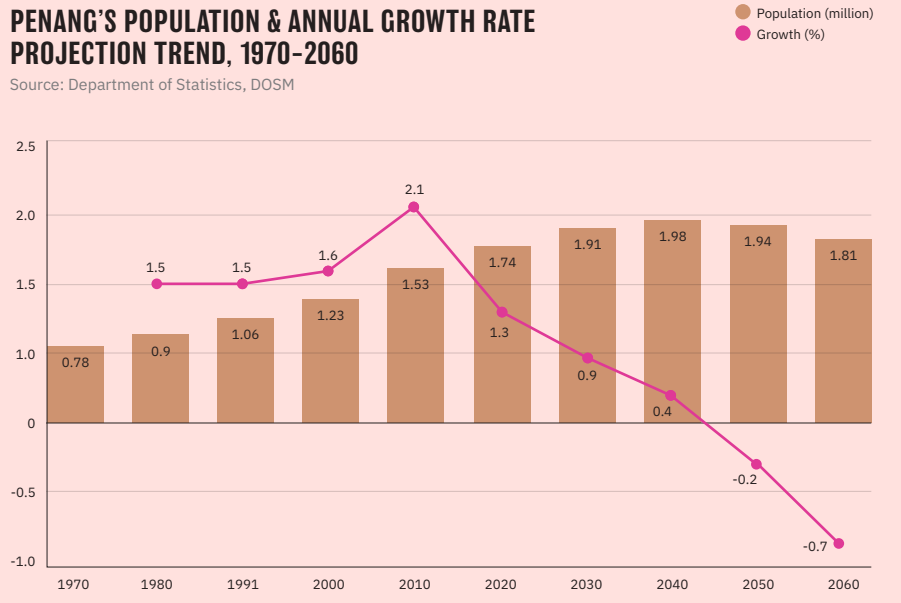
The **median age** in Penang has **risen** from **18.9** in the **1970s** to an expected **35.9 by 2030** and **46.2 by 2060.** This means the **"typical" Penangite** will be **much older than before,** signalling a major shift in community needs from education and childcare to **healthcare and age-friendly services.**

HOW FAST IS AGEING HAPPENING IN PENANG?

Penang's **population growth** has **slowed sharply,** falling from around **2.1%** in 2010 to about **1.3%** in 2020, and is projected to turn **negative** after 2040. The state's population is expected to **peak at** about **1.98 million** around 2040 **before gradually declining.** Although the total population will continue to grow in the short term, **fewer births** combined with **longer life expectancy** will **increase the number of older residents.** This creates strong ageing momentum, making Penang an ageing society well before its population actually begins to shrink.

PENANG'S POPULATION & ANNUAL GROWTH RATE PROJECTION TREND, 1970-2060

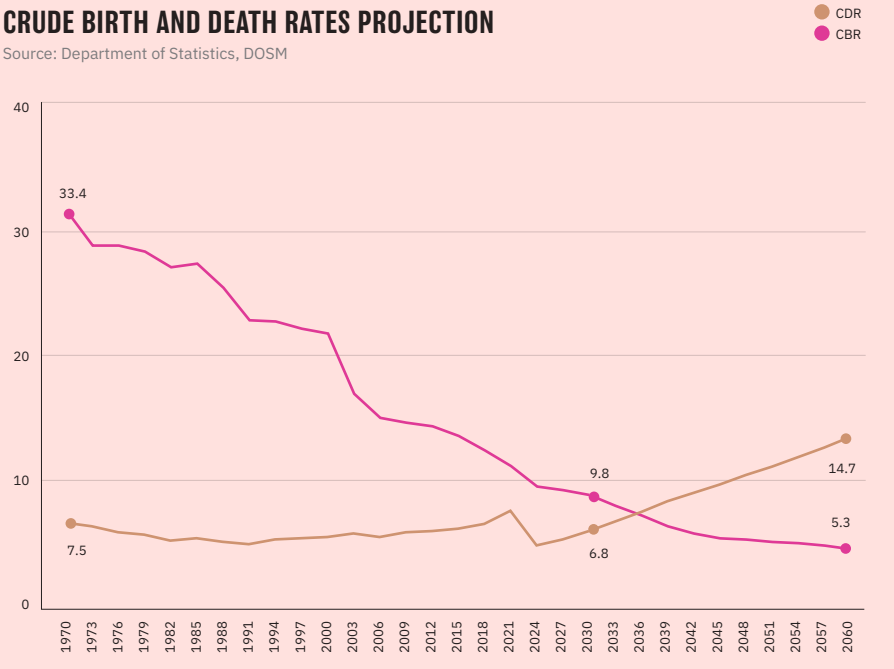
Source: Department of Statistics, DOSM



Behind this slowdown is a clear demographic transition, where **births are falling faster than deaths. Crude birth rates** are projected to **decline** from about 33.4 per 1,000 people in 1970 to just over 5.3 by 2060, while **death rates rise steadily** as the population ages, reaching nearly **15 per 1,000.** By the early 2030s, **deaths are expected to overtake births,** marking a shift from natural population increase to natural decline, and accelerating the pace of population ageing.

CRUDE BIRTH AND DEATH RATES PROJECTION

Source: Department of Statistics, DOSM



TOTAL FERTILITY RATE & LIFE EXPECTANCY LONG-TERM TREND

Source: Department of Statistics, DOSM

Note: M-Male, F-Female,
Total fertility rate-1980
Life expectancy-1991

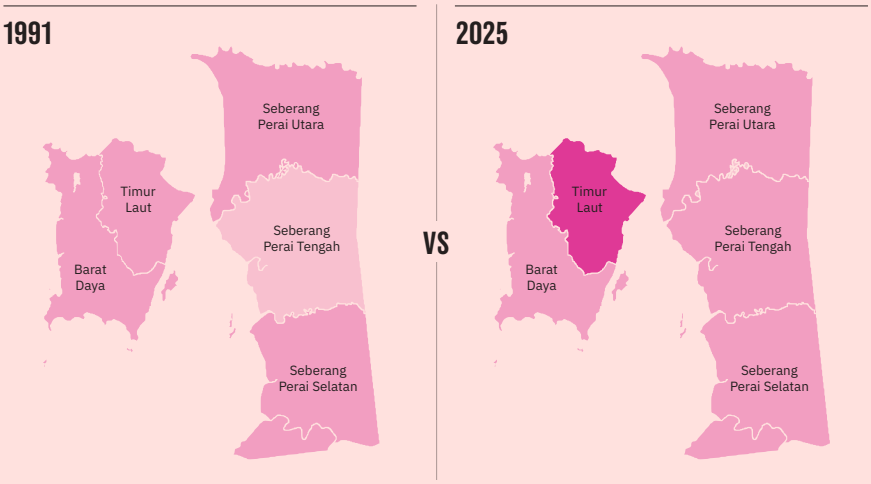
	1980/1991	2030	2060
Total fertility rate	2.9	1.2	1.0
Life expectancy (M)	68.6	73.2	76.7
Life expectancy (F)	73.6	77.9	81.0

The speed of ageing is reinforced by **long-term changes** in **fertility and longevity.** Fertility is projected to **fall from nearly three children per woman** in 1980 to about **one by 2060,** well below replacement level. At the same time, life expectancy continues to rise with **men expected to live** almost **eight years longer,** and **women more than seven years longer** than in the early 1990s.

The shift toward an **older population** is now visible across Penang's districts. In 1991, most areas had at least **7%** of elderly residents, except for Seberang Perai Tengah. By 2025, Seberang Perai Tengah has also moved up at least one category and **Timur Laut** has joined the 15% & above category, making it **an "aged" district.**

AGEING BY DISTRICT IN PENANG: 1991 VS. 2025

Source: Department of Statistics, DOSM



WHAT IS PENANG DOING NOW?

Other efforts include the **Age-Friendly City Action Plan** and the integration of a dedicated **Age-Friendly City (AFC)** icon into the PEARL mobile app. This ensures that information regarding senior services is easily reachable, while the **#DahDigital initiative** helps seniors stay mobile, connected and socially engaged. Complementing these is the **i-Sejahtera programme,** which provides consistent annual support to older and vulnerable groups.

Source: Penang Island City Council (MBPP) Age-Friendly Portal, Digital Penang and i-Sejahtera portal

1

AGE-FRIENDLY CITY PENANG ISLAND STRATEGIC ACTION PLAN

The primary goal is to create an environment where older adults can age gracefully while remaining physically and socially active by focusing on 8 key areas: Outdoor Spaces & Buildings, Transportation, Housing, Social Participation, Respect & Social Inclusion, Civic Engagement & Employment, Communication & Information and Health Service.

2

DIGITAL INCLUSION #DAHDIGITAL

Digital Penang has conducted 135 free basic technology classes since 2020 as part of the state's effort to drive digital adoption among the community.

Digital Clinic classes help seniors and adults build digital skills and confidence to access online information and services.

3

FINANCIAL APPRECIATION I-SEJAHTERA

i-Sejahtera programme is an annual financial contribution by the state government as a gesture of appreciation and care for senior citizens, persons with disabilities, single mothers, housewives and infants.

Launched in 2010, the i-Sejahtera programme continues to support Penang's seniors and is set to run through 2026.

WHAT'S NEXT FOR PENANG'S AGEING SOCIETY?

Looking ahead, new initiatives under the **Digital Economy Master Plan** aim to equip older adults with age-friendly digital skills, while Seberang Perai's entry into the **World Health Organisation (WHO) Age-Friendly Cities Network** and the pilot **Retirement-Oriented Development** project signal a move toward more inclusive neighbourhoods and purpose-built communities for older residents.

Source: TheStar, WHO Age-Friendly World - Seberang Perai and KWAP (Retirement Fund Inc) Media Centre

1

PENANG'S DIGITAL ECONOMY MASTER PLAN (DEMP) 2025-2030

A five-year roadmap to empower the ageing workforce by equipping seniors with age-friendly digital tools and skills.

2

AGE-FRIENDLY CITY (AFC) SEBERANG PERAI

Seberang Perai City Council (MBSP) officially joined the WHO Global Network for Age-Friendly Cities in 2025, with a 3-to-5-year plan to make the mainland equally accessible for seniors.

3

RETIREMENT-ORIENTED DEVELOPMENT (ROD) PILOT PROJECT

The project is a collaborative effort between KWAP (Kumpulan Wang Persaraan (Diperbadankan)), the Penang Islamic Religious Council (MAINPP), and KWEST Sdn Bhd (KWAP's property arm), prioritising retirees (especially pensioners) with programmes to enhance learning and social involvement.

BABY BOOMERS

BY
ENGEL CHEOH

AGES FORWARD THROUGH PURPOSE AND COMMUNITY

AGEING IS OFTEN discussed in terms of inevitability rather than possibility. For younger people, it exists somewhere in the abstract future; for older adults, it is frequently accompanied by expectations of withdrawal from work, from visibility and sometimes from public life altogether. Yet, as life expectancy rises and health outcomes improve, such assumptions are increasingly being reconsidered. Later life is no longer simply about slowing down; for some, it has become a stage for continued participation.

Baby Goh—founder of Baby Goh Cleaners, Bumiteras Resources and Cleanions—belongs to a generation quietly reshaping what it means to grow older. Rather than receding from professional and social spaces, she has remained actively engaged in business, community initiatives and personal pursuits, showing that ageing may be less about retreat than about recalibration.

Born Goh Baby @ Goh Lay Dee on 27 January 1955 in Simpang Ampat, Seberang Perai, she grew up in a modest double-storey corner shop lot within a large household of eight siblings. Her professional name, "Baby", originated from a spelling error, but it endured, eventually becoming inseparable from her public identity. Childhood was structured around shared responsibilities within the family—tending to animals, harvesting coconuts and contributing to household routines. These experiences fostered early self-reliance and cooperation.

A central influence during these formative years was her mother, who balanced domestic duties with farm work and coconut harvesting, while ensuring that all her children received an education. From this example emerged a working philosophy grounded in discipline, endurance and accountability.

Education provided both mobility and perspective. Baby Goh was the only sibling to attend Convent Bukit Mertajam for primary and secondary school—a routine that required predawn mornings, lengthy travel and the balancing of academic and domestic obligations. Her continued involvement with the school, including serving on its Board of Governors and later as Alumni President, reflects an enduring commitment to institutional continuity and community ties.

Her entry into the workforce began at age 18 as an Operations Trainer at National Semiconductor in Bayan Lepas, where she developed organisational and managerial competencies that would later underpin her entrepreneurial transition. After a stint in foreign maids recruitment services, she established her own cleaning company, expanding into residential and industrial sectors at a time when professionalised cleaning services were still an evolving business locally.

As the business matured, Goh's hiring strategy took on a distinct social dimension. Through Bumiteras Resources, she prioritised local employment, particularly among single mothers and individuals from the B40 income group, introducing flexible work arrangements that acknowledged caregiving responsibilities alongside economic necessity. In doing so, the enterprise functioned not merely as a commercial operation, but as a modest mechanism of social support. Later, Goh took this further in a collaboration with the Penang Prison Department's rehabilitation programme, through which female inmates on parole are employed as cleaners until the completion of their sentences.

"Underlying these commitments is a guiding principle she often articulates: 'Give and share all you can before you leave.'"

ENGEL CHEOH is a Penang-based media entrepreneur and strategic brand consultant known for connecting luxury, lifestyle and culture across Southeast Asia.

Such efforts reflect a pragmatic approach to reintegration—one that recognises dignity and economic participation as important components of second chances.

The launch of Cleanions and its accompanying app in 2019 marked another adaptive step, integrating services ranging from cleaning and sanitisation to caregiving and gardening into a one-stop digital platform. The move proved particularly significant during the Covid-19 pandemic, underscoring the role of adaptability not only in business longevity, but also in individual relevance.

Her activities outside business similarly resist conventional narratives of ageing. In 2025, she co-initiated Glammas, a community-driven movement advocating active ageing and visibility among women aged 60 and above through fashion presentations, dance performances and fundraising efforts supporting organisations such as Rose Charities Malaysia, D'Home Mental Health Association and Penang Pink Ladies. The initiative subtly challenges our cultural tendency to render older women socially peripheral.

A multidimensional woman, Goh also represented the World Sport Stacking Association Penang (WSSA Penang) and emerged as the 2025 Senior 1 Champion for the 65–74 age category, setting the Malaysian record for the division.

Underlying these commitments is a guiding principle she often articulates: "Give and share all you can before you leave." Over the years, she donated blood 45 times until medical advice required her to stop at age 64, after which she registered as an organ donor. The gesture reflects a consistent ethic of contribution that extends beyond professional life.

Active ageing, in this sense, is not about defying time, but about remaining in conversation with it—staying socially connected, physically engaged and open to reinvention. Whether through line dancing, travel, community work or entrepreneurship, Baby Goh's trajectory illustrates how later life can function less as an epilogue and more as an evolving chapter.

If ageing is ultimately a collective experience, then examples such as hers invite a broader reconsideration of how societies understand productivity, relevance and participation. Growing older, it would seem, need not require stepping aside; it may instead offer an opportunity to step forward differently.

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GOT A STORY TO TELL?

WRITE TO US AT
editor@penangmonthly.com

WE NEED TO CARE FOR THE CARERS

BY NISHA KUMARAVEL

HEALTHCARE PROVIDERS ARE often seen as pillars of strength, calm under pressure and endlessly compassionate. Yet, behind the white coats and reassuring words, many struggle silently with their own mental wellbeing. They carry the emotional pain of others; this makes them vulnerable to burnout, compassion fatigue, vicarious trauma and moral distress. These are all predictable consequences of systems that place immense demands on those tasked to care for others, but offer limited support to these carers.

Unless you work in healthcare, it is difficult to grasp the daily intensity of the job. Mental health professionals, in particular, are constantly navigating the need to be fully present for others while maintaining their own emotional stability. Their labour is often under-recognised, undervalued and insufficiently supported.

THE EMOTIONAL LABOUR OF MENTAL HEALTH WORK

For psychologists, counsellors, social workers and other mental health professionals, the emotional burden of care is intense. Constant exposure to clients' trauma narratives and severe distress can result in vicarious trauma, compassion fatigue and burnout. Quantitative data on mental health professionals in Malaysia are limited, but research from Singapore shows that practitioners experience high levels of stress and burnout linked to job demands, age and years of service.

When providers are exhausted or traumatised, their judgement can be impaired, emotional connection diminished and quality of care compromised. Focusing on the wellbeing of carers is not a luxury or merely a personal responsibility. It is essential for mental health services to be safe, effective and sustainable.

A cross-sectional study of primary-care providers in Selangor found personal burnout rates exceeding 40%, with younger providers, doctors, and those experiencing high stress and poor sleep being the most affected. Another study from a Malaysian public hospital reported that around 55% of healthcare professionals experienced moderate burnout. In many cases, healthcare workers continue providing care under unsafe conditions, often without adequate rest or psychological support.

BARRIERS TO SEEKING HELP

Stigma around mental health remains a significant barrier in many societies, including Malaysia. While public discourse on this has become more positive, remnants of stigma persist in medical culture. Healthcare professionals may fear being seen as weak or incompetent if they admit to needing support.

Mental health challenges among doctors and nurses are frequently minimised or overlooked, even within professional settings, making early intervention less likely. Malaysia's public health initiatives, including forums and Ministry of Health (MOH) programmes, acknowledge this problem, but also highlight how much work remains before providers can be supported effectively.

Access to specialised care is uneven. Psychologists and counsellors are scarce in some regions, meaning timely support is not always available. Structural issues also affect retention. Limited career pathways and low job prospects for mental health specialists have led some trained professionals to migrate to countries offering better working conditions and pay. This creates a paradox: while the population needs more mental health care, the system struggles to recruit and retain those capable of providing it.

VICARIOUS TRAUMA BEYOND THE THERAPY ROOM

Vicarious trauma occurs when helpers experience changes in their inner life as a result of empathic engagement with trauma survivors. Unlike burnout, which is often linked to workload and organisational factors, vicarious trauma can affect belief systems, sense of safety and worldview.

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Mental health providers may develop intrusive thoughts, heightened emotional reactions and altered perceptions of relationships and the world. These effects are not limited to counsellors and psychologists. Medical doctors, nurses and allied health professionals are also vulnerable, particularly when working with complex trauma, abuse or disaster-related cases. Left unaddressed, vicarious trauma can contribute to decreased empathy, increased cynicism and impaired professional performance.

CASE EXAMPLE 1: A CLINICAL SUPERVISEE EXPERIENCING BURNOUT

A junior counsellor working in crisis support reported fatigue, irritability and emotional numbness during supervision. Over several months, they had supported multiple high-risk callers involving suicidal ideation and family violence, often during overnight shifts. Although protocols were followed and outcomes were clinically appropriate, the counsellor felt constantly on edge, struggled to sleep and questioned their competence.

It emerged that they felt unable to take leave due to staff shortages and feared being perceived as incapable if they disclosed distress. Their burnout resulted from sustained exposure without adequate recovery or organisational support. This case highlights how workplace conditions and cultural expectations intersect to produce cumulative emotional strain.

CASE EXAMPLE 2: A DOCTOR EXPERIENCING VICARIOUS TRAUMA

A medical doctor providing ongoing care to survivors of domestic violence and sexual assault began noticing emotional withdrawal and cynicism. Although not working as a therapist, the doctor frequently listened to traumatic histories and managed the medical consequences. Over time, they reported feeling hopeless about recovery, emotionally disconnected from patients and hyper-vigilant in their personal life.

Despite being recognised as a respected clinician, the doctor delayed seeking support, believing that emotional impact was simply part of the job. It was only after experiencing symptoms consistent with vicarious trauma that they sought psychological help. This example underscores how vicarious trauma can affect a broad range of healthcare workers and why early intervention is critical.

CASE EXAMPLE 3: A CRISIS INTERVENTION SPECIALIST IN DISASTER RELIEF

A mental health professional specialising in crisis intervention was deployed to assist communities affected by severe flooding in East Malaysia. Her role involved providing psychological first aid, counselling trauma survivors and coordinating with local aid organisations. She worked long, physically demanding hours in unsafe conditions, often in areas with limited access to food, water and electricity. While supporting others through acute distress, she was simultaneously grappling with her own material losses, including damage to her home and belongings, as well as concern for her family's safety. This led to intrusive thoughts, nightmares, hypervigilance and persistent feelings of guilt for even momentarily prioritising her own needs.

Despite her expertise in crisis care, she felt pressure to remain composed and a source of stability for survivors, which made seeking support for herself feel almost impossible. Only through peer supervision and structured debriefing sessions was she able to process her trauma and begin regaining emotional balance. This case highlights that without support, the combined personal and professional stress of disasters quickly leads to burnout for mental health staff.

TOWARDS A CULTURE OF CARE FOR PROVIDERS

Addressing the wellbeing of healthcare providers requires interventions at multiple levels. Solutions go beyond teaching individual coping strategies and must include systemic, organisational, cultural and educational changes.

Organisational change: Health institutions should prioritise psychological safety, ensure adequate staffing and support work-life balance. A confidential access to mental health support, flexible work schedules, stress management programmes, employee assistance programmes and structured peer support networks are crucial.

Policy and national strategies: Integrate provider wellbeing into workforce planning. This includes investing in mental health services, expanding career pathways for counsellors and psychologists, and ensuring equitable access across regions.

Cultural shifts: Normalising help-seeking behaviour, promoting open dialogue about mental health, and training leaders to recognise and respond to signs of distress are essential steps.

Education and resilience building: Training providers in resilience, self-care and early recognition of burnout symptoms, alongside supportive supervision, can strengthen coping skills and improve long-term retention in the profession.

A sustainable health system relies on proactive support for healthcare workers' mental health. This requires reshaping workplace cultures, expanding access to care, and recognising that caring for the carers is not a luxury, but a crucial investment in the health of communities.

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THE FREEDOM AND PRECARITY OF THE NOMADIC: ON CARVING OUT SITES FOR THE EPHEMERAL AND THE INVISIBLE

BY VANINI BELARMINO

A reflection on curating performance-based practice.

HOW CAN ONE curate anything in the absence of an institution? Without a building, staff or funding—without a space to hold what is often already fleeting—what can an independent curator do?

When I left the structure that once defined my daily work, I found myself living by the sea. In moving homes, shifting routines and embracing a structure-free life, the beach became my open studio. As I walked along the shore, observing tourists, children and horses treading the long stretch of sand, I began to wonder how one might continue to curate without the safety of infrastructure and other people. The sensation of grit between my toes reminded me that grounding could come from movement itself.

After years of orchestrating large-scale participatory and immersive projects within a museum, I had grown accustomed to the noise of production: the endless calls, negotiations, approvals and the cycle of conceiving, managing and installing. Then, suddenly, there was nothing of it, only questions and a silence that produced a different kind of sound: a hum of possibilities.

In that silence, new ideas emerged. I realised that the work could start precisely from this absence, from a place where structure is not provided, but created.

Performance offered that opening. In conversations with artists whose practices dwell in gesture and presence—those who can transform the ordinary through movement, breath or gaze—I began to reimagine the curator's role.

These artists, through their own precarity, embodied a way of making visible what resists permanence. Their capacity to activate space through the body suggested a way forward—curating as an act of attention, of framing the ephemeral without freezing it.

This impulse became the seed of *In Situ, Performance as Exhibition*. It was not conceived in an office or an institution, but rather during walks, conversations and moments of uncertainty. The first iteration took root in Singapore through collaboration with LASALLE College of the Arts, University of the Arts Singapore. Later, it found its grounding in the Philippines with the Cultural Centre of the Philippines as an organising partner. Finally, in its concluding phase, it was held in Malaysia towards the end of 2025, in collaboration with the George Town Literary Festival (GTLF) and Penang Art District (PAD).

The project unfolded like a series of crossings—between places and artistic and cultural sensibilities. It became a way of working that was nomadic, not only in geography, but also in thought: echoing my own curatorial practice, intertwined with my personal reality.

In Singapore, the monumental architecture of the University of the Arts shaped the conditions of presentation. The works of the Danish artists, Lilibeth Cuenca Rasmussen, Molly Haslund and Sophie Dupont, engaged with the reflective surfaces of the built environment and its institutional framework.

The Philippines demanded a different kind of listening. There, *In Situ* spanned over 700km, from the mountainous terrains of Mount Makiling to the shorelines of La Union and the dense urban zones of Manila. The heat, the humidity, the unpredictable weather—each became part of the choreography.

In Situ reached Malaysia in November of last year, finding itself in yet another state of becoming—less a repetition, more an act of reimagining what an institution could be. Penang's colonial façades, clan association temples (*kongsi*) and a repurposed transport hub offered a textured map of possibility. I collaborated with artists and partners to transform cultural and public spaces into vibrant stages.

This Penang edition introduced a hybrid model, merging the ephemerality of live performance with the persistence of exhibition-making. Working again with Molly Haslund, the only artist present in all three editions, we explored once more how meaning shifts when a performance travels across time and space. Her work, *Teenagers Eating Ice Cream Cones,* was staged at Hin Bus Depot, offering its own atmosphere, audience and temporal rhythm.

Christian Falsnaes's *Front*, presented at Cheah Kongsi for the final act of the GTLF, was part of a series of works in which the artist explores the creation of artworks as a collective rather than an individual process. At this site, he allowed the audience to become part of the work; the resulting piece related directly to their situation instead of to his as an artist. The work began with a blank white wall—a metaphorical starting point representing existing structures that can be dismantled to make space for something new. The artist guided participants to engage with the structure in their own way, yet ultimately towards a shared objective.

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Without their active collaboration, the work could not have existed.

Hesselholdt & Mejlvang, whose practice centres on participation, activated audiences through textiles. People contributed personal fabrics at a COEX workshop, each carrying its own memories and stories. These textiles were transformed into large-scale banners for a participatory performance at Hin Bus Depot and an exhibition at ChinaHouse. Through movement, music and collective action, the work celebrated diversity, communal identity and the creative energy that emerges when people come together to co-create.

Across these sites in Penang, the artists' work activated audiences as co-creators, revealing the city itself as a stage. By situating performances within the rhythms of daily life, the Malaysian edition of *In Situ* blurred the distinctions between art, community and site. Culture here was not held within walls, but carried through encounters—improvised, porous and communal. Each site became a living stage where meaning was co-authored and ephemeral, emerging in the shared presence of artist, audience and space.

When combined with exhibition elements, these gestures allowed performances to linger, existing both in the moment and as traces within a broader archive. This hybrid approach affirms *In Situ*'s underlying principle—what disappears can still leave resonance, and the invisible can pulse with presence.

What happens after a performance ends? The answer is not in the image or the document, but in the body that remembers—the spectator who carries the vibration forward. Each gesture reconfigures space, reshapes time and reorients perception.

Curating becomes an act of care: attending to what vanishes, framing what resists possession. It demands patience, humility and a willingness to dwell in uncertainty. It is about creating spaces of encounter rather than display, continuity rather than collection.

Curating without an institution is not an act of lack, but of invention. It calls for imagining new architectures of connection, for believing that even without walls we can build worlds—momentary, porous and alive. This is the space where my spirit moves.

CAPTIONS

1. *Be a beautiful force together,* Penang, Malaysia, November 2025. Photography: Geric Cruz | Image credit: Hesselholdt & Mejlvang

2. *FRONT,* Cheah Kongsi, Penang, Malaysia, 31 November 2025. Photography: Geric Cruz | Image credit: Christian Falsnaes

3. Team photo of the artists and curator for *In Situ,* Performance as Exhibition, The Malaysian Edition, 2025. Left to right: Christian Falsnaes, Vibeke Mejlvang, Vanini Belarmino, Sofie Hesselholdt and Molly Haslund. Photography: Geric Cruz

VANINI BELARMINO is an independent curator, producer, writer and founder of Belarmino&Partners. Her practice explores artistic encounters, cross-genre collaboration and public-space interventions. She has worked across Asia, Europe and the Middle East.

GTLF

WHEN WRITERS CONVERGE IN GEORGE TOWN

BY CAROLYN KHOR

2

"WE LIVE IN a world of myths and memories, in that grey area where we choose our facts and our fictions to make sense of our lives," Ooi Kee Beng, the executive director of Penang Institute, said in his speech for the launch of the George Town Literary Festival (GTLF).

For the writers gathered in George Town that week, those myths and memories were not distant abstractions. They unfolded in conversations between sessions, in meals shared with strangers with common interests and in many people's first encounters with the city.

One can't attend everything at such a festival, of course. But one could try. So, as I wandered through the three days of events, I was lucky to be part of some fascinating sessions, and I met a few enchanting writers and speakers.

Among those who had stepped foot in Penang for the first time to attend GTLF was Lize Spit, a prominent Belgian writer. Her debut novel, *The Melting*, became a bestseller across Europe, known for its psychological sharpness and emotional weight.

"I have never eaten so well in my life. This festival is a mind-opening experience; there is such kindness between authors. It's special for me because it's on another continent, and I'm in a city I have never been, so it gives an extra atmosphere to the whole festival."

Spit explored the city in between sessions—she swam at the beach, hiked, visited Little India and ate at roadside stalls, the way locals do. "It's a little chaotic, but in a nice way. A mosque, a Hindu temple, tourist streets, all next to each other. I have not come across anything like that in Europe. I'm really impressed by Malaysia," she said.

She also found something familiar. "Penang reminds me of my village in a good way. It is small, and people seem at ease here."

Her impression echoes those of many first-time visitors: a city that welcomes with warmth and ease.

Spit's session at the festival was moderated by Sharon Bakar, a stalwart of Malaysia's literary scene. On stage, Bakar's hosting became a bridge between the European author and the Malaysian audience.

Spit and Bakar were a fitting pairing—a first-time GTLF guest introduced by someone who knows the festival intimately, and who has witnessed the growth and evolution of GTLF.

Having lived in Malaysia for more than four decades, Bakar has attended countless literary events in Penang and remains one of the most recognisable figures in the local writing community. "I love Penang. I've been coming here since 1984 and I'm still discovering new places," she gushed.

She spoke about the festival's power to create lasting connections. Each year feels different to her. "It's wonderful to meet people who will be part of the furniture in your head, whose books will change your life. And you make lots of new friends. It's very well organised, very friendly and you learn so much that's new. I hope it continues. It's important."

It was not Australian–Malaysian writer Omar Musa's first time at GTLF. He had participated in 2012 and again in 2018. This time, he returned once more to launch his book, *Fierceland*, a novel set in Sabah, where his father is from. A multidisciplinary artist—rapper, spoken word performer and visual artist—Musa brings rhythm and musicality to his prose. Paying tribute to his fatherland, Malay words punctuate *Fierceland*, making his storytelling relatable and resonant with Malaysian audiences.

"Launching my book here in Malaysia feels right because it's grounded in Malaysian history and culture; it's wonderful to see people responding so strongly," Musa said.

The writer and his cellist wife, Mariel Roberts Musa, also took part in *Ghost Bird,* a performance piece blending spoken word, rap and experimental cello. "I love that it's so accessible to so many different people. It's really well curated, and there are so many fascinating writers here."

Ramayda Akmal, an Indonesian novelist, explored history and displacement in two panels. In "She Who Remembers, She Who Rewrites", she highlighted the forgotten narratives of Indonesian workers abroad—a theme consistent with her interest in inherited memory and the lives of those who move between places.

Later, Akmal reflected, "This festival was wonderful; it is intimate, yet doesn't lose its intensity."

For local writers, GTLF is both a checkpoint and a launchpad. Lim Wan Phing, who took part in four panels this year, noted the improvements. "This year's programme seems to be more packed, and I liked that they split the market hall into two so it has more space to accommodate more vendors," she said. "Last year, the programmes were only 50 minutes-long, and they were slightly too short. This year it's been expanded to an hour."

The extended sessions offered room for deeper conversations. "It was very inspiring. I met a lot of new writers and networked with a lot of publishers," she added. A highlight was the Penguin SEA book launch, which featured her alongside Tunku Halim and Kam Raslan. "We had a great chit-chat about our inspirations, how we came to write our books."

The market hall at UAB became a pulse point. Vendors displayed books; tables became meeting points for people resting or waiting for book signings; adjacent halls offered food and drink, keeping the festival flowing from session to session.

Such festivals do not thrive on passion alone—funding and partnerships are critical to its sustainability. Greatech Technology Berhad, a Penang-based automation company, has pledged RM200,000 as the main sponsor from 2024 to 2026.

"We believe innovation thrives where ideas, stories and cultures are celebrated. GTLF inspires creativity and critical thinking—these values are what drove Greatech from day one. We are proud to support a festival that elevates Penang and showcases our city to the world," said CEO Tan Eng Kee.

HSBC Bank Malaysia, another main sponsor since 2024, also backed the festival this time with RM100,000. To the bank, GTLF is not merely an event on the literary calendar, but a cultural asset with national significance.

CEO Omar Siddiq emphasised, "I think it's important to showcase our talent and also bring together global literary players. It allows us to demonstrate our own strong literary tradition, and ensures that Malaysia remains relevant to global literary discussions. I am so proud that we have this here."

Two very different industries—automation and banking—yet both are invested in the same cause: nurturing ideas, conversations and stories.

When the festival ended, it left more than signed books. Writers departed with fresh ideas in their heads, collaborations in motion and a piece of Penang folded into their stories.

GTLF is not just an event; it is a living dialogue between a city, its people and the storytellers who pass through.

CAPTIONS

1. (Cover page) Omar Musa and Mariel Roberts Musa on the cello during the performance of *Ghost Bird.*

2. Authors Ramayda Akmal from Indonesia (left) and Lize Spit from Belgium (right) in conversation during the panel "She Who Remembers, She Who Rewrites."

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

YANG SHUANG ZI

WRITING TAIWAN THROUGH FOOD

CAPTIONS

1. Yang Shuang Zi shares insights from Taiwan Travelogue during her GTLF conversation on food and national identity.

2. Yang Shuang Zi (left) and her partner (right) with the author (middle).

"WHEN DOES FOOD stop being *just* food?"

During last year's George Town Literary Festival (GTLF), Taiwanese author Yang Shuang Zi tackled the question in a conversation about *Taiwan Travelogue*, her novel unravelling Taiwanese identity through meals and menus—recently longlisted for the Booker Prize.

Yang's appearance was supported by the Taipei Economic and Cultural Office (TECO) in Malaysia, which has been playing a growing role in bringing Taiwanese writers to the region in recent years.

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.

BY IYLIA DE SILVA

Set in 1938, during Japan's colonisation of Taiwan, *Taiwan Travelogue* follows a fictional Japanese writer, Aoyama Chizuko, on a railway journey across the island. With her local interpreter, O-Chizuru, she recorded what she ate, saw and encountered along the way.

At first, the book reads like a charming gourmet travelogue, but it does not stay light for long. Aoyama wanted closeness, perhaps even friendship, yet the colonial structure made intimacy hard to separate from authority. As the meals accumulated, so did tension: desire, dependence and the unequal terms on which people were allowed to know one another. Built on fictionalised narration and reconstructed encounters, it raises questions of authorship, translation and what it means to "retell" history.

Yang frames the novel through four key elements: history, the railway, food and *yuri* (a genre of media focusing on intimate relationships between female characters). *Yuri* does not always imply relationships of a romantic or sexual nature; it can also describe companionship, strong friendship or deep emotional and spiritual intimacy between women.

WHAT A DISH CAN CLAIM

Apart from sustenance, Yang highlights, food carries origin and memory. It is also shaped by class and hierarchy, and by the technologies that decide what can be preserved, transported and priced. "Food is not just something we set on the table and eat. It is also a representation of where our roots are."

Taiwanese cuisine is not a mono-cultural inheritance. Its food identity draws from indigenous traditions stretching back thousands of years, Han migration in the 17th century, the modernising force of Japanese colonial rule and later, American post-war influence. Over time, these layers have settled into a cuisine that reads as distinctive to Taiwan.

After 1949, Taiwan's food landscape shifted again as new waves of Chinese migrants brought food from their various regions, so that "Chinese food" in Taiwan came to be more diverse, and was being shaped by layering rather than a single lineage.

This raises a question: who owns a dish? "Ownership" here is never only culinary; it becomes shorthand for identity, belonging and legitimacy.

Take *rùnbǐng* (润饼), similar to Malaysia's *popiah*. On the surface, it is a wrapper filled with stuffing, but what goes inside is rarely random. Fillings can reveal ancestry and origin—the story of migration carried in everyday habit. Even the occasion during which a meal is eaten matters—in Taiwan, *rùnbǐng* is commonly eaten during Qingming (Tomb Sweeping Day).

Another example is *má yì tāng* (麻薏湯)—a jute-leaf soup created in the wake of colonialism out of necessity. Under Japanese rule, jute farmers were poor, and the crop carried no prestige. After the stalks were processed, the leaves were left as waste, until necessity turned these into food. *Má yì tāng* has no stock base—the leaves are crushed and washed repeatedly to remove their bitter sap, then cooked with the starchy liquid left from boiling rice.

"People did not eat it because it was delicious... they ate it because they had to," Yang says. The dish never spread, and remains linked to where jute production was concentrated—in central Taiwan, around Taichung and the Dadu River.

The same goes for bubble milk tea, a globally recognisable case of contested food identity. Tea culture traditionally centred on hot drinks, but Taiwan's hot summers made iced drinks a necessity, and sweetened black tea over shaved ice felt intuitive. By the 1980s, foam tea emerged, defined by its creamy top and interesting textures. This later evolved into pearl milk tea, beloved for its textural delights. The use of cane sugar was also replaced by fructose or corn syrup, which stabilises foam and supports the drink's texture.

A LITERARY DETOUR

When asked what she hopes overseas readers will understand about Taiwan through *Taiwan Travelogue,* Yang returns to a central idea: Taiwan has never been culturally singular. Even before later migrant groups arrived, indigenous communities were already foundational to the island.

If there is one "spirit" she hopes foreign readers will sense, it is this: Taiwan's distinctiveness lies in intersection, in what happens when cultures encounter one another and transform. The reason why Taiwan's identity remains difficult to discuss—even among Taiwanese themselves—is partly because its history cannot be supposed in one stable version. Different communities interpret the same events differently; public memory becomes a contest of interpretation. People enter these conversations with fixed convictions: "I don't want to hear your version; I want to keep believing what I believe." To talk about that is to trigger resistance before discussion can even begin.

So, Yang chooses to deliver her message through what she calls a literary detour. Instead of confronting readers with argument, she uses the narrative to pose the question: who gets to decide Taiwan's story? The novel explores themes like power, domination and whose voice becomes authoritative. Setting the story 100 years ago also gives Yang room to bring up controversial topics without being dismissed immediately. The past becomes a disguise; distance creates space.

2

Writing the novel involved a meticulous research process. Trained in literary studies, she began by building a web of keywords that led her into specialised books, journal articles, oral histories and first-hand records.

She read diaries written by Japanese people living in Taiwan in the 1930s—private accounts of daily life, what they noticed and how they interpreted the island. She studied photographs too, not only for accuracy, but for atmosphere—how an era looked, how it held itself. Studying Taiwan's theatre scene in the 1930s, she realised that cultural life split between older forms and newer "modern drama".

At times, research became unexpectedly technical. She notes that infrastructure, especially electricity, reshaped leisure and daily life in the 1930s. To portray an era convincingly, Yang emphasises that writers must understand these invisible foundations. Even the railway journey in her novel demanded specificity: what kinds of trains operated then, what fuel they ran on and why electric transport remained limited.

GTLF

George Town is also a city whose food culture was heavily influenced by migration, layered history, economic necessity and diverse traditions. Perhaps this is why audiences at GTLF were easily engaged with the topic and entered into discussions that were deep, layered and nuanced.

This was the author's first time in Penang, and already Yang thinks it's easy to live here. After a dinner event, she went to the waterfront and watched people fly kites. It left her with a feeling of comfort—being in a place that is historically complex, yet quietly liveable, much like her own home country.

COSMOPOLISES

A NECESSARY INTERPRETATION OF THE WORLD OF THE FUTURE

BY OOI KEE BENG

COSMOPOLIS. That is an exciting word that is full of positive connotations. The original Greek expresses this idea by pairing Kosmos ("world" or "universe") with Polis ("city-state"). Cosmopolis thus translates into "world-city", which in short signifies the ideal of a unified political community that absorbs and accepts—and in the process, minimises conflicts between—the multitude of nations, ethnicities and tribes. A global order is imagined that is inclusive, and within which every human is a citizen. This coherent whole, however, is an urban one. We cannot but conceive of cosmopolitan centres as places that are maddingly crowded, ethnically diverse and culturally fluid.

If we now shift to the Indian civilisational sphere, we find that there are at least two terms in Sanskrit that approximately express the spirit of the abovementioned thought. One is "Vasudhaiva Kutumbakan", an ethical term suggesting the unity of all creation; the other is "Chakravala Chakravartin", the universal sovereign who rules the dvipas, i.e. the world's constituent continents.

Chinese political thought, in turn, owns the term Tianxia, often translated as "All under Heaven" and denotes the known world, or more probably, the imperial polity as a whole. The Indian and Chinese ideas, however, do not assume the world to be made up of cities; they are more indicative of territorial overview. The Greek Cosmopolis clearly imagines crowded cities exhibiting a matured world civilisation and globally inclusive order.

Today, that word is seldom used in daily conversation (except increasingly and interestingly in political philosophy debates pronouncing the overshadowed enlightenment thoughts of 15th-century Europe to counteract the dominance of those of the 16th-century which scholars today are conversant in). The former (exemplified by Montaigne and Shakespeake) champion the spontaneous and the human, the latter (fronted by Descartes and Newton) the mechanical and the precise.

A COCKTAIL OF VARIATIONS

Cosmopolitan and Cosmopolitanism are today the semantic variations of the word commonly encountered in serious discourses. Besides denoting a cocktail, a cosmopolitan used as a noun literally means "a citizen of the world". But it appears most popularly as an adjective: a cosmopolitan person is an open-minded and globally-savvy sophisticate, expectantly free of provincial biases; a cosmopolitan place is an economically and socially dynamic city strongly flavoured in multicultural interactions; and a cosmopolitan idea is worldwide in scope and universally relevant.

Notably, describing something as cosmopolitan falls short of the high ideals contained in the doctrine of Cosmopolitanism. At the same time, that long word flaps like a rallying pennant in the wind, voicing the conviction that all human beings belong to a globe-spanning single community. It heralds the attitude that our primary obligation is to humanity as a whole.

But something is not quite right. The Cosmopolis, despite its basic declaration of love for cultural diversity nevertheless seeks conformity in values in the long run. There is something in the concept that is highly reminiscent of monotheism; it seeks final unity in rationality. It may celebrate diversity and difference, but it loves political stability and moral conformity more. It lacks faith in the positive power of conflict and arguments. It strives for harmony in variance, but distrusts opposition and disorder.

A ROOM OF ONE'S OWN, EVEN FOR COSMOPOLISES

This brings me to the main reason for writing this article. I wish to introduce the word Cosmopolises. If we are to love difference in human societies, we should not envision that differences can find space within that singularity we call the cosmopolis. We should instead imagine enough room for differences within a unifying cosmopolis to not lead to suppression, and for enough space so that a loose cosmopolis need not predicate inevitable collapse.

In my time, I have lived in more than one city that warrant being called cosmopolitan. It has taught me that the cosmopolitan character of each of these relies on dynamics—their compromises are different, their cultural interactions are different, and the diversity of their values, in the end, are different.

Yet, while we should call each of them a cosmopolis, we should not exaggerate them to be examples of the same, or similar, phenomenon. Cosmopolis as a word is given to being much more connotative than denotative.

Thus, the need for Cosmopolises.

That is the pluralised form favoured by Penang Institute and *Penang Monthly*

to front the George Town Literary Festival (GTLF) in 2026. That semantic form injects inclusiveness into the term Cosmopolis itself, and thus leaves the latter without an end goal.

The word Cosmopolis, in the singular, given time and unpredictable changes, risks becoming a paradox. To avoid that situation from building up over time, we need to pluralise the concept.

Every cosmopolis consists of its own set of differences and tensions. Every mix of cultures, every venue for intercourse between human cultures, is different; every mix of economic dynamics is unique. And these sets of differences should not—and cannot—be reduced into a few tight abstractions to become comfortably comparable.

When I was in Istanbul some time ago, it struck me how the cosmopolitan character of that wonderful city was hugely different from, say, London. Even Penang's cosmopolitan nature is clearly different from that of her erstwhile twin, Singapore.

Then there is Shanghai and how it differs as a cosmopolis from Beijing. One is prone to think of each of these cities as being less cosmopolitan than the aforementioned ones in the Middle East, Europe and Southeast Asia. That, I believe, is largely due to the outsider not being able to recognise differences in the population. Despite the fact that the population in these giant Chinese cities stem from centuries of cultural inflows and outflows from diverse places across the empire and beyond, patient time and continual hybridity have smoothened the edges of differences, at least to a visiting outsider.

Interestingly, such cases support the point I wish to make about cosmopolises. Older cosmopolitan centres have been melting pots for a long time, and original differences are naturally faded. Hybridity now passes for homogeneity, and to a significant degree.

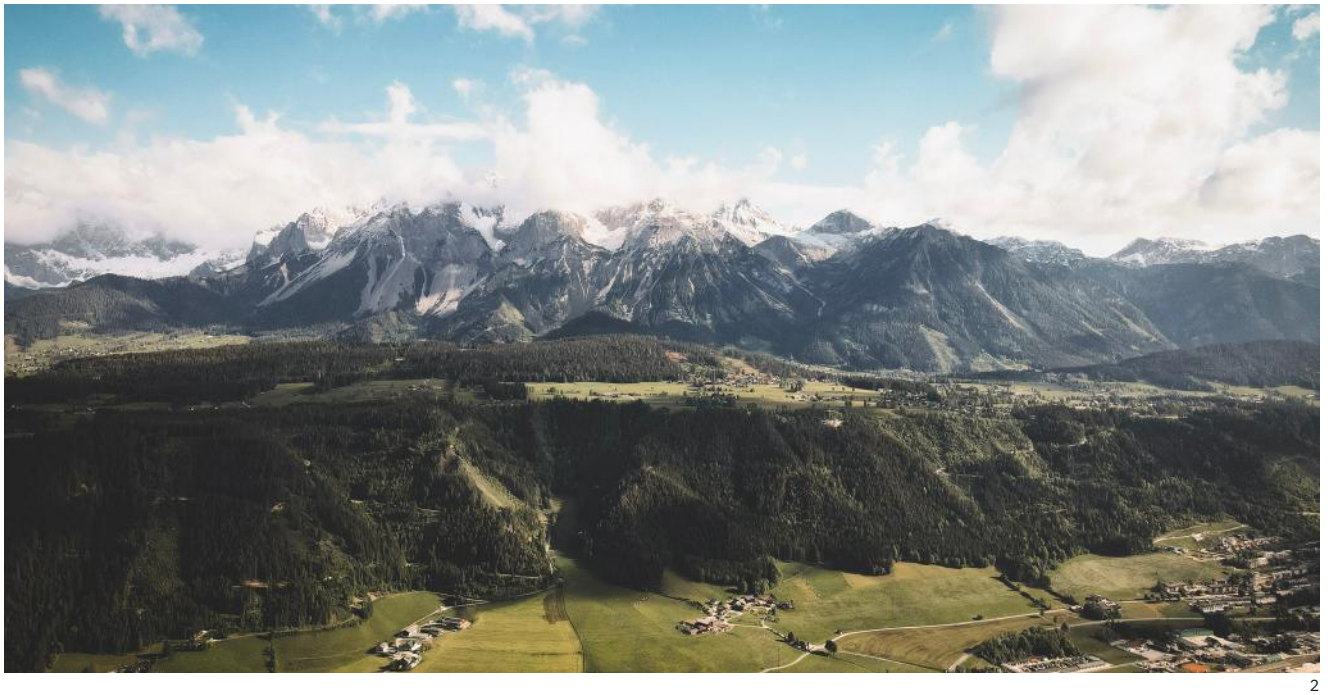
The Cosmopolis suggests a trajectory that is to lead to Global Cosmopolitanism, but taking that ideal path will litter it with righteous suppression of differences. Each cosmopolis is different, and each has its own tensions, and they cannot co-exist comfortably if brought together too closely politically and ideologically, or if each is misrepresented as being more or less true to the ideal of Cosmopolitanism.

Cosmopolises allow for time to take its course, for differences to work themselves out according to each their own dynamic and nature. But to rank these differences within some unspoken and emotive ideal of evolutionary unity and commonality of values, and to not appreciate the different existential trajectories they find themselves in, amounts to singular cosmopolitan hegemony.

OOI KEE BENG is an accidental hybrid product of the many Cosmopolises he has had the fortune to reside within.

AUSTRIAN HIKES THAT LEFT ME DREAMING

BY
CELINE TAY



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CAPTIONS

1. (Cover page) At the Olpererhütte suspension bridge, located 100 meters from the Olpererhütte in Austria's Zillertal Alps.

2. One of my favorite shots (made my jaw drop as I was flying the drone) while we were putting up at Schladming. A lucky shot with all the help I could get from the sun late in the morning. The day after, the skies didn't put on the same show.

3. T'was a steep climb but not far from the start, we found the Austro-Hungarian All-Round Machine Gun Position.

4. Some of the remnants and bunkers along the start of the trail.

I HAD AN opportunity to plan a trip in Austria when my sister had a company trip in mid-May last year. The idea: we'll meet her right after her trip is done, and then roll out our hiking focused activities—an opportunity I didn't grab quickly at first simply because I had no idea what Austria's outdoor landscapes had to offer. That was until a simple Google search evolved into hours of obsessive research. The images blew my mind away. Could a place really look that dreamy?

Yes, yes it very much can.

On that 10-day trip, I worked out a self-drive hiking-focused itinerary to visit the country's mesmerising outdoor landscapes—ones that make you feel like you are part of a grand movie, *The Sound of Music*, if you'd like. In the words of a fellow Netherland hiker we bumped into along the way: "There are no bad pictures you can take in Austria".

We started our road trip from Salzburg; we headed East, then South all the way to the Italian border and back up, making a loop around some very cold yet gorgeous outdoors.

The trails we took were all maintained exceedingly well: paths were kept clear, with flat rocks laid out wherever necessary to ease the climb. Benches were set up right after steep sections for hikers to take a breather while taking in the gorgeous views all around.

3

Signages at every junction and throughout a straight route helped us navigate with ease. My mother, at 61, had fallen slightly sick halfway through the road trip but still managed to complete a couple of these hikes at a more relaxed pace.

I curated each trail around a geographic highlight—moving from the heights of a hanging bridge and the heritage of an open-air museum to the secluded depths of a valley basin home to multiple waterfalls.

KLEINER PAL / PAL PICCOLO (WORLD WAR I REMNANTS)

Our first intended hike was to the summit of Kleiner Pal (directly translated as "The Small Pal"). Interestingly, its peak is higher than Grosser Pal (The Big Pal). These mountains are located among many other peaks in the Carnic Alps, directly south of Salzburg, located at one of the southern borders of Italy.

4

We wanted to explore the open-air museum of Kleiner Pal where one can find intact remnants of World War I, from bunkers, defense positions, trenches and more. This stretch of the Carnic Alps was once a fiercely contested area, and remnants of the conflict remain scattered across the jagged summits and steep slopes on either side of the mountain that now divide Austria and Italy.

HIKING THE ITALIAN FLANK OF KLEINER PAL (ITALIAN SIDE)

We parked our vehicle on Italian grounds, right at the Austria-Italy border and began our hike to the trailhead. It was early in the morning. However, we only managed to head up for approximately 1km before it got too risky to continue. On this side, the terrain was steep and if we wernt any further, we knew that it offered no margin of error. One slip and we could end up thousands of feet in the valley below—thanks, but no thanks.

That said, it was still a very beautiful climb with some cool bunkers and war remnant sightings along the way.

5

HIKING THE AUSTRIAN FLANK OF KLEINER PAL HIKE

We then visited a border restaurant named Al Valico Carnico to clear our bowels and grab a light brunch. Interestingly, its name translates to "at the Carnic Pass" which, in geographical terms refers to the part of the mountain where the road crosses between Austria and Italy. After devouring a delectable serving of pastas, we headed to the Austrian trailhead some 100m away from the trailhead on Italy's side.

The path became steep not far from the trailhead. Before long, we spotted the Austro-Hungarian All-Round Machine Gun Position. It was built on the slopes because the terrain was impassible and served as a natural defense on the Italian side.

SULZENAU ALM (WIDE BASIN VALLEY TO MULTIPLE WATERFALLS)

The Sulzenau Alm is a transition into one of the most breathtaking alpine basins in the Stubai Valley that leads to massive, tall waterfalls.

We began at the Grawa Wasserfall trailhead. The hike was relatively gentle, punctuated by a few steep sections that remained well within the reach of a casual climber—very much doable within an hour or less. Following the clearly marked trail and yellow signages that guided us at every junction, we eventually arrived at a flatter route.

The trail gave way to Sulzenau Alm in all her glory. This wide, sun-drenched valley invited you to race across its expanse or sink into the meadow in carefree bliss. To catch the best view is to witness it during the summer when farm animals roam the valley while you take it all in over a meal at the mountain hut. These huts are open for hikers to dine at or sleep in, especially if they are doing a multiday hike across the mountains.

There is also a trail to the right of the alm, where one can head above Sulzenau Falls which branches into many more trails with different views—a notable one is the Sulzenau Lake which has a striking turquoise colour due to the glacial deposits.

OLPERER HÜTTE (SUSPENSION BRIDGE WITH AN UNBEATABLE LAKE VIEWPOINT)

Behold, the hike that induced the most "wow's" and "wah's".

The hike is known for its famous viewpoint at the hut—where a suspension bridge is hung at a photogenic angle overlooking the Schlegeis Lake

5. Further up with fewer remnant spots before the summit we were halted thanks to what we assume was a Common European Viper/Adder in our trail's way.

6. Spot us at the bottom left!

7. Riepenbach Wasserfall Olpererhutte.

8. There wasn't any border control as with most frontiers in Austria; simply a red line across the connecting road with no phone line in the area. Tip: download all your offline info and maps before hiking in border regions.

9. Olpererhutte Snow Trail.

10. The rocks ware too loose and seemed like it was built for climbing. Doing it with no harness was too much for the acrophobic me.

11. You know it is a good hike when you start with an already-mindblowing viewpoint of Grawa Wasserfall.

CELINE TAY is a wildlife enthusiast with 5 years in eco-tourism (Mowgli Venture), conservation, and art, creating works to support endangered species & collaborating with marine conservation groups in Malaysia.

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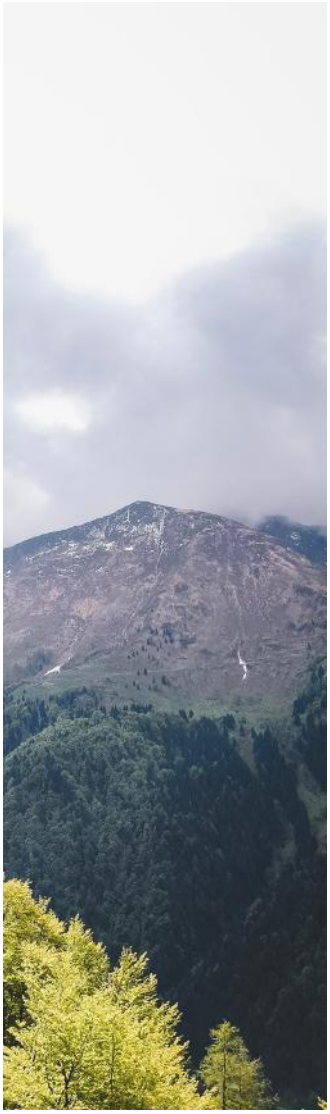

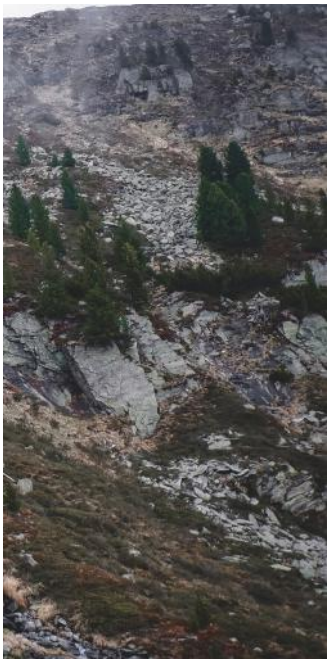

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(Schlegeis Stausee). There is also a pretty trail you can meander, but the weather wasn't the best to see anything when we were there.

The hike is fairly straightforward—we simply followed the obvious and marked path all the way to the hut. It typically takes hikers an hour or two one-way (we took longer for my mum to hike comfortably especially with the high altitude shortening our breaths), and the views throughout the trail are absolutely breathtaking! We came close to the massive Riepenbach Wasserfall on the way, which was a joy to see throughout the climb.

As we entered the final quarter of the ascent, a sense of unease set in; the fog had thickened into a heavy shroud, thickened so much so we could not see the views below. We all wondered if we would be able to see the view we came here for. The lofty views we had anticipated were lost to the mist. A Singaporean family we bumped into who had reached the bridge far earlier than us had decided to call it quits and were headed down. We wondered if we would share the same fate.

The trail eventually led us to a steep snow-covered section where we took a minute or two to get our non-hiker friend across, and eventually, continued up amongst wet and icy trails.

Upon reaching the suspension bridge and waiting alongside possibly 10 other hikers, the fog finally cleared up! Imagine the relief and joy on everyone's faces. We took turns in grabbing our shots of the bridge overlooking Schlegeis Lake—2,389m above sea level.

Yes, the Austrian landscape is dreamy and magnificent; matching it is the well-planned access given to public hikers. Even the most daunting distances and steep inclines are rendered traversable through intentional design: clear paths, well-marked junctions, and strategically placed resting points. Multi day-hikes are the norm for Austrians despite the extreme temperatures as compared to what we have in Malaysia, simply because these huts (which really are comfortable lodges) operate along these mountainous routes. They also serve hot meals and draft beers, keeping fellow travellers warm and their stomachs full, even for those not putting up a night there.

Now, imagine if we had something like that here: probably stripped-down timber huts perched along our many jungle trails across hill ranges, serving hot *teh tarik* and *nasi lemak* to weary hikers. Wouldn't that be nice.

9

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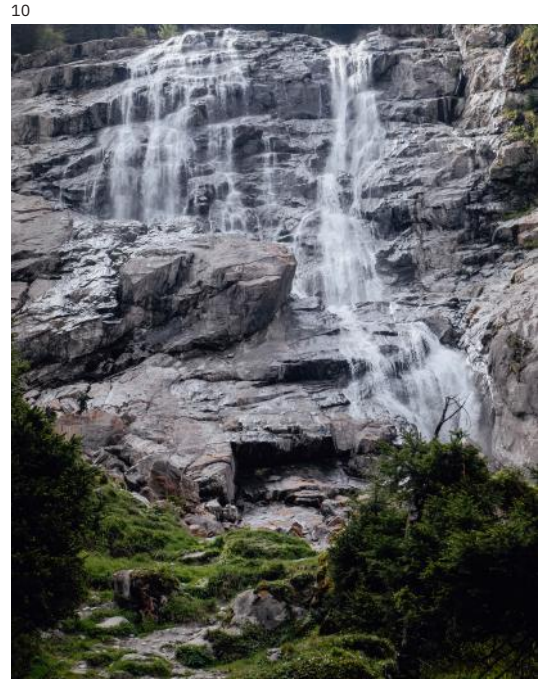


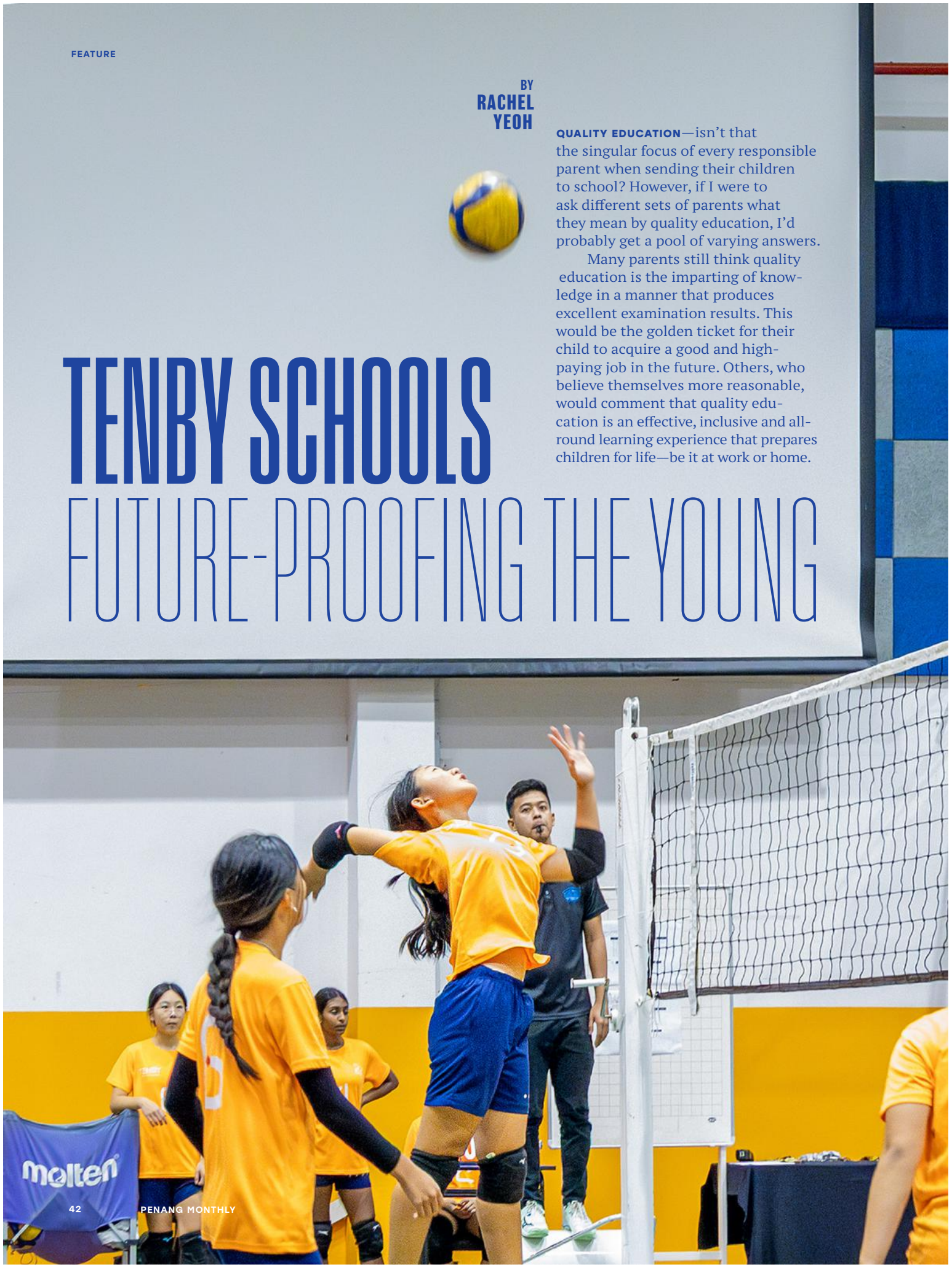
11

BY
RACHEL
YEOH

TENBY SCHOOLS
FUTURE-PROOFING THE YOUNG

QUALITY EDUCATION—isn't that the singular focus of every responsible parent when sending their children to school? However, if I were to ask different sets of parents what they mean by quality education, I'd probably get a pool of varying answers.

Many parents still think quality education is the imparting of knowledge in a manner that produces excellent examination results. This would be the golden ticket for their child to acquire a good and high-paying job in the future. Others, who believe themselves more reasonable, would comment that quality education is an effective, inclusive and all-round learning experience that prepares children for life—be it at work or home.



According to the Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013 to 2025, the National Education Policy (revised in 1996) sees education as developing the potential of individuals in a holistic and integrated manner so as to produce individuals who are intellectually, spiritually, emotionally and physically balanced, and harmonious, and with a firm belief in and devotion to God.[1] The National Education Blueprint 2026 to 2035 looks at building a high-quality, inclusive and future-ready education system that produces holistic citizens skilled in digital literacy, AI, STEM and moral values, with a focus on workforce readiness and building national identity.[2]

Do these words, inked on press releases before they are propagated through the media for the eyes of a nation with growing education malaise, possess the structural weight to bridge the gap between lofty rhetoric and classroom reality?

I'd like to think that there was not much of a gap from when I graduated national high school and when I first started teaching secondary school students in an international school—four years, at most. However, what struck me was the multidimensional nature of the curriculum. While there was still emphasis on getting good grades, the teachers were expected to conduct classes according to Howard Gardner's seven learning styles: covering visual, oral, verbal, kinaesthetic, logical, interpersonal and intrapersonal methods.

Fast forward to today, with exponentially more tech used in the classroom and in schools, serving as a force multiplier in the classroom, I was excited to hear what it is like to be a student today—a Tenby Schools student, especially.

OPPORTUNITIES WITHIN THE CLASSROOM

When asked how studying in Tenby differed from their previous institutions, Sarah Lim from Year 9 was quick to quip that she was exposed to many more opportunities here: "Before I came to Tenby, I was quite introverted. I had a vague interest in public speaking in my old school, but being in Tenby accelerated this interest. I am involved in debates and public speaking. I am part of Model United Nations (MUN)—where I can act as a diplomat from different countries, bringing up issues and talking about solutions—and also World Scholar's Cup (WSC)."

Kathy Woon, a Form 5 student and Head Girl, who is part of Tenby Schools' national curriculum expressed the same. As part of the netball team, she has had the opportunity to compete in PSAC (Penang Schools Athletic Conference) and also represent the school in Singapore. However, a defining difference would be the STEAM Engine, a 75,000ft² hub featuring cutting-edge facilities such as robotics labs, XR labs, makerspaces, cooking lab, a black box and design technology studios—designed to transform education and empower students with future-ready skills.

"In the national curriculum, we do not have as much opportunity to use the STEAM Engine as those who are doing the international curriculum, but the teachers try to incorporate it into our lessons." Fortunately, those doing the national curriculum have the opportunity to use the STEAM Engine facilities through co-curricular activities (CCA) like science and robotics, among others.

More impressive still are the parties that the school collaborates with. "There was one time the school had a partnership with Switch, and the students got to use the iPads provided by them during classes," Kathy added, "and for us, those who take Business for SPM, we would market a product at the end of the year. Instead of just doing it as a project, our teacher brought in lecturers from universities like Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) to actually question, critique and comment on our marketing strategy."

As for May Morimitsu from Year 6, the extensive use of technology in the classroom is what makes coming to school exciting. "We use more of our iPads, as opposed to just writing on paper." She also recounted a memorable lesson when a science experiment on reversible and irreversible compounds was held in the cooking lab, parabled through the baking process.

When Sarah came across a marketing material on the STEAM Engine and saw that there was a VR room, she was sceptical about actually having the chance to use it. "The very next week, I see it in our curriculum. Tenby is really pacing into the future!" To this, Namish Thava from Year 5 interjected, "My friends and I are going to the VR room next week to test out and learn how the human blood circulation works."

REAL WORLD EXPECTATIONS

There is this phrase in Hokkien, *thak si chek* (讀死冊), which literally means "read dead book"—an idiom describing studying by rote memorisation without understanding material and having the knowledge to apply it in real life. To go on this route just to achieve a string of A's would empty the purpose of the blueprints I mentioned earlier. Learning this way would not prepare a student for life outside the classroom. As for the Tenby students, I wanted to see if they grasped value in the hands-on and engaging classes curated for them in a way that prepares them for the real world.

"What I learned about the real world, from talking to parents, teachers: It is not all about grades, you can have straight A's for all your subjects, but in the end when you go out there, you are just one out of the pool of a few thousand people who have the exact same grades as you or even better—you need something else. And for me, it is effective communication. Typical schools won't teach us about the real world, but when you do interviews, what you really need is the skill to conduct presentation, among other things, to get that specific job," Sarah answered.

Kathy concurred, adding that having a social life and connections are also important as it requires you to prepare yourself to make a good impression.

Sarah also added that in an increasingly globalised world, being in a community or system that offers diversity brings positive impact. "We are squeezed into this school system where preconceived stereotypes can be broken—we experience friendships with a person and not judge them by race. I think it is pretty fundamental to address social issues like racial bias."

Just as I was about to wrap up the group interview, the primary students (Namish, May and Brindha Sivasuthan) segued into another topic—scrutinising a classroom AI programme used by the school. "I wish it didn't just give me the answer and allowed me time to find my own mistake when answering," one said. "Yes, it could be more interactive," said another. "There is another AI programme that would suit us better because…" added the other, along with a list of pros and cons.

Talk about instilling analytical skills among the students. I guess the Tenby Schools' system is raising thinkers. Instead of complaining about homework and studies, they are deconstructing how an AI programme could be improved to aid their learning.

Now, isn't that most peculiar, in the most positive sense?

ENDNOTES

1. https://www.pmo.gov.my/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/Malaysia-Education-Blueprint-2013-2025.pdf#:~:text=A%20fundamental%20objective%20of%20any%20education%20system,the%20three%20Rs%20(Reading%2C%20wRiting%20&%20aRithmetic).

2. https://www.mohe.gov.my/muat-turun/penerbitan-jurnal-dan-laporan/rancangan-pendidikan-tinggi-malaysia/1804-rancangan-pendidikan-tinggi-malaysia-2026-2035-pdf/file

CAPTIONS

1. (Cover page) Marin during the PSAC Over-15 Volleyball Tournament.

2. Namish creating his own music using Garageband—an AI music programme.

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.

BUKIT

A SURPRISINGLY TOUGH HIKE

HIKE AT A GLANCE

LENGTH
3.5 hours

DIFFICULTY
Moderate

INTEREST LEVEL
High

SIGNPOSTING
Signposted only in certain sections

LIKELIHOOD OF GETTING LOST
Medium

NUMBER OF HIKERS
Several near the Berapit Impounding Reservoir

KOLAM

BY
REXY PRAKASH CHACKO

THE HILLS AROUND Mengkuang Dam form the largest area of green space on mainland Penang, comprising both forested areas and agricultural land. Bukit Mertajam and Bukit Seraya are two popular peaks in this region, with hikers thronging the former each weekend. Nestled between these two peaks lies a minor summit called Bukit Kolam. This dome-shaped peak, also known as Bukit 800, rises to about 339m and, in recent years, has attracted the attention of hikers, especially those searching for new areas to explore. Looking for such a challenge, I set my sights on this peak, and enlisted Heng, a hiking expert on mainland Penang, to explore this trail with me.

We began our hike just outside the gates of the Bukit Mertajam Recreational Forest Park, where a smaller tarred road branched off to the right, towards the Jiu Long Gong Chinese temple. Starting under the shade of lush oil palm trees, we passed the temple and a restaurant, after which the path curved northward along a relatively flat section. After about 10 minutes, we reached a junction.

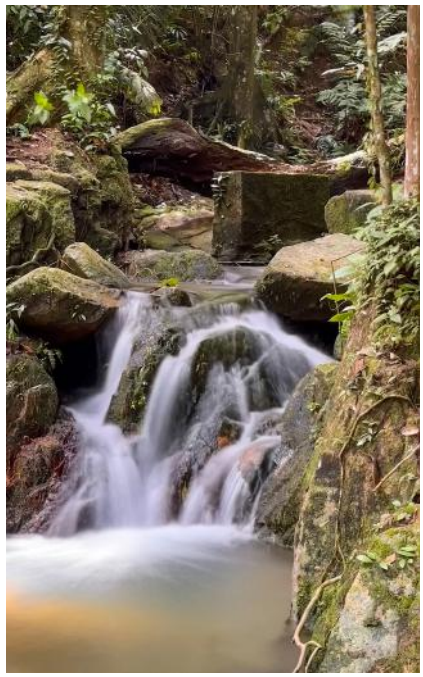
We chose the path on the left, passing through a small, open gate which led us into a durian orchard. It was quite a steep ascent up the cement road, and occasionally, spray-painted arrows and markers from the "Penang Eco 100" event helped us orientate ourselves. It took us about 15 minutes to reach a junction where a cement bridge crossed over a rocky stream bed. We went over the bridge and continued uphill, and soon encountered another junction. We went left again.

As we continued, we came right up to the border of the Bukit Mertajam Forest Reserve, which, unlike other reserves in the state, had large concrete poles demarcating its boundary. Round, green fruits were strewn all over the ground. Examining one of these, I realised what I was looking at was the fruit of the Melaka tree (*Phyllanthus emblica*).

This brought back cherished memories of sitting in history class and listening to the story of how Parameswara, while resting under a Melaka tree, witnessed one of his hunting dogs being kicked by a mousedeer. Taking this as a good omen, he decided to establish his empire there and named it after the tree. Apart from its historical significance, the Melaka fruit is well known for its high vitamin C content and features prominently in traditional medicine.

2

We pressed on, navigating slightly overgrown sections of the trail until we reached a col where the path branched. The right fork led to Bukit Seraya, while straight ahead was Bukit Kolam. Choosing the latter, we followed the trail into the forest and eventually reached the peak of Bukit Kolam.



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By now, it had been close to 1.5 hours since we started our hike. The peak did not offer much views so we quickly began our descent. About 15 minutes downhill, we reached one of the popular photo stops along this trail: two granite rocks which seemed like they were broken apart, with the number "800" spray painted on one.

After taking a few photos, we continued northward along the ridge. Another 20 minutes of walking downhill brought us to the edge of the forest reserve again, where a clearing revealed the breath-taking view of the Mengkuang Dam—the largest dam in Penang, which was opened in 1985. Beyond the dam stretched vast oil palm plantations spilling into Kedah, interspersed with booming townships. In the far north, sat the towering peak of Gunung Jerai. As it was already close to noon, we decided to stop here for lunch.

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Afterward, the trail snaked downward through lush forest into a valley. Some sections were steep, with ropes provided to aid our descent. As we reached the bottom of the valley, there was yet another surprise waiting for us: the historic Berapit Dam.

Established in the late 19th century, this dam has a holding capacity of 37 million gallons of water, and supplied the needs of Butterworth, Prai and Bukit Mertajam. Ironically, a filtration plant was

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only built in 1939—over 40 years after the dam's establishment—likely in response to complaints that Butterworth's water was "unpleasant" and "undrinkable".

Crossing the dam along its crest, we noticed that it was nearly empty, as the sluiceway was opened and all the water flowed into the presently used Mengkuang Dam below. Reaching the other end of the dam, the trail turned left and began to climb gently. Within 10 minutes, we crossed a bubbling stream that served as an intake point for the dam. On one of its walls, the words "STREAM NO: 1" and the year "1896" were etched, a testament to its age.

The forest here was lush and damp, with moss carpeting many of the trees. From this point, the trail rose steadily uphill, and after the ups and downs thus far, this section felt more strenuous. It took us about 30 minutes to reach the col between Bukit Kolam and Bukit Mertajam.

Here, the trail merged with the more popular Bukit Mertajam trail, which we followed downhill. Along the way, we came to a junction leading to the "Big Tree", a highlight of the Bukit Mertajam Recreational Forest Park. We followed this turn, and shortly thereafter, reached a mature Mengkundor tree (*Tetrameles nudiflora*) with huge buttress roots. As we took a few clicks in front of the tree, its huge buttresses made us feel like mere dwarfs.

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Though often said to be the tallest tree in Penang, in actual fact it is not, as the Tualang (*Koompassia excelsa*) on nearby Bukit Seraya surpasses it in height. After marvelling at the tree, we retrace our steps to the junction and continued downhill to the Bukit Mertajam Recreational Forest Park's car park.

Reflecting on this hike, I can't help but feel that this was an immensely satisfying journey through Seberang Perai's finest natural offerings, enriched with a touch of history.

CAPTIONS

1. (Cover spread) The viewpoint along the trail towards Mengkuang Dam and the vast oil palm plantations below it.

2. A large *Ficus* tree growing out of the edge of the Berapit Dam's crest.

3. Cascades feeding into the Berapit Dam.

4. The words "STREAM NO: 1" and the year 1896 were etched onto one of the walls of the intake point.

5. The large buttress roots of the Bukit Mertajam Big Tree. It is a Mengkundor tree (*Tetrameles nudiflora*).

6. Climbing up to the col between Bukit Kolam and Bukit Mertajam.

7. Fruits of the Melaka tree (*Phyllanthus emblica*).

8. Lush forest along a section of the trail.

9. A popular photo stop along this trail where there are two granite rocks which seemed like they were splintered apart from each other.

10. Another viewpoint from lower down in the valley. Here, Gunung Jerai can be seen in a distance.

11. Large concrete poles demarcating the boundary of the Bukit Mertajam Forest Reserve.

12. The Berapit Dam.

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THE GBS SECTOR POWERS PENANG'S INNOVATION FRONTIER

This article is supported by the Penang Development Corporation (PDC).

BY
KENNETH ONG KAR SHENG

FOR DECADES, Penang has worked to solidify its position as a global industrial powerhouse. Beyond its manufacturing sector, the Global Business Services (GBS) sector has emerged as a vital engine for the state's economic growth. In fact, driven by digitalisation, the GBS sector has become a core pillar of Penang's economy, built upon more than 90 GBS companies with more than 20,000 skilled professionals.[1]

As we enter the age of artificial intelligence (AI), navigating a rapidly shifting technological landscape has become a critical skill. Be that as it may, Penang is strategically capitalising on the untapped potential of its GBS sector to transform the state into a knowledge-based economy. Through state-led initiatives and infrastructure support from the Penang Development Corporation (PDC), the state has strengthened its economic resilience by creating high-value employment and driving diversification through a sophisticated GBS ecosystem.

THE MODERN GBS LANDSCAPE

GBS consists of companies that integrate business functions such as finance, information technology (IT) and human resources (HR) into a single, shared service.[2] While traditionally seen as a cost-saving measure, GBS has evolved into a strategic business partner that drives digital innovation and operational efficiency.

In Southeast Asia, the GBS sector has been a vital economic engine, particularly for nations with a strong presence of foreign multinational companies (MNCs). Regional advantages have led to distinct specialisations: the Philippines, for instance, leverages its vast English-speaking talent pool to dominate the Business Process Outsourcing (BPO) space, focusing on large-scale customer service and call centre operations.

Malaysia has been ranked the world's third-most competitive GBS location since 2022.[3] The country continues to see growth in GBS investment, from RM0.73bil in 2021 to RM9.87bil in 2024[4].

While KL leads the nation's GBS investments with its financial and digital sector, Penang has carved out a unique niche as a technological and innovation hub. By leveraging its robust industrial expertise and heritage, Penang focuses on high-value, tech-intensive services such as integrated circuit (IC) design, and research and development (R&D) that directly synergise with its existing manufacturing base.

THE EVOLUTION OF PENANG'S GBS ECOSYSTEM

Penang's GBS sector is a natural extension of its strong manufacturing and electronics base. Since the 1970s, the state's industrial success has cultivated a pool of highly skilled and multilingual workforce that built the foundation of its shared-service industry. By the 2010s, this foundation attracted MNCs seeking to establish captive shared services and outsourced functions in finance, HR, IT support and customer operations.

Capitalising on this momentum, PDC spearheaded the development of specialised infrastructure in Bayan Baru. This began in 2017 with the refurbishment of Mayang Mall into GBS@Mayang, a dedicated MSC-compliant building[5]. The success led to the launch of GBS@Mahsuri in 2020.

Today, these hubs in Bayan Baru have matured significantly, transitioning from cost-focused shared services into technology-enabled platforms that drive enterprise-wide value creation. They now host a cluster of tech-based MNCs, including Jabil, Cisco Systems, Synapse Design and many more.

Penang's GBS landscape is now entering a transformative phase with the launch of the Penang IC Design and Digital Park—part of the broader Penang Silicon Design@5km+ initiative.[6] This 1,000,000ft² industrial project, situated in the heart of the Bayan Lepas Industrial Park, is designed to house high-impact activities in IC design, R&D and Digital Global Business Services (DGBS), among other high-value engineering operations.

The first phase, completed in late 2024, introduced two new GBS nodes: GBS by the Sea and GBS Techspace. These provide premium office spaces and dedicated high-end engineering facilities. This new generation of GBS buildings have attracted more investments from existing MNCs in Penang, including prominent US semiconductor player, AMD, which invested in a new engineering facility for chip design at GBS by the Sea in August 2025.[7]

Looking ahead, the second phase of the digital park will introduce GBS@Technoplex[8] in 2028. With a leasable area of 396,000ft², GBS@Technoplex will be PDC's largest GBS development to date. To meet the rising demand of AI technologies, this next-generation hub is designed to support digital-first capabilities such as automation at scale, AI-enabled services and cloud-based platforms. The project is currently in the pre-construction stage, while three prospective companies are already in discussion regarding one-third of its pre-let space.

UPSKILLING THE GBS WORKFORCE

To futureproof the workforce against rapid technological shifts, the Penang GBS Industry Academy (PGIA)[9] was launched in November 2022, spearheaded by InvestPenang with the support of Malaysia Digital Economy Corporation (MDEC), Penang Skills Development Centre (PSDC) and Penang GBS Focus Group (GFG). The programme aims to bridge the talent supply and industry demand by upskilling new and existing talents in technical domains, management and various soft skills specific to the GBS industry. Since its inception, PGIA has trained more than 1,000 participants including job seekers, working professionals and business owners across 40 courses provided by PSDC.

Building on the success of PGIA, the state launched PGIA 2.0 in June 2025 to meet the growing industry demand of AI talents; this offers new programmes in Generative AI (GenAI) and IC design. On top of that, PGIA 2.0 aims to train at least 500 GenAI talents by 2026, and to upskill talent across key sectors including IC design, GBS and automation.

CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

In alignment with the Penang2030 vision and the Digital Economy Master Plan, Penang is advancing its value chain through the expansion of its GBS ecosystem. In an era of geopolitical instability and shifting trade dynamics, the GBS sector not only serves as an economic buffer, but could also offset potential downturns in the manufacturing sector.

While the integration of AI drives productivity and innovation within the GBS sector, it also introduces policy implications concerning job security, data privacy and accountability. To mitigate risks, it is essential to continuously update governance frameworks such as the National Guidelines on AI Governance and Ethics (AIGE).[10]

Penang can further strengthen its value proposition by adopting a Hub & Spoke Model[11] in collaboration with other regional economic corridors. Under this framework, Penang serves as the primary hub that handles high-value activities while delegating high-volume operations to regional partners. This strategy not only expands the state's regional footprint, but also opens up opportunity to explore new industries, such as renewable energy.

The GBS sector is not only the engine of growth, but also a strategic platform for innovation, talent development and digital leadership.[12] Under the leadership of the state government combined with a steady pipeline of specialised talent, Penang is well positioned to remain the nation's preferred destination for high-value GBS activities.

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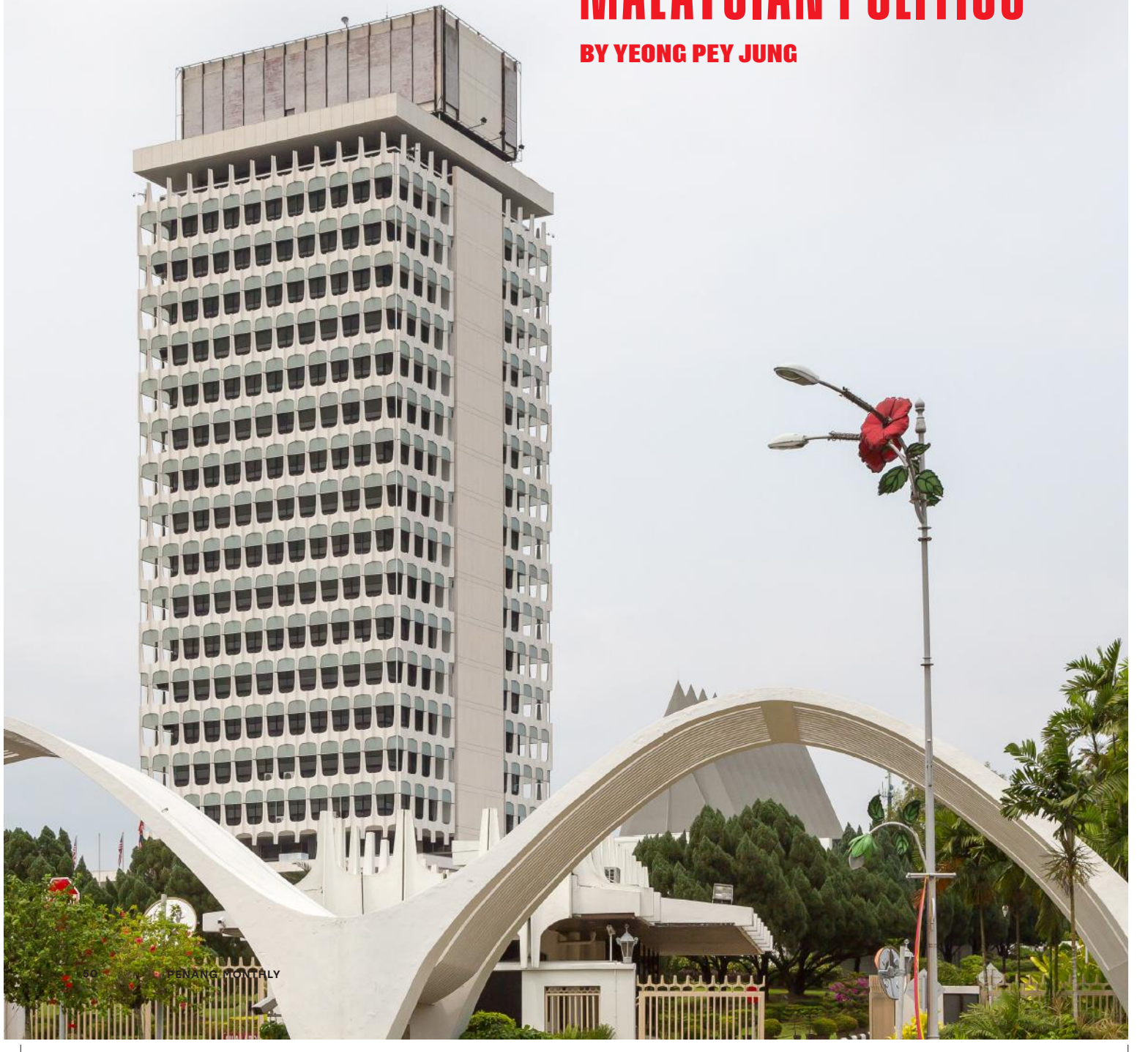
THE CHALLENGING JOURNEY FOR WOMEN REPRESENTATION IN MALAYSIAN POLITICS

BY YEONG PEY JUNG



SINCE THE Beijing Platform for Action was formalised in 1995, governments have strived to meet the minimum threshold of 30% women in politics. Malaysia became a signatory that same year, but it took another 14 years before the target was formally adopted as part of the National Policy on Women. The year 2009 marks the beginning of the Malaysian government's commitment to meeting this threshold in Parliament, state assemblies and the Senate.

So, another 17 years later, where do we now stand?

Unfortunately, nowhere near the goal. With 13.5% female parliamentarians, 12% female state assembly members and 19% female senators, Malaysia is not even halfway to the minimum target. The stark reality is that we have never reached 15% women representation in politics in 68 years of independence. The highest percentage to date was 14.4% parliamentarians (2018) and 12.3% state assembly members (2023). Malaysia ranked far below its ASEAN neighbours in the most recent Global Gender Gap sub-index for political empowerment. Ranked 128 out of 148 countries, we sit only slightly above Brunei Darussalam, the worst performer region-wise.

Taking a closer look at women's representation in the states, Johor is at the top with 27% women in state assemblies. Penang sits in the middle with 12.5%—a regression from 2018's 15%. The east coast states showed even lower numbers: Terengganu's state assembly has one woman (3.1%) and has only ever elected two women since elections began.

Women also rarely make it to the real decision-making table. Women ministers are a small share (currently 15.6%) and are rarely given heavyweight portfolios such as Finance, Defence and Home Affairs.

In most states, the State Executive Councils (EXCOs) are male-dominated as well, and usually only assigns one female member to the women, community development and/or welfare portfolio.

This lack of women's representation starts long before polling day—it begins at the candidate selection process. How are we to achieve minimum 30% representation when the percentage of women candidates fielded has historically never even reached 15%? Candidate lists across parties have always been overwhelmingly male. To date, not one major coalition or political party has ever put up 30% women as candidates.

Structural barriers are the cause of this exclusion. First, deeply entrenched gender norms still limit women's political participation. The expectation remains that women are supposed to prioritise family and domestic life over political and career aspirations, and familial approval is often needed if they want to stand as candidates.[1] Furthermore, women often face scepticism over their qualifications and their ability to lead—something men are rarely asked.

This is further reinforced within political parties, where leadership is disproportionately male. As seat allocation and internal candidate selection processes are headed by the same male-led committees, women often find themselves sidelined; male gatekeepers are more likely to select candidates who most resemble themselves—meaning men.[2] Meanwhile, women's wings are often limited to playing the supporting role, with male endorsement required before women are seriously considered as candidates. In this sense, even highly qualified women risk losing out even before nomination day.

And even when women do get past the gate, incumbency further narrows the space. With Malaysia's First-Past-The-Post (FPTP) system, male incumbents have a stranglehold on "safe" seats, often holding on for years and unwilling to give them up.[3] Party elites also tend to favour male incumbents due to patronage ties and established networks. Furthermore, women admittedly have a lot less access to party resources and funding, which translates into fewer opportunities for mentorship and training, and less financial resources to run competitive campaigns.

But why does women's representation in politics matter?

For starters, it is a simple question of equality and justice. Women are 47.5% of the country's population, yet they hold less than 15% of seats in parliament and state assemblies. Imagine a scenario in the corporate world where half of the directors' voices in a company board are not heard.

Moreover, when decision-making in government is dominated by men, there is a glaring risk for policy blind spots. The real issues that affect women—maternal healthcare, child care and gender-based violence—often take a back seat to the "hard" portfolios, such as economy, trade and defence. Male politicians, no matter how well-intentioned, cannot fully understand the lived realities of women.

On the other hand, women politicians bring the necessary perspectives to address issues that affect women and their rights, and they often show a higher commitment in pushing for policies to improve women's rights. The Anti-Sexual Harassment Act (2022) is a strong example. For decades, women's groups and women politicians have been pushing for this law to protect women, especially in workplaces. But with a staggeringly male parliament, the issue wasn't prioritised. It took the bipartisan commitment from women politicians across the floor to finally table the bill and push it through for enactment.

Just as importantly, we must not underestimate the power of visibility. Having more women in government sends a strong signal to young women and girls that governance isn't an exclusive boy's club—it is a space where they have equal right to belong. It asserts that women are not just bystanders in the development of the nation, but active, capable partners in shaping it. By normalising women in leadership, we will be able to inspire the next generation to step forward and lead, to create a future where women's voices in governance are the rule, and not the exception.

Achieving the goal of minimum 30% isn't just a number; it is about giving women the space they deserve in governance and decision making—and it should not stop at 30%. Women's representation should never be an afterthought; it should be a natural and indispensable part of nation building. And to achieve that, we need concrete action: from quotas and enforceable targets to legislative and electoral reforms to ensure that equal representation is not just an empty promise in policy, but a permanent reality in our democracy.

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MALAYSIAN PLANTS

FROM GARDEN TO PLATE AND TO CANVAS

BY YONG-YU HUANG

BY HER OWN admission, botanical artist Esther Geh is no good with plants.

"I have no green thumbs, fingers or anything of that sort," Geh said, describing herself as a "useless gardener". However, her portfolio of work spans an array of intricately-painted stems, leaves and flowers—the result of years dedicated to watercolour botanicals.

A retired anaesthesiologist, Geh's artistic career researching and painting plants has led to her to become more in touch with her cultural heritage. Although she has always liked to draw, Geh kept her artistic interests separate from her medical career. Only when the latter drew to a close with the birth of her son did she begin to seriously pursue art.

Geh had no formal training; her education as an artist has largely consisted of YouTube, books and online tutorials. In the years since, she has completed a diploma course in botanical painting and attended a four-day workshop in Sydney.

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CAPTIONS

1. (Cover spread) Drawing and painting of roselle flowers.
2. Kim Hock Su (left) and Esther Geh (right) spoke at the event. Ivan Gabriel (middle) helped facilitate the meeting of the two artists.
3. The *ulam raja* topped a sugarless meringue, which was paired with snapper tartare and Sze Chuan pepper relish.
4. The dishes featured six local ingredients in innovative ways.
5. Drawing and painting of torch ginger.
6. Instead of being served whole, the *ulam raja* was freeze-dried and powdered.
7. Drawing and painting of Arabian jasmine.
8. The Arabian jasmine was incorporated into a dessert featuring a Chinese pear black olive financier, a vanilla jasmine whipped ganache and lime.

A POST-MEDICINE PIVOT

After stepping back from full-time medical work, Geh became deeply involved in the St. Christopher's International Primary School community, and decided to start a small coffee group for artist parents. As the group grew, they decided to found The Art E Space at Straits Quay in 2012.

"It was like a co-working space, but for artists or creatives," Esther said.

Over the years, the studio continued to grow. As local artists frequented the space, they used it to both do their own work and to teach classes. Many art teachers found it difficult to rent their own studios in Penang, as some taught only a couple classes a week and could not justify renting a space full-time; Geh strove to meet that need. Running the space on her own was hard, especially during the pandemic—it would eventually close in 2022.

Sharon Kow, an artist friend Esther made at the studio, said that while she missed the studio, its closure was a good thing—it allowed Geh to fully concentrate on her own art.

As a member and, later, organising committee for the non-profit, Open Studios Penang, Geh began to participate more in various events and exhibitions. In 2022, she was one of seven artists who participated in a show put together by then-Hin Bus Depot curator, Ivan Gabriel, titled "TU7OH".

"That gave her an interesting challenge to look at numbers and patterns in nature," Gabriel said. It was also during that show that Geh felt she had formed a local presence.

Since then, Geh has also exhibited both nationally and internationally, including with the Society of Botanical Artists, Botanical Art Society of Singapore, George Town Festival and more.

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PLANTS THAT TELL STORIES

"The subjects I paint have to have some sort of narrative," Geh said. "I focus on botanical painting because every plant I have painted have had a story."

As Geh began to explore botanical art, she discovered that many plants in Penang—whether in the wild or in people's gardens—were not indigenous to Malaysia, and were mostly brought in by the British. Being of Peranakan descent, Geh also started looking into plants used in local cuisines.

"I got very interested in our food plants—not just in Peranakan cuisine, but our heritage and traditional crops that we are now losing because of access to imported vegetables," she said.

"I think my scientific background drove me to study what I am painting, do research on it and try to bring awareness of these plants to the public," she added.

Beyond the kitchen, Geh pointed out that many of these plants also hold medicinal value, and are traditionally used as health supplements and remedies. While doing research, she acquired a variety of botanical books and spoke to local communities and experts, such as Jawi Peranakan anthropologist Prof. Wazir Jahan Karim.

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"REIMAGINED: FROM GARDEN TO PLATE"

From freeze-dried and powdered *ulam raja* to roselle paired with confit duck, Au Jardin's private room became an immersive experience offering Penang's cultural heritage as both visual and culinary art. This December afternoon, in a presentation pairing Esther Geh's botanical watercolour illustrations and sketches with an array of canapés starring six local ingredients, a collaboration between Hin Bus Depot and Au Jardin challenged guests' understanding of local plants.

As Chef Su Kim Hock disclosed his team's interpretations of torch ginger, *ulam raja*, Indian roses, roselles, banana blossoms and Arabian jasmine during the event, titled "Reimagined: From Garden to Plate", Geh's delicate renderings of those same plants lined the wall.

The collaboration came together through Gabriel, who connected Su with Geh—coincidentally the sister-in-law of one of Su's close friends. From the beginning, they agreed that this wouldn't be a money-making venture. Instead, the event's proceeds would go to the local non-profit, Arts-ED, which provides arts and culture education to underprivileged children.

Given Geh's focus on botanical painting, the collaboration's floral theme stemmed from a discussion about presenting a focused narrative.

"There's always this misconception of edible flowers being the confetti of a plate, right?" Su said. "So, we want to try to reverse that perception a little bit, because not all flowers are confetti. You have flowers that don't taste of anything, but also, at the same time, you have flowers that actually make a hell of a difference on a plate."

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Geh and Su had debated how to present the work—should the botanical illustrations be sold separately from their preparatory sketches or as unified pieces? Su wanted to display Geh's drawings along with the paintings, once he understood that her paintings are formed mainly in the sketching phase. Eventually, they compromised, framing two pairs together while keeping the rest separate.

THE INGREDIENTS AS ART

"White flowers are more than just pure white," Geh explained, as there is always a yellow or pink tinge at the heart, some gradient lurking beneath. She also explained common misconceptions about these plants. For example, what most people call the banana flower, she pointed out, isn't actually the flower at all—it's the bract. The real flowers are tiny, and are hidden underneath; male ones are clustered near the heart and female ones lie further up. The torch ginger is the same; its dramatic red structures are bracts and not blooms. The actual flowers are minuscule, tucked among the outer layers.

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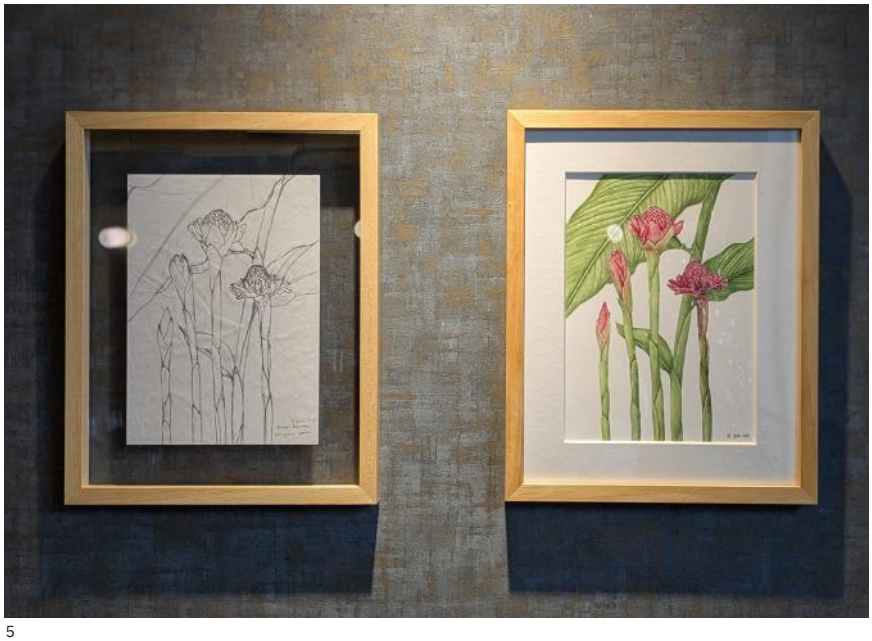
"I prefer to work from life. So all these plants are now in my garden," Geh said. She sources her specimens wherever she can find them—her garden, up on Pearl Hill or friends' homes. She pointed out that Malaysian cuisines commonly feature the versatile banana leaf, and while the Indian rose petals are edible, it is mostly used by the Indian community for prayers and decoration. Meanwhile, jasmine is a staple tea, roselle is commonly made into tea or jellies, torch ginger stars in Laksa and curries, and *ulam raja* is often eaten raw.



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COOKING IS AN ART TOO

Focusing on local ingredients aligns with Au Jardin's culinary ethos. Currently, 85% of the restaurant's ingredients are locally sourced, with 65% from within a 25km radius—largely from Penang Island itself and from a small sliver of the mainland.

The geographic scope also allowed Su's team to happily experiment. Su's early training was in European cuisine, but between cooking artichokes or banana blossoms, he would choose the banana blossom every time.

"There's no fun in [choosing artichokes], right?" he said. "We want something a little bit more challenging."

As Gabriel walked participants through Geh's botanical illustrations and Su's culinary interpretations, Louise Goss-Custard, an attendee, found herself transfixed by the banana blossom. Visually, it was the most dramatic ingredient on display—and seemingly the most resistant to being transformed into an amuse-bouche, she said.

She wasn't far off—according to Su, the Indian rose and banana blossom proved most technically demanding.

Cooking dishes with roses is "nothing groundbreaking", Su noted, as certain cultures have been cooking with rosewater for ages. But his team worked with savory tastes to subvert expectations.

"If I'm feeding you a piece of gummy that tastes of rose, it will not be as exciting as feeding you something savory that tastes of rose," he said. After all, most people already associate roses with sweetness.

The team had to retain and accentuate the flower's taste without artificial flavouring. Instead of going the easy route and making rose essence, syrup or oil, which introduces heat and fails to eliminate unfavourable flavours like bitterness, Au Jardin settled on fermentation.

After introducing salt to kickstart lacto-fermentation, they let the petals ferment for three days. Then, they faced another problem: solidifying the now-runny texture. The solution was freeze-drying.

Meanwhile, the banana blossom, if not cooked properly, tastes like raw bananas. The flower also contains high amounts of latex and sap that must be removed to make it edible.

The Au Jardin team consulted traditional cooks to tackle this challenge. First, they looked at Malay cuisine, where the blossoms are typically chopped and boiled, a method that removes the sap, but destroys the flower's intact form. Wanting to preserve the blossom's dramatic structure, they then turned to Indonesian cooking, where they discovered another solution—vinegar and water. In the end, they used this technique, experimenting with ratios until they were satisfied.

After that, came texture and temperature. As a final step, Su sketched out the plate to visualise the dish—though by the time he began drawing, he already knew what to do.

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"What always fascinates me is not the finished product," Su said. "It's actually the sketch."

In the end, what united Geh and Su was not simply a shared interest in our heritage plants, but in reimagining them. For both artist and chef, the finished work—whether a painting or a dish—was only the visible tip of a much longer process rooted in research, observation and creativity. This exhibition reframed everyday Malaysian plants as subjects worthy of careful study and creative labour; and together, their work suggests that cultural memory is not static, but something that must be continually re-examined, re-drawn and re-tasted.

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CAPTIONS

9. Drawing of banana blossoms.

10. Banana blossom dish.

11. Drawing and painting of Indian roses.

12. Su combined the Indian roses with saffron rice, prawns pâté, mi-cuit prawn, rose jam and lacto-fermented rose vinegar.

13. The torch ginger pastries included mud crab *kantan sambar,* apple jelly and chive flower.

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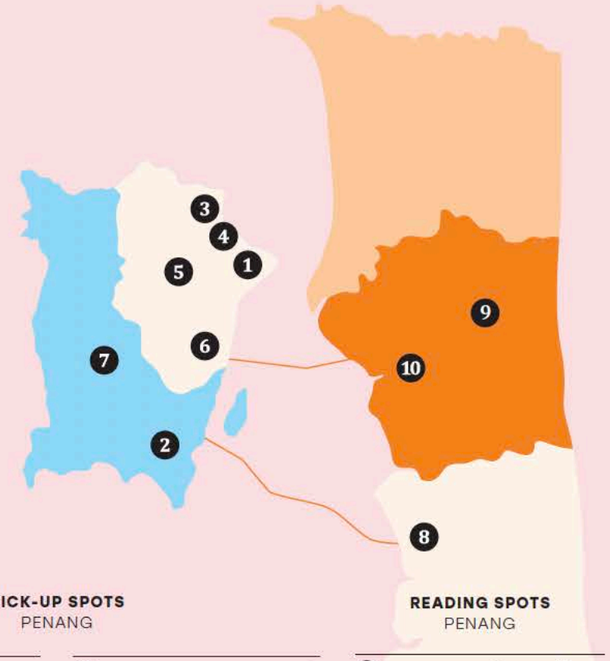

PICK-UP SPOTS
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Hubba Hubba Mont Kiara
The Godown Arts Centre

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

○ Subang Jaya
Sunway University
(Students Study Area)

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Gerakbudaya Bookshop
@ Hikayat
Gurney Plaza
(Information Counter)
Hin Bus Depot Art Centre
Huey & Wah Café
Le Petit Four Patisserie
More by Arang Coffee
Penang Institute
Penang Island City Council
(Komtar Level 3)
Pusat Harmoni
(Harmonico)—Reception
Ren I Tang Heritage Inn
Sin Seh Kai Artisan Bakery
Tourist Information Centre

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

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

4 Tanjung Tokong
Blue Reef Straits Quay

5 Air Itam
Coffee Elements
Penang Hill—Lower Station
Sunshine Central

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

8 Batu Kawan
IKEA Batu Kawan

9 Bukit Mertajam
Seberang Perai City Council

10 Juru
AUTO CITY
Shop-In D'Park

READING SPOTS
PENANG

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

4 Tanjung Tokong
Leo Books

7 Balik Pulau
Botanica Mansion
Nada Natural Farming

8 Batu Kawan
Peninsula College

WATER FOR ALL

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

However, Penang is a water-stressed state with a limited land area (1,059 km^2) and limited water catchment areas (62.9 km^2 of precious hillside forests).

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

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

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

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

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

PBA
Perbadanan Bekalan Air Pulau Pinang Sdn Bhd
199901001061 (475961-X)
Memenuhi segala keperluan bekalan air anda
Meeting all your water supply needs

PENANG 2030

24-hour Call Centre: 04 255 8 255 | email: customer@pba.com.my | website: www.pba.com.my