

# PENANG MONTHLY

A portrait of Ooi Kee Beng, a man with grey hair, glasses, and a goatee, wearing a blue button-down shirt. The background is a soft, out-of-focus landscape with green hills and a body of water under a blue sky.

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FEATURE

AQUACULTURE CAN  
ENSURE FOOD  
SECURITY FOR PENANG

FEATURE

OOI KEE BENG AT ISEAS:  
IDEAS, INNOVATION  
AND INSPIRATION

FEATURE

FINDING MY WAY BACK  
TO LADAKH—AND TO  
MYSELF

## PHILOSOPHY AS ACTIVISM



X

PENANG MONTHLY

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# 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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As a free publication funded by the state government, we take pride in delivering quality content that informs, entertains and connects our community.

However, to expand our reach, improve our offerings, and keep our magazine vibrant and independent, we need your support.

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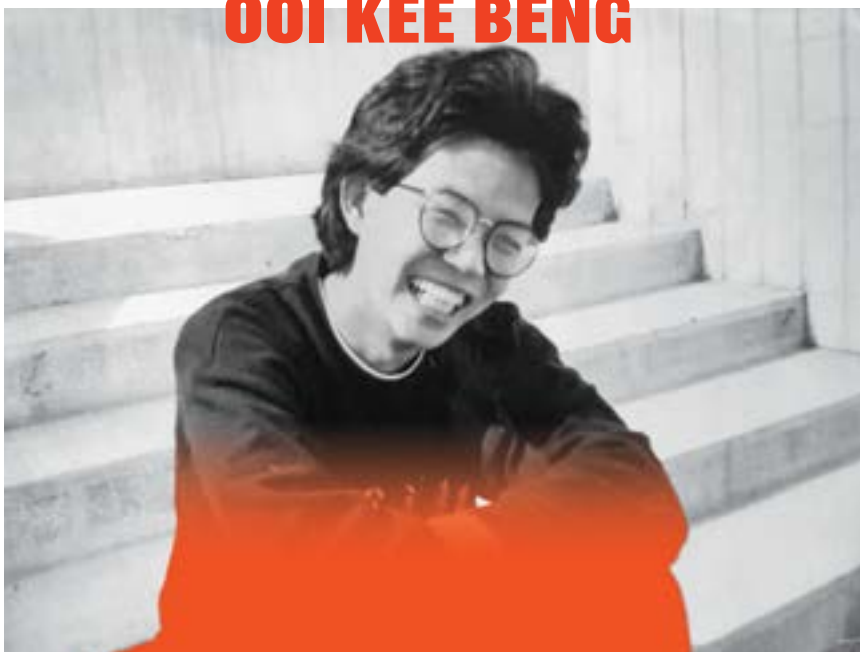


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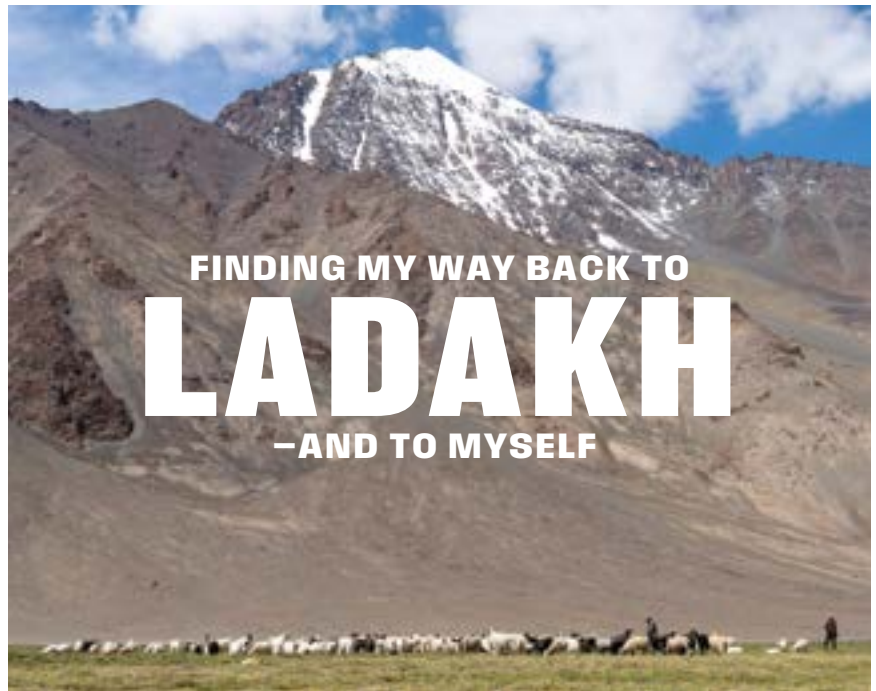


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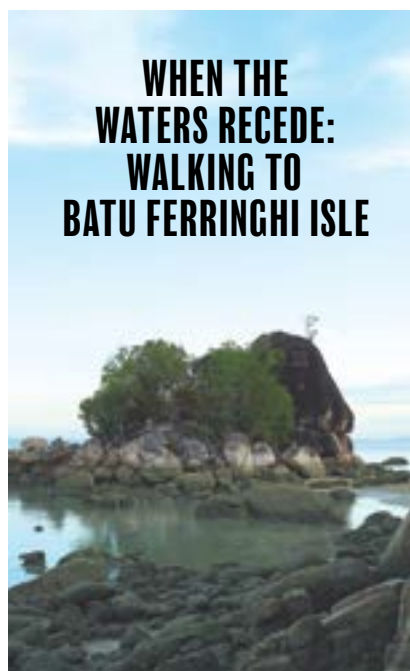


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# NARRATING THE NATION: OOI KEE BENG'S ART OF STORYTELLING

# BY LIEW CHIN TONG

**OOI KEE BENG** is turning 70. His rather youthful look belies his age. I remember driving him home in 2005 after one of our earliest meetings, and during our chat, was stunned when he said his eldest daughter was born in 1980. I thought he was only slightly older than me.

After the change of the Penang state government in 2008, I was assigned to bring change to its think tank, the Socio-economic and Environmental Research Institute (SERI), which in 2012 changed its name to Penang Institute. One of my earliest—and in hindsight, most lasting and prided—initiatives at the Institute was to turn a black-and-white periodical internal publication into a full-colour monthly magazine.

Kee Beng was most supportive and fully committed. We took the large mock-up of the magazine up and down, trying to convince various stakeholders to back the project. A trial issue was printed in October 2009, and *Penang Monthly*—a publishing miracle in Malaysia—was born, and has been under Kee Beng's stewardship ever since.

There's no better place to honour his ideas than in the pages of *Penang Monthly*. Hence, for the first time in 16 years since its existence, I am writing the editorial instead of him, and the issue will feature Kee Beng as the subject.

In 2004, Kee Beng returned to the region after more than two and half decades in Sweden. At the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS) where he worked, he started writing op-eds in the Singaporean newspapers. He writes with a very unique style and feel—there's hardly any anger in his writings; instead, they are philosophical and informative. He was soon noticed.

Around the same time, Taufik Ismail deposited his father Ismail Abdul Rahman's (popularly known as Tun Dr. Ismail) private papers to ISEAS in the hope that someone would go through them and write a memoir of this very special statesman of the Merdeka era. Many thought of him as the Prime Minister we never had. Kee Beng was in the right place at the right time.

To write this memoir, Taufik and Kee Beng travelled extensively to meet many people who knew the former Deputy Prime Minister. It was during one of his trips to KL in July 2005 that I was first introduced to Kee Beng. I had just come back from Australia in February that year after completing my studies.

Over the last 20 years since, Kee Beng, Francis Hutchinson (whom I met in our alma mater, the Australian National University, in 2002), Wan Hamidi Hamid (whom I first met in 2006) and Woo Wing Thye (whom I first met in 2008) have been my longest lasting intellectual collaborators until this day, for which I am immensely grateful.

When *The Reluctant Politician: Tun Dr. Ismail and His Time* was launched in January 2007, it took the nation by storm. Malaysia was in search of a moral compass, and the book filled the void by reintroducing Ismail Abdul Rahman as a politician to be exemplified. Kee Beng became an instant intellectual sensation.

"In life, it is often who we meet that changes the course of our lives," he is fond of saying. Thanks to him, I became a research fellow at ISEAS. Through him too, I was introduced to the Sultan of Perak, Sultan Nazrin Shah, as well as Robert Kuok and his wife, Ho Poh Lin.

More significantly, when I contested in Penang in 2008, Kee Beng—a local—connected me with many Penangites outside the political circle, who provided me with an in-depth and wide-ranging understanding of Penang society, some of whom I still maintain contact with today. The unexpected 2008 political tsunami also provided Kee Beng with the opportunity to reconnect with Penang, initially assisting me with my work at Penang Institute, and, since 2017, leading the Institute himself.

Kee Beng is an unusual public intellectual. In Wan Hamidi's words, a "curious case". An accomplished and prolific writer, he has published many op-eds, compilations, biographies, academic works, and translated Sun Tzu's *The Art of War* into Swedish. I know he is particularly delighted that his conversation with Wang Gungwu while writing *The Eurasian Core and Its Edges: Dialogues with Wang Gungwu on the History of the World* has attracted very favourable compliments and significant attention.

He is arguably one of Malaysia's best editors too. Most of my op-eds in the earlier years were edited by Kee Beng. Not only does he edit well, he has acquired a special knack for creating new fit-for-purpose formats for publication. *Penang Monthly* is a testimony to this; there are also various other formats he had created, as explained by Francis Hutchinson in his article. His influence in the writing and editing of opinion pieces in Malaysia, and even in Singapore, is unparalleled.

Ultimately, Kee Beng is a thinker—a public intellectual with a mission and purpose. He does not write to express frustration or anger, as with most opinion pieces today, but rather to effect change. How he functions is underpinned by Wittgenstein's understanding of philosophy as activities, and in Kee Beng's case, as activism.

On the occasion of Kee Beng's 70th birthday, we celebrate his ideas and life's works that have inspired many of us, and that have smoothed the nation's path to a better future.



**LIEW CHIN TONG** is the Deputy Minister for International Trade and Investment, and a Board Member of Penang Institute. He was a key player in establishing *Penang Monthly* back in 2009.

**T** IS A sorry bookshelf that is filled only with the books you have read. That is no longer a bookshelf, but an archive, only a memory away from standing as dead history. To bring that bookshelf alive, what you need to do is build your atemporal, ever-shifting self into its recesses—the books you once wanted to read, but no longer do, brushing shoulders with the books you insist you will get around to reading, both envying the prestige of those books you half-read, put down and finally became too busy to finish. That is a living bookshelf where all those who love you can see you holistically, like a collage portrait where each spine gestures to the observer the kind of person this reader wanted to be for a short while.

That living diversity of interests is where I want to start this little self-contained, unique perspective on my father, Ooi Kee Beng. The bookshelves of our house

reach from Da Vinci's sketches to Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*, and from Malaysian geopolitics to European poetry, but they also cross universes from the fantasy novels I loved as a tween to the pottery pieces my sister made before leaving for university. Each cover my finger lights upon as I consider picking up something to read (before coming to my senses and redirecting to my phone) is a small insight into one of the million people he—like us all—has bounced between wanting himself to be. A historian, a martial artist, a charcoal sketcher, a calligrapher, a journalist, a biographer, a fiction author, a novelist, a pianist.

I stand before this bookshelf with my father's bold eyebrows and wild hair, and in turn, the bookshelf stands before me as his faceless painting; I see neither his nose nor his beard, yet it is as though I am in his presence.

I was always struck by what seemed to me—even as I grew old enough to begin unveiling the lie that grown-ups knew what they were doing and talking about—to be a

decided wholeness of self in my father. It felt—and feels—as though the voice with which he helped me with my maths homework was not doing anything all that different from the voice which I heard speak at conferences.

With one breath, he speaks to me about making my Masters' applications and asks the gardener how his kids are doing. The Papa who reacts to my messages with nothing but a (often frustrating and always funny) thumbs up emoji is acting no differently from the man who responds with curiosity to the Char Koay Teow hawker, who has abandoned his wok to come to our table and continue their last conversation about what the best duck eggs are for cooking.

This is the trait he passed on to me without ever saying it—though he has often been vocal about what he hopes I should learn from him—to appreciate what I am going here to call "The Joyous Opportunity for Interest".

That is the line by which I would define my father; it is how I think of him, and it

# THE JOYOUS OPPORTUNITY FOR INTEREST





is the way in which his thinking has journeyed me forward into a world that seems to be beating ever more anxiously between diversity and purity. He taught me in his image to find these remarkable chances to talk meaningfully to new people from worlds you do not occupy, that by treating each human being as a guru of their own life, you become the student of ten thousand masters.

He has told me many times that good luck is not random, but rather, that by opening yourself up to the chance for good luck, and most crucially, by valuing the people whom you meet and spend time with, good luck has no choice but to come your way in time.

It is no different from the way he writes his editorials.

The opportunity arises to be interested in a second-hand copy of Sir Francis Bacon, or he finds joy in the creative stimulation of sitting on a porch in Gopeng, feeding fishes, and like a night orchid blooming over the course of an evening, growing steadily in

just the corner of your eye, this interest catches and unites other realisations, questions and observations from other moments of interest, developing both consciously and unconsciously into something which you, kind *Penang Monthly* reader, may hold in your hands and think, "How did he have the time to do all of this thinking?"

That time was spent over dinner. Or perhaps walking with his wife and kids. Or while watching the latest trashy Jason Statham action movie. Some of the nebulous thought associations which were always floating in his mind and which have been continuously added to over the course of a lifetime of interests coalesced finally into something tangible enough to be written.

I suppose that is one of the tenets I wanted to express. How intensely social, but even more, how pivotally inspired this process is. All too often, we think of calling something "inspired" to mean some almost supernatural, muse-borne miracle, when that is far from the truth. To create

something inspired is to allow yourself to be inspired by the world around you and the people in it, to find enough happiness in your capacity for interest that every rain-drop in a thunderstorm inspires you.

Each book in his bookshelf is a testament to curiosity and to interest; even forgotten, unread or thought missing, they are saved from dead history by living on as one of those nebulous thought associations. Just as those thought associations are passed on to cultured *Penang Monthly* readers in the form of editorials, so were they passed on to me in the form of growing up in the warm shade of my father and his bookshelf. That is how meaningful those sparks of inspiration which we all flash upon are, that their echoes resonate through so many minds.

No article worth reading could come from only one mind; creative thinking is the product of being interested, of being curious, of being loving and of taking care not to let the sparks of inspiration we all flash upon go to waste.



**CIAN SACKER-001**  
is an editor for *World Scientific Publishing*. He spends his time travelling, talking and taking photos

**BY CIAN  
SACKER-001**



PHILOSOPHY IS ACTIVISM:  
THE CURIOUS CASE OF

# OOI KEE BENG

## BY WAN HAMIDI HAMID

His hobby was academia, yet he was never interested in taking examinations. He prefers philosophy, understands Confucius and Laozi well, and loves Wittgenstein's language games. He left Malaysia for Europe almost 50 years ago; became a factory worker to enable him to study Sinology and all things Chinese—in Sweden, of all places. And he has always known that he is a child of Merdeka. This interview provides a glimpse into the life of Ooi Kee Beng, a writer, editor and thinker who celebrates his 70th birthday this year.

### WH: What makes you want to write?

**OKB:** I've always wanted to write. As far as I can remember, I was interested in books as soon as I could read. My problem, living in Rifle Range, Penang, and being from a quite poor family was I never had enough books. The books would be Enid Blyton's, those kinds of books. You read what you can. But I think I must have been fascinated by language—and by the power that language has and the ability of language to communicate all sorts of ideas and values, and so on.

As far back as I remember, my first dream job was to be a journalist. Because in Penang, you don't think bigger than that. If you're good in English, what do you become? You become a journalist.

*The Star* newspaper has started (in 1971), so I joined, and they put me as a court reporter, which was the most boring. You write the same thing every day with different names and different sentences—"the jail sentence is six months, and then nine months; and this guy had cannabis, that guy had heroin". That's very boring for six months.

The boss then said he wasn't going to extend my six months. So, I said, OK, I'll go to *The Straits Echo* (a much older newspaper in Penang). I told them *The Star* did not want to extend me, that's why I'm here. And they laughed and said, "No, it's OK, we'll take you".

I became a sub-editor rather than a reporter. Maybe that led to my editing. The main difference between writing as a reporter and sub-editing is that you have to have a more detached view. The reporter is just getting the facts, and then writes a certain way. The sub-editor has to think of what the reader is capable of understanding and so on.

I noticed back then, editing was largely grammatical, I think. But what was important was the heading. I think I became very good at giving headings. I picked that up immediately. Looking back, I think your first career is really important, somehow, because you have that focus when you're very young. And then you go in, and you go in deep, right? And I think it formed me greatly. Until now, I don't let headings go too easily, even for my publications. I change all the headings.



**WAN HAMIDI HAMID** is a veteran journalist who has spent some 30 years in journalism, media consultancy and political communication. He is now media advisor to DAP Strategic Director, Liew Chin Tong.





*The Star* moved out to KL after that. Now, people don't seem to realise *The Star* was a Penang paper. *The Straits Echo*, I think, closed down in the 1980s. I had left by then. But as a journalist—both as reporter and sub-editor—I was quite unhappy because I thought it wasn't giving me what I thought it would give me. I wasn't just looking at what other people wrote and trying to make them look better. I wanted more, and so I left. I left Malaysia for Sweden.

I remember leaving on the plane, first flight out of Malaysia in my life. This was 1978. I remember writing it down, and even looking back, I thought it was strange that I was thinking like that. Back then I was 23. I didn't know how long I was going to leave Malaysia.

#### WH: What did you do in Sweden?

**OKB:** I went to Sweden to learn something new. The first degree I went for was public administration. Being a left-leaning person, it was one way to learn about the well-known Swedish welfare system, how it works, how they think and so on. I did that for four years.

At the end of which, I didn't trust bureaucracies anymore, and my thesis for that was on promoting anarchism—the opposite of bureaucracies—and of course, the teacher didn't like it. But the headmaster said that was good, go with it. Teachers didn't like it because they didn't know anything about anarchism. That was a big thing for me back then.

And I found anarchist thinking—not anarchy thinking, but anarchist thinking and anarchism, reading Peter Kropotkin and so on. Conceptually, it was important for me to see the whole dichotomy from fascism and capitalism to anarchism. To me, it became a yin-yang circle. But if you don't have anarchism, the yin-yang circle isn't complete. You can't really see the whole turning of political processes and thinking. I thought that was a big achievement.

I was looking for something. I needed more stimulation—and yet, although I went away for many years, I never felt I was leaving Malaysia. I was just going out to learn things. So, when I changed my passport in 1989, it wasn't an emotional moment.

#### WH: Why did you change your passport?

**OKB:** Sweden gave me a scholarship to study Sinology, and I have to go to China. But I can't get into China if I'm a Malaysian, at the time. To me, I was in a philosophical crisis. I had to go to China to find out why I found certain Western thinking unacceptable.

Why do I react so strongly to certain ways of thinking? I assume it's my Penang background, which is part English, part Chinese. And in Stockholm, if you want to learn Eastern thinking, the best way was to learn Chinese. So, I actually learned Mandarin from Swedish people. That's why it's not so good. And they like to teach you Mencius, Confucius, all that stuff. In the end, the one good thing out of that was that I'm the first one to translate Sun Tzu's *The Art of War* from classical Chinese to Swedish. It is still selling; I'm still getting royalty out of it.

#### WH: You love writing, why didn't you pursue studies of language or literature?

**OKB:** You have to know the world to write about it. When I was young, that prompted you to go towards that. I was born a Catholic. I went to Catholic school. And when I look back today—even though I'm no longer religious in any sense—but I think what I picked up from Catholic teaching was exactly catholicism, the small “c”, universality.

Once that becomes very strong in you, you see that it can easily become socialism, you start thinking like that. That's why I have trouble forcing myself to accept narrow nationalism. That's why when I gave up the passport, it didn't feel at all like an important thing, because the world is human, it's not national. A child of mankind probably, I would say.

Maybe enlightenment, maybe Confucius, this universal thing has always been around. But in our nation-state era, the national identity is the most demanding. You travel with your passport. Without your passport, you're dead. I mean, that's how we've organised humankind.

#### WH: So, you “discovered” philosophy in Sweden?

**OKB:** After I got my degree in public administration in the Swedish system, I thought I had to do Western philosophy. There were two types, practical philosophy and theoretical philosophy. Practical is actually ethics. Theoretical would be, perhaps, you study philosophers. Of course, I went into practical philosophy. But then I realised it's actually only ethics. And in Stockholm University, ethics is utilitarianism. These people take ethics as mathematical. Everything is, wow, so it becomes very simple. If you're able to count, it's very simple. But you cannot. I don't know what the hell they were doing. Spending years trying to argue that the best happiness is the one that gives you more this and more that.

We don't act like that. I mean, to some extent, qualitatively, we act like that, yes, but never quantitatively. Thanks to certain friends that I met in that course, I got interested in Ludwig Wittgenstein, whose philosophy is very deconstructionist. Instead of looking for logic with a big “L”, you actually understand that all languages have small logic, small rationale. And it becomes a language game.

#### WH: Could you elaborate that, please?

**OKB:** For a person coming from a multicultural society, most of our language is not high-end language. Our language is all market language. It's obvious to us that language is whatever is required, then you have that. These guys in Cambridge, they don't see this. All these philosophy people, they're looking at this big “L”. They say, this is Plato, I suppose.

Why I liked Wittgenstein was he went against the whole thing, cracking Western philosophy, that Western philosophy largely had gone wrong. That's why I think Wittgenstein became so popular in Japan. Because the Japanese also consider language to be a problem.

Language is not neutral. Very useful, but you don't get trapped by it. That was what fascinated me. Out of all the studies about Western philosophy, I would say, of course, some Marxist thinking is important, and a bit of Foucault, because at least power is a problem. I love Spinoza because he sort of changed religious thinking into “God, or Nature”. And I rather like some of the Chinese thinkers. Confucius had certain things to teach us, and naturally, everyone loves Taoism because Taoism gives you excuses to be whatever.

Looking back, I think this would be the few philosophers I was influenced by—but I never took the exam. I went four years in philosophy, and I thought, you cannot test philosophy. You can just teach me. If I'm going to pass the exam, I'm going to pass the exam of the utilitarian. So, I don't have a degree in philosophy, although it affected me greatly.

**WH: Coming back to your plan to go to China, what happened?**

**OKB:** After that, it led me to Chinese thinking, and the best way to do it was to join the Sinology Department. In Sweden, they're very classical, so you learn all the classics instead of the modern ones. Then, they gave me a scholarship for two years to study in Beijing. It was a good time to go to Beijing—just after Tiananmen, so there were soldiers everywhere.

But it was during the tail end of communism, if you like. There were good things to see—like this idea of community was very strong. China taught me it was good to see the tail end of communism, and then to see China today. Here was a country that actually practiced minimal income gap. There was corruption out there. Everyone's making 300 or 400 yuan per month.

When it's switched into "any cat that catches a mouse" mode, it is fine; the whole thing works, certainly, definitely, the last 30 years has worked. Recently, I've been to China a bit. It's shocking to see what they managed to accomplish. Because when I was there in 1989, what I saw, I asked myself, where were the 5,000 years of civilisation? I couldn't see it anywhere. The toilets were the worst you can imagine. The spitting was everywhere. You actually walked by looking at the floor. You're going to step on somebody's spit.

A few years back when I went there again, everything changed; everything was better when they had become richer, although they're now less friendly.

**WH: What happened after you completed your PhD?**

**OKB:** In Sweden, I worked at Ericsson the whole time. That was how I lived. I was a factory worker, doing quality control, running machines. You didn't have to know anything; you just made sure what buttons you need to press. I did that for 22 years.

But my hobby was academia, if one could put it that way. I went for all sorts of courses, and in Sweden, it's free. You can go for this course or that course, just learn whatever you want. But if you do that as a hobby long enough, you're going to end up with a PhD! It took me a long while, but I got there in the end, lecturing and so on. Seen another way, I just went into Stockholm University and did the whole shebang—going from undergraduate until you run out of space. You're never going to be a professor.

But then Ericsson moved to China. Suddenly, I lost my main job at the same time I had just finished my PhD. With my third child coming, my wife and I decided to go back to Asia.

UKM (Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia) offered me a job, but took it back. At the same time, I applied to ISEAS Singapore and was accepted. We moved to Singapore even though Singapore was never in my head. But it turned out the stars were aligned; I did need Singapore because Sweden wasn't enough.

Singapore was a country that actually consciously went for a type of decolonisation, and although not totally a form of decolonisation, its nation building was serious; no fooling around. All these men—Lee Kuan Yew and his group—knew what nation building historically involved. That's how I would look at Singapore now. But being a small country, certain things look bad and go wrong.

I returned to Penang, to the state where I was born. I think I'm a Merdeka child. Looking back, when I was born in 1955, I was for two years a subject of the Queen. I think this must be why, when I did all the political biographies, I can understand them. I can understand Tun Dr Ismail Abdul Rahman, I can understand Lim Kit Siang... I think I was at the tail end of it, getting the tailwind of what it meant.

**WH: What is it about philosophy that interests you so much?**

**OKB:** Language is a problem. Language carries connotations, that kind of thing. Nothing more dramatic than that, I think. And then it suddenly hit me that if we think, we think of everything as language games. Now, this ties in with something I do with my kids. I allowed them, when they were young, to play computer games. I never stopped them. Because I thought a computer game is complete in itself. It's a bubble. You cannot have contradictions in a computer game, right? It's all thought up to be complete. And then you change game.

The rules are different. You let them play five or six games, they start becoming conscious. It's all made-up. So, they will see that the world is made-up. You know, a bit like that. It's all discourse-based. That's why the words after that, I like words like paradigm and discourse—other words for language games.

The Chinese are different. The Chinese base can't be controlled that easily, I think. If you have a civilisation without power, what does your science look like? I sort of sense that the Chinese have something there. It could be medicine even. It's sort of half scientific today.

**WH: Would you dare to go against the contemporary stereotypes, questioning things such as racism in Malaysia? Do you consider yourself an activist?**

**OKB:** I get very cynical nowadays and like to talk about how the problem of the world is universal education being badly done. We have a lot of slightly educated people, and the problem with these slightly educated people, they think they can say things. And then we have the social media.

What I mean by that is actually language traps you into thinking there is an agent. "So why don't you do this? Why don't they?" Where are these agents coming from that can be supplanted by the word "they" or "you"? Any system is so complicated, there's no one agent, unless you have a routine system, whatever you have.

And I've been an activist for some reason all the time. But I think I want to be a smart activist. So, you'll not see me joining NGOs because I find NGOs don't know enough.

**WH: Perhaps you see yourself as an anarchist? Or how do you actually view things?**

**OKB:** If I'm an anarchist, it's only as a philosophical anarchist. I know that anarchism won't work. But you have to conceptually think like an anarchist. To your earlier question, if I would oppose racism, yes, but only smartly. And I don't think burning bridges help.

People are not going to listen to you after you have shouted at them. Be their friend and then "I understand you a bit." The only thing I ever joined when I was in Sweden was a syndicalist movement for a little while. But that was also just a joke, just to fill in the spot they have placed, things like that.

For me, philosophy is activism. Basically, I view things in passing processes, more than in moral stances and situations. So, my ambition is to synergise, facilitate and merge positive and half-positive energies. Put another way, I analyse largely from that angle of fluidity of purpose, process and prominence.





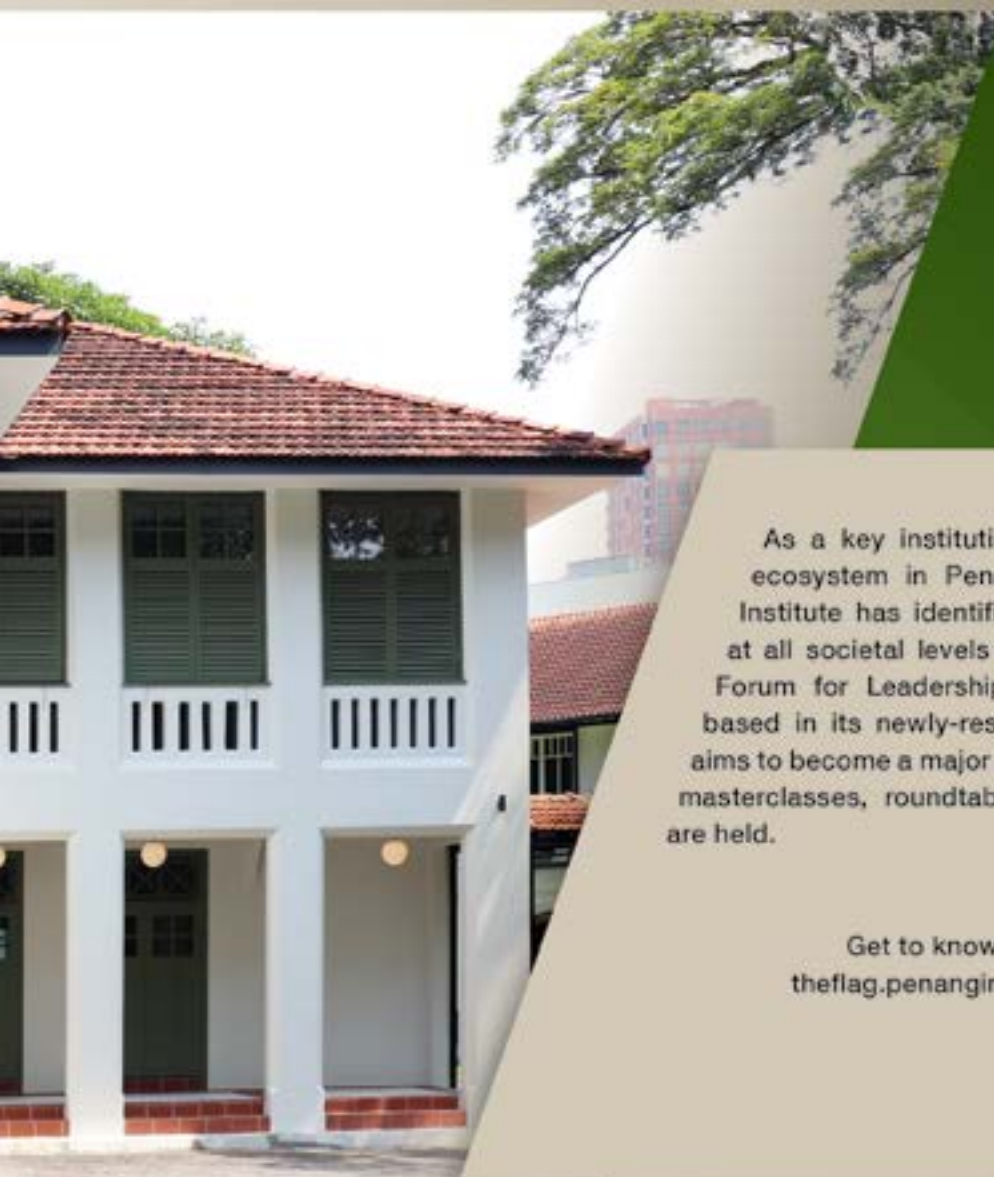


Forum for Leadership  
and Governance

@ Penang Institute







As a key institution within the policymaking ecosystem in Penang and Malaysia, Penang Institute has identified leadership development at all societal levels to be an urgent matter. Its Forum for Leadership and Governance (FLAG), based in its newly-restored South Wing building, aims to become a major platform at which leadership masterclasses, roundtables, seminars and courses are held.

Get to know The FLAG  
[theflag.penanginstitute.org](http://theflag.penanginstitute.org)





A portrait of Ooi Kee Beng, a middle-aged man with grey hair, glasses, and a goatee, wearing a dark blue button-down shirt. He is standing in front of a background of green and yellow foliage. The text is overlaid on the left side of the image.

# OOI KEE BENG AT ISEAS: IDEAS, INNOVATION AND INSPIRATION

**BY FRANCIS HUTCHINSON**

**OOI KEE BENG** spent a significant part of his career at the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS). He arrived in ISEAS in Singapore from Sweden in 2004, and left in 2017. During the first half of his time at the Institute, he was in the Regional Socio-Cultural Studies and the Malaysia Studies Programme (MSP). From 2011 until his departure, he was Deputy Director, charged with overseeing the Institute's entire research programme.

Always a doer, Kee Beng inspires by example. Very prolific as an academic, during his time at ISEAS, he was active in three broad areas.

Kee Beng perhaps became best known for a series of very influential biographies of Malaysian and Singaporean first-generation leaders. This includes but is not limited to the likes of Ismail Abdul Rahman, Lim Kit Siang, Goh Keng Swee, Yusof Ishak and Lee Hau-Shik. Coupling in-depth archival research with key informant interviews, these biographies afforded the public and researchers an intimate and human perspective into the lives and times of these foundational personalities. As an aside, this work put the ISEAS library on the region's radar as a safe and respectful abode for personal libraries and documents.

Kee Beng also wrote prolifically on Malaysian politics, including a trilogy that analysed the country's transition away from Mahathir through the Abdullah Badawi period and into the Najib era. He also wrote or co-edited books on the run-up to or aftermath of the 2008, 2013 and 2018 general elections, namely *March 8: Eclipsing May 13*, *Done Making Do: 1Party Rule Ends in Malaysia* and *Catharsis: A Second Chance for Democracy in Malaysia*.

The third area of his research was on regional issues. This includes the winner of the ASEAN Book Publishers' Association Award, *Continent, Coast and Ocean: Dynamics of Regionalism in Asia* and *The Third ASEAN Reader*, both of which he co-edited. And, perhaps the book with the most far-reaching impact is the critically-acclaimed *The Eurasian Core and its Edges: Dialogues with Wang Gung Wu on the History of the World*.

In addition to his research work, Kee Beng published in newspapers from the region, including his frequent contributions to the *Straits Times* op-ed page, his

column in *The Edge* and innumerable articles elsewhere. He also regularly appeared on Channel NewsAsia, showing the Institute's more introverted researchers the tantalising possibilities of engaging with the media.

As Deputy Director (2011-2017), Kee Beng reconfigured the way the Institute engaged with the wider community. Firmly believing that researchers should share more of their research in a timely and accessible manner, ISEAS began to produce a monthly newsletter summarising and analysing key events in the region. This then evolved into the shorter and more analytical *Perspectives*, produced from 2012 onwards; and then the longer and more in-depth *Trends*, published from 2014 until the present. Professionally copy-edited and produced as well as quickly released, these outputs really multiplied the reach and impact of researchers.

In line with his penchant for new ideas, Kee Beng started a wide-ranging and ambitious research project looking at how neighbouring Southeast Asian countries relate to each other. However, explicitly eschewing conventional land-based approaches, Kee Beng pushed us to look at how the sea simultaneously connected and divided adjacent nations. On a personal level, this led to a very enriching part of my career, where I, along with colleagues from ISEAS and beyond, looked at interactions between Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia across the Singapore and Johor Straits.

Beyond the ideas and the innovation, Kee Beng was very active at the coalface of the publication process. With a keen eye for detail, colour and flair, he took the lead in revamping covers, designs and websites. And, he personally edited the bulk of the Institute's output, from *Perspectives* to *Trends*, as well as many compilations. Over the years, my own outputs often benefited from his deft touch, ranging from reframing to retouching a title or phrase.

During his sojourn at ISEAS, Kee Beng brought a new vision about what research ISEAS should carry out and how it should engage with the public. In line with this, he was able to dismantle mental and procedural barriers about how researchers should work with each other and relate to their own scholarship. Kee Beng's ideas, innovation and inspiration left ISEAS an immeasurably improved institution.



**FRANCIS HUTCHINSON** is Senior Fellow and Coordinator of the Malaysia Studies Programme at ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute.

# MERDEKA FOR WHOM?

## OOI KEE BENG RETHINKS MALAYSIA'S NATIONHOOD

BY CAROLYN KHOR

**OOI KEE BENG'S** reputation precedes him. His works are widely published in the country, regionally and even globally. He has authored and edited over 20 books on Malaysian politics, nation-building and political figures. Besides his illustrious career as an academician, researcher and writer, he now leads Penang Institute and serves as a senior visiting fellow at the ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute.

Most notably, Ooi continues to share his insights through *Penang Monthly*, Penang Institute's flagship magazine, and through his regular column, Picking on the Present, in *The Edge*.



What distinguishes Ooi from others is his ability to manoeuvre the nuances and breadth of Malaysia's dramatic politics, while connecting them to broader trends on a regional and global scale. Yet, on another dimension, perhaps the most striking aspect of his writing, is how deeply it resonates with readers—one might even say he writes as if speaking directly to them.

#### MOULDERING PERSPECTIVES

Back in 2017, when Ooi was appointed the Executive Director of Penang Institute by Lim Guan Eng, then Chief Minister of Penang, he only had one focus—making Penang Institute the top think tank in Malaysia.

And that he did, strengthening policymaking in Penang and Malaysia by drawing on his three decades of experience in studying nation-building in Asia and analysing Malaysian politics. Through publications like *Issues* and *Monographs*, Ooi shares research conducted by Penang Institute's researchers with state assemblymen, members of parliament and the public regarding policy-relevant matters related to Penang, Malaysia and the region.

At the launch of his book, *The Reluctant Nation: Malaysia and Its Vain Quest for Common Purpose*, at the George Town Literary Festival organised by Penang Institute, Ooi said how we judge the unity government cannot be without consideration for the situation that the world is in today.

"The world is changing, and this is also a time for Malaysia to change," he said. The changing world means that we are in exceptional times where exceptional possibilities are possible, and that is why Anwar needs to adapt nation-building to the new global context, he elaborated.

Ooi also stressed that Malaysians should consider governance a largely technocratic process, rather than succumbing to emotional rhetoric.

"Right now, as geo-economics undergo great changes, Malaysia's unity government feels the imperative—and sees a window of opportunity—to adapt and to be proactive where international trade is concerned."

It is important to ensure domestic tensions inherited from decades of a restrictive and divisive notion of nationhood do not upset the creation of a healthier national narrative. In his opinion, a healthier nation is less introverted, less provincial, more dynamic and more inclusive.

"There are good reasons why Malaysia was born a federation. The point is not for such a creation to be centralised as quickly as possible, but the opposite. That means we should have allowed the various parts, the various states, the various communities to embrace Merdeka as a personal treasure, and be given resources and collective support to develop their special traits and their economic ambitions.

"The centre's job should be, firstly, to facilitate lower levels of government, and secondly, to exercise damage control and even out income and opportunity gaps for national growth where needed. Not easy. But no alternative is easy in any case," said Ooi.

"Merdeka means independence, but for whom?" he questioned. "That question may appear to be an ideological one, but it is simply about the potential for growth of each citizen now liberated, and who should be aided in pursuing their potential. It is not merely independence for parties and politicians, who claim the

right to represent fellow citizens and their prescribed identities," he said.

Ooi further explained that statehood has been understood to be a search to find manifestation for some communal essence, some inherent nationhood, instead of being an inclusive opportunity for liberated citizens to blossom through the creation of a facilitating state that functions technocratically to empower citizens.

"For this to work, nationhood and statehood have to be understood as a thing of the future, not of the past. A new nation is more a greenfield project than a brownfield project, where identities are concerned."

#### THE RELUCTANT NATION

Ooi's latest publication, *The Reluctant Nation*, critiques Malaysia as a "nationally narcissistic" country. The eponymous reluctance stems from a host of reasons: the inability to decide, a lack of power, the absence of clear and realistic goals, or even a conscious strategy to maintain the status quo. Meanwhile, Ooi's idea of nation building is generating a sense of common purpose among key stakeholders in society, whether in achieving a homogenous society or a pluralistic one.

Ooi's thoughtful analyses and kaleidoscope of wisdom encourage readers to reflect on the long-term implications of governance decisions and the potential for building a more resilient and equitable society.

Tanjong Bunga State Assemblyman, Zairil Khir Johari effectively sums up Ooi's commentaries as "always making for interesting reading".

"Not just because he likes to challenge existing norms, but also because of his philosophical worldview. His musings are often allegorical, and one can almost imagine thought bubbles forming as he paints his canvas with words."

"More importantly, they are written with a keen sense of aspiration—always reminding us that there is something to look forward to and that, at the end of it all, the struggle is worth it."

*The Edge's* op-ed editor, Rash Behari Bhattacharjee, similarly acknowledges Ooi's incisive perspectives in his monthly column, where he frequently revisits the issue of nation-building.

In 2012, Ooi posited that endless policy making had become the new game in town—and across the country. This, he argued, points to a growing urgency for decentralisation.

Allen Tan, former managing director of The Habitat Group and prominent environmentalist, said that Ooi's greatest strength, when it comes to politics and Malaysian life, is that he brings an international perspective to the table amidst the often opaque nature of local political discourse.

"His analyses are grounded in historical context and in comparative insights from other nations, which gives his arguments a depth that is often lacking in Malaysian commentary," he said. "He doesn't pull his punches, and he shares his insider's perspective utilising language that resonates just as well in halls of powers as it does with the person on the street or in the *kopitiam*."

Tan added that there is no better guide, advisor and friend to "help us make sense of it all and to help us navigate the road ahead in this rapidly changing world fraught with global uncertainties brought about by multiple disruptive forces."



**The world is changing, and this is also a time for Malaysia to change."**



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

# A MIND THAT INSPIRES, A MENTOR WHO GUIDES

BY BEH MAY TING



**IF LEADERSHIP HAS** a script, he does not follow it—he writes his own. And, in doing so, he pushes the rest of us to think beyond the obvious, not as an intellectual exercise, but as a necessary responsibility.

Working with him feels like stepping into a living, ever-expanding library—one where ideas are not just stored, but tested, debated and, more often than not, thrown back at you with a challenge to think harder. He does not dictate; he nudges, questions and pushes us to see that the answers are often already within us—we have just been asking the wrong questions. He challenges assumptions, urges us to rethink what we take for granted, and always circles back to his favourite question: “What is the meaning of Merdeka?”

At his core, Kee Beng is an anarchist—not in the reckless, chaotic sense, but philosophically. He distrusts power structures that stifle independent thought, and he resists hierarchies that demand obedience over understanding. He believes that knowledge should be liberating, not limiting, and that true progress comes from questioning authority, dismantling dogma and always pushing against the tide of complacency.

Many seek out conversations with him—evident in the endless invitations he receives to speak. I am fortunate to learn from him not just in formal settings, but also during spontaneous discussions over lunch, where history, philosophy and politics flow as naturally as everyday conversations.

For him, knowledge is not something to be hoarded; it is meant to be shared, to spark debate, to shift narratives. He builds spaces where ideas can breathe, and refuses to settle for mediocrity—nor allow it for those around him. He does not merely study the world as places on a map—he sees it as a collection of histories, evolving and interconnected, needing to be told with clarity, honesty and sometimes, provocation.

And if knowledge is power, Kee Beng wields it relentlessly. He is probably one of the most published individuals in the region, his works spanning history, politics, philosophy and identity with an intensity few can match. His writings do not merely document events; they dissect and reframe them, challenging both policymakers and ordinary citizens to think deeper about the structures shaping their world.

Those who work with him never work *under* him. We work *beside* him—sometimes struggling to keep up, but always knowing that the pursuit of knowledge is the only hierarchy that matters. He does not just mentor; he empowers. He does not only critique; he refines. And in moments of doubt, he reminds us—through action more than words—that the work we do matters. That ideas, wielded well, can shape minds, policies and futures.

His commitment to his work is remarkable—though not necessarily enviable. He works through weekends, public holidays and, I suspect, long into the night—his mind always engaged in the next project, the next thought. He often says the mind never ages, but even those half his age struggle to match his energy and drive.

Summing up Kee Beng’s impact in words is no easy task. Those who have the privilege of working with him agree—his intellect, leadership and generosity shape not just individuals, but entire institutions and narratives.

As a scholar, Kee Beng has an unmatched ability to weave history, politics and identity into analyses that challenge conventional wisdom. His work on Malaysia and Southeast Asia deepens our understanding of the region, urging us to engage critically with its past, present and future. He does not impose his views; he invites discussion, always insisting on nuance and depth over easy conclusions.

As a leader, particularly in his tenure as Executive Director of Penang Institute, he builds an intellectual powerhouse—a space where research, policy discourse and public engagement thrive. Under his guidance, the Institute became a hub for rigorous debate and bold ideas. He fosters a culture of openness, encouraging young researchers to challenge assumptions, explore unconventional perspectives and sharpen their thinking. Working with him is both inspiring and demanding—his mind moves swiftly, making connections others might miss, and he expects those around him to keep up.

What sets Kee Beng apart most is his generosity. He is more than a scholar and a leader; he is a mentor, a teacher and a friend. He takes a genuine interest in the growth of those around him, offering guidance without pretension and encouragement without expectation. His door is always open—whether for a discussion on policy, a debate over ideas, or simply a coffee and a conversation.

At 70, his legacy is not just in the books he has written or the institutions he has shaped. It lives on in the critical thinkers he has nurtured, the minds he has sharpened and the conversations he has sparked. Those of us who work with him are all the better for it.

Here are some lunchtime wisdoms that I have received from him:

- There is no failure if you are doing what you are passionate about.
- Writing takes your mind on a journey, leading you to discoveries and ideas you never imagined when you first put pen to paper.
- When you talk to a mentor, it is not the facts that are being spoken that is important, but learning from the way his mind works.
- In order to be an eagle, you mustn’t behave like a mynah.
- Self image is the key to professionalism.

Kee Beng, on this milestone birthday, we celebrate not just your years, but your impact. May the years ahead bring you continued joy, good health and new intellectual adventures. Thank you for your wisdom, your kindness and your unwavering dedication to the pursuit of knowledge. A mind that never stops questioning, a leader who leads by opening doors and a mentor who never asks for tribute—but whose influence demands one.



**DR. BEH MAY TING** is an urban anthropologist and a senior analyst at Penang Institute. She draws professional and personal inspirations from the finer things in life.





# AQUACULTURE

## CAN ENSURE FOOD SECURITY FOR PENANG

BY IAN MCINTYRE

**WHILE PENANG IS** one of the smallest states in size, it is now the largest in terms of aquaculture production, with an annual output of 68 million kilograms of seafood. This translates to an annual wholesale value nearing RM1.5bil—another feather in the state's economy.

There is more room underwater for aquatic growth.



**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.

Fahmi Zainol, the EXCO who oversees agrotechnology, food security and cooperative development says the potential for growth is bright because Penang plans to digitalise aquaculture; a digitalised system would allow farmers or fishermen to carefully plan their catches.

While the state will now also need to take into account the ill effects of the new and evolving tariff percentages imposed on Malaysian imports by the US, Fahmi says that a thriving farming and fisheries sector will help consolidate food security and subdue inflation.

In 2017, Penang Institute did a study on the agriculture sector. According to an executive summary by Negin Vaghefi, aquaculture has become increasingly important due to rising population and income driving demand for fish. This growth is partly a response to overfishing along the peninsula's western coast. While fish farming currently contributes minimally to the national GDP, it remains a significant supplier within Penang, and can act as a basis for economic diversification. "Aquaculture is expected to become a powerful income and employment generator and a high profit sub-sector. This is despite challenges such as resource constraints (land and labour), heavy dependence on imported raw materials, low-quality water, and vulnerability to climate change and disease."

In 2015, Negin's research showed that Penang's aquaculture production gained the highest wholesale value among the states in the country. Brackish water ponds and cages constitute the majority of Penang's aquaculture. Fisheries from brackish water have been contributing nearly 50% of the total fish production and about 69% of its value in Penang. Of these, sea bass and snapper recorded the highest production, followed by shrimp, cockle and other brackish water cages species such as grouper and mackerel—no surprises there as these fish are in high demand among Malaysians. Other aquatic life bred within the fish farms nested near the Sultan Abdul Halim Muadzam Shah Bridge are shrimps, cockles and ornamental fishes.

The state is poised to be a huge fish exporter in the region because of its closeness to the Indian Ocean, and its well-developed port and airport cargo transport facilities. Moreover, Penang is a major transportation and logistics hub in the northern region and the Indonesia-Thailand-Malaysia triangle, and it facilitates farmers in gaining access to the global market.

#### FARMED FISH DRIVING GROWTH

While aquaculture offers an alternative to over-fishing, many aspects of it require enhanced scientific knowledge and technological advancement to become a sus-

tainable source of production and income generator. WorldFish Centre recently released findings highlighting how aquatic foods are vital to Malaysia's food security, nutrition, economy, and livelihoods—both capture fisheries and aquaculture playing central roles.

However, the sector is currently at a critical juncture. The new study shows that despite its critical role, capture fisheries has stalled while farmed fish and seaweed are now driving growth.<sup>[1]</sup> A study published in *Frontiers in Sustainable Food Systems* authored by scientists from WorldFish, the Centre for Marine and Coastal Studies (CEMACS) and the School of Biological Sciences at USM, and the Institute for Future Initiatives at the University of Tokyo finds that overfishing, habitat loss, and challenging governance and market environments have pushed capture fisheries to the limit.<sup>[2]</sup>

In 2022, wild-caught fish made up 69% of Malaysia's total fish production. Unfortunately, output has remained flat since. In contrast, aquaculture which includes farmed fish, shrimp and seaweed, contributed up to 30% and continues to expand. Malaysia's seaweed farming sector is now the single largest component of aquaculture, making up more than half of total farmed output. This low-cost, low-impact system has quietly become one of the country's most promising blue economy success stories.

Cristiano Rossignoli, Research Lead at WorldFish said Malaysia's aquatic food systems are facing both risk and opportunity. "Aquaculture in Malaysia still faces key sustainability challenges. However, it holds great potential to meet the growing demand for aquatic foods, especially as wild fisheries stagnate. To unlock this potential, smallholders must be supported to adopt sustainable practices," he said.

Fisheries and aquaculture in Malaysia face rising costs, limited access to hatcheries, poor cold storage and processing facilities, complex regulatory processes and environmental vulnerability. Many are being squeezed out of the sector altogether.

Director of CEMACS, Aileen Tan said the findings underscore a need to adapt to shifting dynamics. "This research provides important evidence that Malaysia's aquatic food sector is undergoing a structural shift. As wild fish production plateaus, it is essential to strengthen support for sustainable aquaculture especially for small-scale producers," she said.

Malaysia's fish self-sufficiency rate has dropped from 93% in 2019 to just over 90% in 2022.

While domestic demand for seafood remains high, the country is importing more fish than ever before. Results from the study show that major reforms to expand hatchery capacity improve rural infra-

structure and support small producers is needed. It also recommends investments in research and development.

Even the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO), in its latest report on the state of the World Fisheries and Aquaculture, mirrors the contention that traditional fishing is losing out to the cages concept of fish farming.

Total fisheries and aquaculture production reached an all-time record of 223.2 million tonnes in 2022, 185.4 million tonnes (live weight equivalent) of aquatic animals and 37.8 million tonnes (wet weight) of algae, a 4.4% increase from 2020. 62% of aquatic animals were harvested in marine areas (69% from fisheries and 31% from aquaculture) and 38% from inland waters (84% from aquaculture and 16% from capture fisheries).

Asian countries produce 70% of the aquatic catch in the world, followed by countries in Europe and Latin America and the Caribbean (9% each), Africa (7%), Northern America (3%) and Oceania (1%). China remains the major producer (36%), followed by India (8%), Indonesia (7%), Vietnam (5%) and Peru (3%).

But like many other aquaculture habitats, Penang is facing high risks from sea pollution and climate change. Just last year, the late Zulfigar Yasin, on a boat trip to CEMACS, highlighted the issue about algae blooms that kill fish in net pens. "Did you see the fish farms on the way here?" he asked, "Unfortunately, I can safely say that the waters here will experience an algae bloom overnight, and if they do not farm the fish tonight, the fish will suffocate and die, leading to a huge loss."

Algae blooms deplete the oxygen in the water, and because these fish have nowhere to swim to, they are left to die, unbeknownst to the fish farmers.

"There needs to be more education, and these farmers need technology, such as monitors to indicate water quality. If they know that an algae bloom is going to happen, the fish can be farmed and sold before it happens," he added. Hence, managing wastes discharge and recycling are paramount in the protection of food security in aquaculture.

#### FOOTNOTES

[1] <https://worldfishcenter.org/press-release/malaysia-wild-fish-catch-stagnating-while-aquaculture-surges-says-new-report>

[2] <https://www.frontiersin.org/journals/sustainable-food-systems/articles/10.3389/fsufs.2025.1545263/full>



# SEAWEED

## AS PILLAR FOR AQUACULTURE AND FOOD SECURITY

BY ABE WOO AND ANNETTE JAYA RAM

**MALAYSIA IS RANKED** ninth on the list over the world's biggest fish and seafood consumers per capita, way ahead of countries like China, or any neighbouring ASEAN countries. Given Malaysia's cultural, economic and geographical connections to the sea, our unique position in a mega diverse marine biodiversity area has deeply rooted our diet to seafood. One surely cannot imagine Nasi Lemak without anchovies or Penang's famous Char Koay Teow without blood cockles. However, I am very sure that this is becoming common as we face challenges of dwindling supply of fish and our ever-growing appetite for seafood.

Malaysia used to be a net exporter of seafood products, but this took a turn in 2013 when we started importing more seafood products than exporting them. Since then, we have been running on a trade deficit on seafood, which in 2022 amounted to (-)RM3.2bil.<sup>[1]</sup> Past issues in *Penang Monthly* have already highlighted several strategies on improving the sector through the lens of sustainability in capture—fisheries, restorative aquaculture, supply chain management and ecosystem protection;<sup>[2][3][4][5]</sup> therefore, I shall not repeat them here.



**DR. ABE WOO SAU PIN** studies biodiversity of marine invertebrates and their systematics. His research interests include ecology, diversity, systematics and taxonomy of echinoderms.



**DR. ANNETTE JAYA RAM** is a lecturer at CEMACS. She is working on the mariculture of mud crabs to find the best ways to culture them, to reduce human dependence on harvesting mud crabs and sea cucumbers from the wild.

### CONSIDER SEA VEGETATION

I have tried to think about traditional seafood dishes made from seaweed, and I have come to realise that seaweed is not really eaten much as it is part of our diet. Apart from the delicacies in Sabah, the only other traditional dish that is made from seaweed can be found in Kelantan, known as *kerabu sare* (*kerabu sarang*). It is made with a type of red algae from the genus *Gracilaria* typically found in the shallow coastal area of Peninsular Malaysia. Although 44% of Malaysia's aquaculture output in terms of tonnage is seaweed,<sup>[6]</sup> it doesn't seem like farmed seaweed made it in our dishes—but let's look at the edible weeds from the sea.

1

#### BROWN SEaweEDS (Phaeophyceae)

Brown seaweeds were once the leading group in seaweed aquaculture. *Laminaria japonica*, known as “kombu”, is among the most commonly cultivated, especially in East Asia. It is widely used as food, particularly in soups and also processed for compounds like alginate, mannitol and iodine. Another significant species is *Undaria pinnatifida* or “wakame”, native to the cold, temperate coasts of the northwest Pacific. It is popularly used in dishes like Chuka Wakame, especially in Japan and Korea. China, Japan and Korea remain the largest producers of brown seaweeds, reflecting a strong cultural and commercial history.

2

#### RED SEaweEDS (Rhodophyta)

Red seaweeds now dominate global aquaculture production due to increased cultivation in tropical regions. This group includes species such as *Kappaphycus*, *Eucheuma* and *Gracilaria*, which are primarily grown for hydrocolloid production, specifically carrageenan and agar. These substances are widely used in the food industry as thickening and stabilising agents. The Philippines and Indonesia are key players in the cultivation of red seaweeds, which has led to a shift away from traditional brown seaweed dominance. Red seaweeds are also valued for their high yield and ease of cultivation in warmer climates.

3

#### GREEN SEaweEDS (Chlorophyta)

Although green seaweed production has declined since the 1990s, several species still play important roles in food and aquaculture. The *Ulva* species, commonly referred to as sea lettuce, are used in dried food products and as animal feed. They are particularly suited for integrated aquaculture systems due to their high growth rates, nutrient absorption capabilities and simple life cycles. In South Africa, for example, *Ulva* is farmed to support abalone feed. Another notable species is *Caulerpa lentillifera*, or sea grapes. These are a high-value delicacies in places like Okinawa and the Philippines. These green seaweeds are often sold fresh and fetch premium market prices. These tiny grape-like bulbs is also promoted as green or vegan caviar for those who choose not to consume fish roe or true caviar.



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## SOCIO-ECONOMIC IMPACTS OF SEAWEED FARMING

Seaweed farming generates wide-ranging socio-economic benefits. It provides employment opportunities, especially in coastal areas with limited economic options. The work spans cultivation, harvesting, processing and marketing, helping to develop local industries. In countries like Tanzania, seaweed farming has become a major economic driver for women, who represent around 90% of the farming workforce. It also supports income diversification, reducing reliance on fishing or other seasonal activities.<sup>[7]</sup>

Cultural impacts are more nuanced. Seaweed farming can support the preservation of traditional practices when aligned with local customs, but may also disrupt existing land use and routines. Successful integration depends on active community engagement, cultural sensitivity and education. Conducting cultural impact assessments and involving locals in decision-making helps foster ownership and long-term support. Additionally, the industry encourages innovation and entrepreneurship, for example, using seaweed for biodegradable packaging;<sup>[8]</sup> while helping to develop new local markets and attract investment.

## ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACTS

When done sustainably, seaweed farming has low negative impacts and, in fact, brings ecological benefits. Seaweeds absorb excess nutrients from the water, improving water quality and helping prevent eutrophication. They also contribute to marine biodiversity when farms are thoughtfully located.

However, there are potential downsides. Introducing non-native seaweed species can pose invasive threats to local ecosystems. While frameworks exist, farmer awareness and compliance remain inconsistent. Additionally, seaweed farms can cause shading of the seabed, which may affect photosynthetic organisms. While small to medium farms usually have minimal impact, cumulative shading from large-scale operations could alter planktonic and benthic communities.

Chemical use is typically limited in seaweed farming but still poses risks if fertilisers or pesticides are involved. Sustainable practices and monitoring are essential to prevent environmental contamination and ensure long-term viability.

## VERSATILITY AND INTEGRATION

Seaweeds are incredibly versatile and are used in a wide range of products, from food and cosmetics to packaging and pharmaceuticals. Their multifunctionality supports a circular economy and adds value to marine-based industries. One of the most sustainable models is Integrated Multi-Trophic Aquaculture (IMTA), where seaweeds are cultivated alongside species like fish or shellfish. In these systems, seaweeds absorb excess nutrients from animal waste, improving water quality and enhancing overall system sustainability. This approach not only reduces environmental impacts but also increases the efficiency and profitability of aquaculture operations.

## SEAWEEDS AIDING FOOD SECURITY

Aquaculture (which includes seaweed cultivation) is a potentially lucrative business when integrated well with technology like Internet of Things (IoT), big data analytics and automation. This can be seen in Japan where

advanced indoor and controlled environment farming of salmon done with high precision, aided by technology, has generated high returns to the company.<sup>[9]</sup>

During a visit to a high-tech farm in Chiba, Japan, I saw how it produces 30 tonnes of salmon per year, and has managed with almost no wastewater discharge. This certainly does not look like a traditional outdoor pond, but rather, a clean one equipped with technologically advanced instrumentations and sensors. This should be the future of how we grow seaweeds as well. Think of it as vertical farms with multiple colourful LED lights to stimulate growth of vegetables like kale and arugula. Seaweed farming in Malaysia has started to employ technologies with sensors and LED lighting to efficiently produce cleaner, tastier and organic seaweed such as sea grapes. One example is done in Kuala Selangor in cooperation with Centre for Marine and Coastal Studies (CEMACS). Now, this farm has become a major supplier of sea grapes in the Klang Valley!

If we want to see change in this industry, we need to deal with the dwindling number and the aging workforce in fisheries and aquaculture. The number of licensed fishermen saw a constant reduction a 1.6% year-on-year basis on average from 1998-2023. This is coupled with a surge of foreign workers from Thailand, Indonesia and Vietnam working as fishermen in Malaysia. It is a no-brainer that our youths have shunned jobs that are deemed unappealing, outdated or lacking in career prospects. The image imprinted of a wooden *sampan*, back-breaking pulling of fishing nets and long hours under harsh weather conditions painted the industry as “low-status” and “poor”. It is not surprising that fisheries and aquaculture are laggard industries with limited and low percentage of innovation and knowledge advancement.<sup>[10]</sup>

Changing the narrative of fisheries and aquaculture sector is of utmost important, alongside efforts in managing fish stocks, enforcing sustainable practices or even ecosystem restoration. To attract young talents to a career in aquaculture and fisheries, it is imperative to integrate technology and modernise the industry. A concerted effort by multiple stakeholders, especially education institutions, is crucial.

As for myself, would I recommend any of my younger family members (or my students in the university) to think of a career in fisheries and aquaculture?

Yes, definitely!



1

## CAPTION

1. Sea grapes grown in Kuala Selangor.

# FARMS OF THE FUTURE ARE EMERGING FROM PENANG

BY  
MADELIENE  
TAN

**COMMUNITY FARMING IN** Penang began since the 18th century with the establishment of spice plantations such as nutmeg and clove farms.<sup>[1]</sup> Since then, agriculture has been vital to Penang's development. In recent years, urban communal farming initiatives have gained prominence as a sustainable way to address environmental issues and food security.

According to the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations (FAO), food security is built on four essential pillars: availability, access, utilisation and stability,<sup>[2]</sup> and these communal farms hold the potential to provide that at the very local level. Moreover, these initiatives also help reduce waste and educate people on the importance of self-sufficiency and on decreasing dependency on imported produce.

The informal establishment of small-scale community gardens have always existed, but the concept of urban farming became a growing trend in urban areas such as George Town in the 2010s. Though they vary in location, size, focus and community involvement, community farms and urban farms both aim to upkeep the quality of life of their respective communities, as well as provide fresh, locally cultivated produce. Urban farms are typically small and business-oriented. They prioritise creative, space-efficient food production to increase food security. Community farms tend to be bigger and are usually situated in rural or suburban regions. Often done as a hobby or a collaborative activity, these farms frequently prioritise community involvement and education over profit.<sup>[3]</sup>

## COMMUNITY AND URBAN FARMING

Kebun Kita(R), launched in 2020 at the Penang Digital Library, is Penang's first self-sustaining urban farm, courtesy of the innovative technology provided by Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris (UPSI). The university deployed solar panels for sustainable and renewable energy, an automatic irrigation system for consistent hydration for the crops and vertical hydroponic systems for efficient use of the constrained space. A zero-waste management system was also set in place to collect rainwater. There are raised soil beds to improve drainage and reduce soil compaction, promoting healthier root development.<sup>[4]</sup> The farm is now managed by Bayan Greentech, and in the past few years, they have initiated green education programmes to cultivate the love of growing food within the community.

Think City has also started small-scale farming programmes—what they call the Community-based Food Security and Organic Nutrition Programme at Seberang Perai. Aiming to enhance food security and promote organic farming, the programme currently involves five grant recipients and 21 participants with private farms undergoing training in sustainable practices such as Indigenous Microorganisms (IMO) preparation, composting, plant care and digital marketing. These community gardens engage local participants to produce sustainable yields. Think City's monthly theory-and-practice training equips them to farm, supporting local economies via produce marketing and strengthening community resilience for a sustainable, healthy lifestyle.

While traditional farming is struggling,<sup>[5]</sup> Penang is shifting its focus towards high-value crops such as fruits and herbs. Despite its initial popularity, urban farming needs additional funding for their continuous growth.

“While traditional farming is struggling, Penang is shifting its focus towards high-value crops such as fruits and herbs.”



1



2



### LINEAR PARK (TAMAN JAJAR)

To address pollution and promote sustainability, soil expert and environmental scientist, Kam Suan Pheng mooted Penang's Sungai Kelian revitalisation. She was in charge of cleaning up the river and setting up a communal farm beside it.

Kam advocated for organic farming methods to preserve water quality, engaging local communities in ecological conservation, and reduce pollution from waste dumping and agricultural runoff along Sungai Kelian. By turning the neglected riverbank into a zone for education and biodiversity conservation, she wished to see the community garden grow to become a beneficial reinforcement of these objectives. A group of dedicated community members known as the Friends of Sungai Kelian came together to activate an open space farm for everyone to contribute to in the midst of the pandemic.

The farm integrates community engagement with sustainable farming methods, making it an ideal model for agroecology. The enhanced water quality and revived biodiversity gave the locals the opportunity to grow organic produce, at the same time raising awareness for environmental issues.<sup>[6]</sup> Kam and her team had built a "collector", a rainwater harvester for use during dry seasons, and a tube-well to get water from underground.

#### CAPTIONS

1. Signage at one of the entrances into the Sungai Kelian community farm.
2. Brazilian Spinach (*Alternanthera sissoo*) planted at Kebun Kita(R).

3. Brinjal, okra and other types of vegetables used to be grown at Kebun Kita(R). Now, basil plants are planted on the raised beds.

### NOT WITHOUT CHALLENGES

A major roadblock faced by communal farms is the lack of volunteers and commitment. People who lost their jobs during the pandemic toiled their plot of land, and volunteers with time on their hands also contributed. "But after Covid-19, most of the volunteers got their jobs back, so there weren't many left to manage the farm," Kam said.

In June 2023, the Mayor of the City Council of Penang (MBPP), A. Rajendran and his team visited the farm to offer their support, expressing interest in helping to upgrade the farm with extended technical and infrastructure support, improving the farming practices, and increasing productivity on the farm. Their continued support has enabled the community farm to thrive in the planting of various vegetables and fruits.<sup>[7]</sup>

The Taman Jajar project was funded by donations from interested parties, and some even contributed to building parameter fences around the farm as goats from the nearby villages kept coming over to consume their crops.

The challenges faced by many of these communities and urban farms could be overcome by policies that help them sustain their communities, such as increasing education for the public and raising awareness of these issues. Penang Green Council's (PGC) Masterplan for Urban Farming (2020) suggests urban agriculture to be incorporated into local plans, so that this type of land or building use can be taken up in the future.<sup>[8]</sup> However, the possible implementation of such plans is still underway after a request for a rework by the Penang Chief Minister, Chow Kon Yeow.

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# SECURING A FUTURE FOR MALAYSIA'S PADDY FARMING

BY HAJAR ARIFF

**GLOBAL RICE PRICE** surges highlight the fragility in food security, calling for a diversified and adaptive approach for long-term resilience. Malaysia's reliance on food imports, including roughly 30% of its rice needs from Vietnam and Thailand, underscores this concern. Rice is deeply embedded in Malaysian food culture, and its supply is now facing challenges from urbanisation, climate change and evolving economic priorities.

Therefore, should paddy planting remain central to Malaysian nourishment? Or should alternative food security strategies take precedence?

## THE ENDURING IMPORTANCE OF PADDY

Paddy fields in Penang, particularly in areas like Kepala Batas and Balik Pulau, are more than just agricultural land, they are integral to the state's cultural identity. Local festivals like the Penang International Paddy Festival in Seberang Perai showcase the deep connection between the community and paddy cultivation. Rice, or *nasi*, is central to Penang's famous culinary scene, from Nasi Kandar to traditional dishes like Nasi Lemak—it symbolises the island's rich agricultural heritage. While the Penang today is known for its industrial development, the remaining paddy fields are seen as a vital link to its past.

While Penang excels in yield, evidenced by the state holding the nation's highest average rice yield per hectare for six consecutive years (2018 to present), the national picture offers a discouraging scenario. As illustrated by the Ministry of Agriculture and Food Security's data, the self-sufficiency ratio (SSR) for rice has declined from 62.4% in 2019 to 56.2% in 2023 (see Figure 1).

Geopolitically, like the rest of Malaysia, Penang is vulnerable to global market fluctuations. This is exacerbated by the nation's continued dependence on rice imports, which exposes it to supply chain disruptions. The volatility of the global market, highlighted by the Russia-Ukraine conflict's impact on supply and demand, underscores the strategic importance of supporting local production, even as diversification is considered.

## CHALLENGES FACING PADDY FARMING

Malaysian paddy farming is confronted by a myriad of issues endangering its endurance and feasibility, notably in Penang, where city growth and financial progress have altered the farming terrain. Rapid development over the past decades has caused the switch from farmland to housing, business and factory sites, reducing the availability of land for paddy farming. Rice growers have had to tackle specific issues stemming from the region's quick growth and terrain limits. Still, it's key to say that rice fields are "First Grade" land (referring to land ownership under a system that predates the National Land Code [Penang and Malacca Titles] Act from 1963, granting landowners the right to use their land for any purpose, subject to zoning and existing land use regulations).

Climate change poses a significant threat to paddy farming—rising temperatures, unpredictable rainfall patterns, and extreme weather events such as floods and droughts can adversely affect rice yields. Referring to Figure 2, the reality that large portions of flood-prone areas—due to rising sea levels—are paddy fields implies a significant reduction in Penang's self-sufficiency level (SSL) if these events do occur.

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# SELF-SUFFICIENCY RATIO (SSR) FOR RICE, MALAYSIA, 2019-2023

Source: Ministry of Agriculture and Food Security



Note: The SSR calculation excludes paddy production for seed and includes the trading stock of imported rice from the previous year that was traded in the reference year.

Figure 1: SSR for rice (2019-2023)



Figure 2: Land projected to be below the annual sea flood level by 2050. (Source: Climate Central)

Penang’s paddy farming also faces significant water-related vulnerabilities. Primarily reliant on Kedah’s Sungai Muda for domestic, industrial and agricultural irrigation, the state’s dependence on a single water source poses a considerable risk, particularly with increasing demand. During droughts, the government prioritises human consumption, leading to irrigation cuts that severely impact farming operations. This vulnerability is compounded by extreme weather events; for example, a devastating 12-hour storm in November 2017 destroyed nearly 76% of Penang’s paddy fields. Furthermore, recurring droughts have forced the state to halt agricultural irrigation to safeguard household water supplies.

The industry is also grappling with a shortage of labour and an ageing paddy farmer population, as more young people are reluctant to pursue careers in agriculture due to the perception of it being low income and hard labour. Data from the Muda Agricultural Development Authority (MADA) shows that 60 is the average age of Malaysia’s paddy farmers, and only 15% of the Farmers Organisation Authority’s members are under 40.

In Penang, where urbanisation offers more lucrative employment opportunities in manufacturing and services, this trend is even more pronounced. Additionally, paddy farming is often less economically viable compared to other agricultural activities or non-agricultural sectors. Rising input costs, including fertilisers and pesticides, place a significant financial burden on farmers. According to a rice farmer coalition, PeSawah, only about 20% of the aid reaches farmers directly, with the majority being channelled through external agencies. Farmers have reported issues with these agencies, including the provision of unsuitable or late-delivered agricultural supplies.

## DIVERSIFICATION AND ALTERNATIVE STRATEGIES

Faced with challenges like land scarcity and climate change, it is worth considering if traditional paddy farming should remain the sole priority for rice production in Malaysia and Penang. Innovative smart farming technologies are being developed to supplement or potentially replace conventional methods. For example, research presented in “Developing industrial indoor rice production: AI using for CEA and rapid growth technology” details an advanced industrialised rice production system using AI, Controlled Environment Agriculture (CEA) and Vertical Farming (VF), demonstrating record-breaking yields (120,274 kg/ha) and rapid harvest cycles (52 days). More broadly, smart farming integrates AI, IoT and big data to optimise yield estimation, irrigation, disease monitoring and quality classification. Building on Penang’s success with vertical farming (See *Penang Monthly* February 2021 issue), as evidenced by Kebun Kita(R), rice cultivation could benefit from a similar approach.

To entice a new generation into agriculture and address the potential risks of monoculture, Penang can strategically utilise the Tabung Usahawan Tani (TUT) to diversify its agricultural landscape. That said, TUT should continue to incentivise young entrepreneurs to explore innovative food sources and sustainable practices. This approach showcases agriculture as a dynamic, high-value sector, demonstrating that it extends far beyond physical labour and is accessible to individuals from diverse backgrounds, regardless of prior experience or rural residency.

Modernising the agricultural sector through technology and innovation can also help attract youths into the industry, especially with smart farming technologies which include drones to assist the application of pesticides and fertilisers. Given the young generation’s tech-savviness, investing in technological upskilling is crucial to attract them to agriculture, a sector vital for Penang’s food security.

One potentially controversial alternative strategy is promoting less resource-intensive and climate-resilient crops like tapioca, which, though seemingly reminiscent of pre-Merdeka times, remains a viable food source. Diversification through urban farming, technological innovation and alternative crops should not be seen as abandoning rice, but rather as a move to strengthen food security and to preserve our agricultural heritage. Ultimately, food security is a multifaceted issue requiring a holistic and adaptive approach. Malaysia’s agricultural sector needs to integrate paddy planting into a diversified framework that addresses evolving needs and challenges. And Penang should lead the way in adaptation and innovation.



**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.



# TRIBUTE TO PROF. DATO' DR. ZULFIGAR YASIN

## THE GUIDING LIGHT THAT KEEPS GLOWING

**ON 3 FEBRUARY 2025**, we bid farewell to a man who was more than a colleague, mentor, and friend—Zulfigar Yasin, whom many endearingly called Prof. Zul. At just 65, he left us too soon, yet the depth of his impact ensures his presence will forever echo through the corridors of science, the gardens of CEMACS and the hearts of all who knew him.

For those unfamiliar with his legacy, Prof. Zul was the very embodiment of excellence, grace and brilliance. And for those of us fortunate enough to walk alongside him—as students, peers or friends—we knew we were in the presence of someone extraordinary.

**BY AILEEN TAN**







**He didn't just teach marine ecology—he built a community of ocean stewards.”**

I first met Prof. Zul in 1989 when I joined Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) as a Research Officer. Our paths often crossed, but it was in 1995, when I became his PhD student, that I began to truly understand his depth. Under his guidance, I transformed from someone who couldn't swim into a diver conducting underwater scientific research. Such was Prof. Zul's magic: he made you believe in the impossible and then showed you how to achieve it.

Prof. Zul devoted his entire professional life to USM, and even after his retirement, he continued to serve with passion and purpose as an Honorary Professor at the Centre for Marine and Coastal Studies (CEMACS). His dedication to public service extended beyond academia—he also served as a Visiting Senior Analyst at the Penang Institute, where he played a pivotal role in initiating the groundwork for the Middle Bank Marine Sanctuary. His contributions were soon recognised, and he was later appointed Head of the Heritage and Urban Studies Programme at the Institute.

Throughout his remarkable career, Prof. Zul helped shape the fields of marine ecology, coral reef conservation and biodiversity, not only in Malaysia but across the region. While his scholarly contributions were vast and influential, it was his human touch—his humour, kindness, and generosity of spirit, which set him apart.

His story began in earnest in 1988 when he returned from the UK with a PhD in Marine Ecology from the University of Salford. That same year, he began his tenure at USM, quickly making waves—both literally and figuratively—in marine science. He was a scholar with an explorer's heart, tirelessly pursuing knowledge that could be used to protect our oceans.

Prof. Zul's leadership as Director of CEMACS was nothing short of visionary. He was not just an administrator—he was the soul of the Centre. He led by example, not from behind a desk but side by side with his team—researchers, staff and even gardeners. His presence was deeply felt in every corner, not only in research but also in the culture of care and curiosity he nurtured.

The gardens he envisioned and tended at CEMACS were more than aesthetic spaces, they were living symbols of his belief that science and nature must coexist in harmony. From the serene Zen Garden, inspired by Kyoto's Ryoan-ji, to the tranquil Bali Garden with its outdoor shower, and the affectionately nicknamed “Future In-Law Garden,” where one could dip their feet and reflect—each space carried meaning. As he once said in spirit, “Dip your feet, clear your thoughts, and if your heart is true—speak your intention.” These gardens told stories, sparked wonder and reminded us that environmental stewardship begins with love—for land, sea, and each other.

Prof. Zul's reach extended far beyond local waters. One of the defining moments of his career was leading a three-month marine science expedition to Antarctica in 2002 (see *Penang Monthly*, October 2024). Harsh, remote and extreme—Antarctica would have deterred many, but not Prof. Zul. He embraced the challenge with fearless enthusiasm, placing Malaysia on the global map of polar research.

He returned with renewed purpose, and soon after, spearheaded the ROSES (Research on the Seas and Islands of Malaysia) Expedition in 2004—a monumental effort to map and document Malaysia's marine territories, including contested areas. Aboard the *Allied Commander*, Prof. Zul led 52 scientists across the Straits

of Malacca and the South China Sea for 42 days, conducting dives at every site. This bold, unprecedented expedition—planned down to the last detail—was vintage Zulfigar.

Following ROSES, Prof. Zul continued to lead marine expeditions during his attachment at Universiti Malaysia Terengganu. His insights were instrumental in establishing and managing Malaysia's marine parks and informing Thailand's marine conservation policies. His reach was regional, yet he remained deeply grounded.

He often said, “Do not start if you are not serious. But if you choose to start, do it properly.” That philosophy drove him and inspired everyone around him to strive for excellence.

What truly set Prof. Zul apart was his devotion to people. He was never too busy for a question, never too important to listen, never too proud to learn. He mentored countless students and colleagues with patience, honesty and unshakable belief in their potential. He didn't just teach marine ecology—he built a community of ocean stewards. He made people feel seen and valued. His presence lit up every room. His smile was a comfort, his counsel a constant source of reassurance. Though he held strong convictions, he led with gentleness and humility.

Despite his towering accomplishments, Prof. Zul remained deeply human. He spoke often and fondly of his family. He loved his plants, his pets, his music. There was poetry in the way he lived—a quiet symphony of intellect, integrity and joy.

Among his many passions, photography held a special place. He was deeply drawn to the beauty and wonder of the natural world—from sweeping landscapes to the intricate details of marine life. As his assistant during fieldwork and academic travels, I had the privilege of witnessing his dedication behind the lens. He would wake before dawn to catch the morning light on the water or dive at dusk to capture the wonderful world of fluorescent corals. With a keen eye and a patient soul, he would often spend hours waiting for the perfect light or composition, capturing moments that others might overlook. For him, photography was not merely a hobby but a means of connecting with nature, appreciating its subtleties, and sharing its wonders with others. Through his images, he reminded us to slow down, look closer, and never take the world's beauty for granted.

To me, he was more than a mentor—he was a guide, a guardian, a giant whose shadow gave me shelter and strength. Being his first PhD student was more than an academic milestone; it was a gift. Under his mentorship, I found purpose. He taught me not only how to explore the ocean but also how to explore within. One of his most lasting lessons: “Never stop learning. Always choose something new to learn and enrich yourself.”

Prof. Zul, your influence is forever etched in my heart. I am deeply honoured to have walked this transformative path of growth and discovery under your mentorship. Thank you for the wisdom you so generously shared, for the unwavering support you offered, and for the boundless passion you brought into every endeavour. I will miss your kind words, your steady encouragement, and most of all, that comforting smile—one that always reassured us that everything would be alright.

Rest well, Zulfigar Yasin. The ocean sings your name. And we who remain will carry your light forward.



**PROF. DATO' DR. AILEEN TAN** is the Director for the Centre for Marine and Coastal Studies (CEMACS), USM. Her experience on aquaculture helped develop several key national and international projects in this field.

# DO YOU HAVE AN EMERGENCY BAG PACKED?

**IT IS ALL** over the news—the recent 7.7 magnitude earthquake that rocked central Myanmar, its ripples shaking the foundations of Bangkok. Everyone gasped in horror as they watched the Bangkok skyscraper, still under construction, collapse like a house of cards shared all over social media. Beyond the visible disaster, the devastation in Myanmar saw more than 3,000 lives lost and another 4,500 injured. The sheer scale of the disaster left many homeless without access to basic necessities and adequate healthcare.

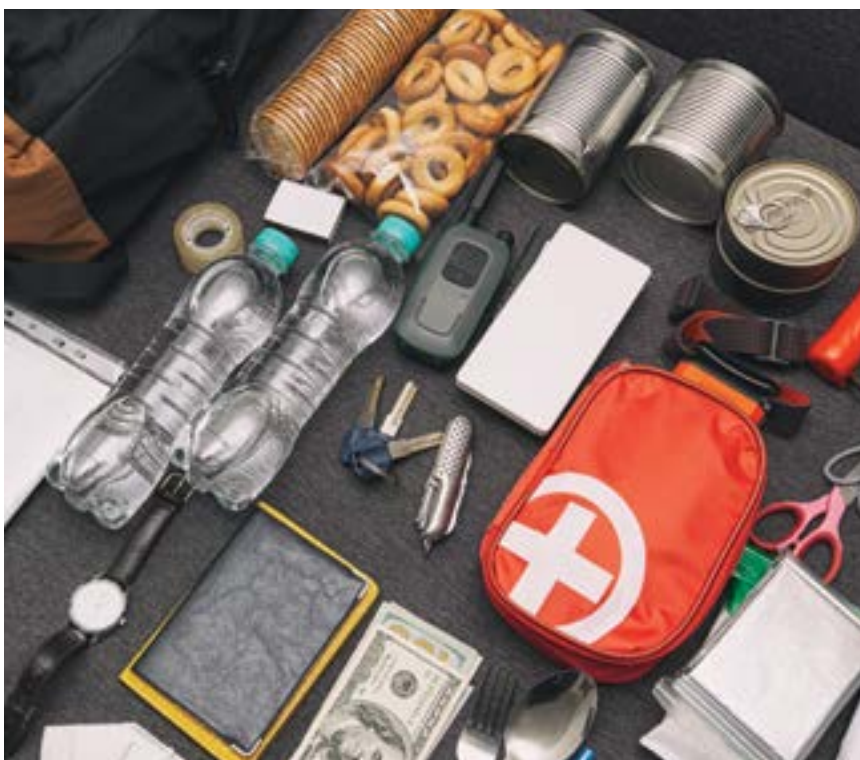
Then, a major explosion caused by a gas pipeline fire occurred at Putra Heights, Subang Jaya, Selangor. It caused an inferno that saw flames reach over 30m high and temperatures exceeding 1,000°C, taking almost eight hours for the fire brigade to extinguish. Many rushed out of their homes with just the clothes on their back and one reportedly only brought her passport.<sup>[1]</sup> The catastrophe left 81 houses destroyed with structural damage exceeding 40%, another 81 partially destroyed and 57 affected but not burned.

## POLL RESPONSE

**“IN THE EVENT OF AN EMERGENCY EVACUATION—WHETHER IT’S DUE TO AN EXPLOSION, GAS LEAK OR EARTHQUAKE—DO YOU HAVE AN EMERGENCY BAG READY TO GRAB AND GO?”**

VIA EMAIL (TOTAL RESPONDENTS 157)		VIA FACEBOOK (TOTAL RESPONDENTS 10)		VIA INSTAGRAM (TOTAL RESPONDENTS: 5)	
Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No
40	117	0	10	0	5

Responses collected from 9 April to 17 April 2025.



A month earlier, a tornado-like twister hit Sekinchan, destroying eight houses. This unusual phenomenon, believed to be caused by unstable atmospheric conditions leading to intense thunderstorms, strong wind, and deluge, may happen more frequently with worsening global warming.<sup>[2]</sup>

It is evident that we are at the mercy of the elements—we’ve seen it with the tsunami in 2004 and we continue to be witnesses of natural (and unnatural) disasters today. These happenings beg the question: Are we ready when tragedy strikes?

One way to be “ready”—though no one will ever be really ready—is by having an emergency bag on standby with the needed essentials to grab and go if disaster strikes. We asked our subscribers and social media followers if they have an emergency bag packed at home and here are the results.

*Penang Monthly* will cover what should be included in an emergency bag in next month’s issue. For more on our polls and to know more about *Penang Monthly*’s involvement with the community, follow us on our Facebook and Instagram.

### FOOTNOTES

[1] <https://www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2025/04/01/i-just-hope-that-our-house-is-still-intact-residents-recall-horror-of-putra-heights-gas-fire-as-rayaholidays-disrupted/171593>

[2] <https://www.nst.com.my/news/nation/2025/03/1186017/sekinchan-twister-experts-warn-malaysia-may-see-more-twisted-weather>

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# GOT A STORY TO TELL?

WRITE TO US AT  
[editor@penangmonthly.com](mailto:editor@penangmonthly.com)



**WHEN  
THE  
WATERS  
RECEDE**

# WALKING TO



## HIKE AT A GLANCE

## LENGTH

1 hour

## DIFFICULTY

Moderate

## INTEREST LEVEL

High

## SIGNPOSTING

None

## LIKELIHOOD OF

GETTING LOST

Low

## NUMBER OF HIKERS

Few

**MOST VISITORS TO** Penang Island would make their way to the famed Batu Ferringhi beach on its northern coast. Strolling along the golden sands, it is hard to miss the sight of a small rocky islet at the beach's western edge. Often called Lover's Isle by the locals, Batu Ferringhi—or Foreigner's Rock—is the very isle that lent its name to the long stretch of coastline beside it, now one of Penang's frequented tourist attractions.

This isle has stood out as a landmark among seafarers from ages past. Through research done by fellow *Penang Monthly* columnist Eugene Quah for his upcoming book titled *The Illustrated Guide to the North Coast of Penang*, a 1762 Portuguese navigation guide, *Arte de Navegar*, is found to have mentioned Batu Ferringhi Isle as a landmark to the spot on the north coast where fresh water can be obtained.

# BATU

BY  
REXY  
PRAKASH  
CHACKO

# FERRINGHI ISLE





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In the Peaks and Parks column, “In Search of the Legendary Isle of Batu Ferringhi” (See *Penang Monthly* March 2021 issue), I recounted walking along the beach right up to the rocky cape facing the islet. Sitting at that cape, I imagined how wonderful it would be to hop on one of the fishing boats moored at the nearby bay to get to the islet for a little exploration. Little did I know then that at the right time of the year, a boat isn’t even necessary to reach the isle. When Eugene told me that it was possible to walk across during low tide, I was amazed! This was something I had to see with my own eyes. It was going to be an island adventure like no other.

We turned to Tide Charts, a mobile application which provides highly accurate tidal readings, to estimate the right time to make the crossing. Our best chance would be when the low tide reading is closest to 0m. We discovered a Saturday when the tide would recede to 0.1m at around 8AM—the ideal timing for our escapade.

Our journey began at a public restroom (Tandas Awam Lover’s Isle Batu Ferringhi) nestled beneath the shade of trees near a bend in the road, just a few hundred metres past the Bayview Beach Resort. Here, we followed a narrow path downhill that wound past a few houses, quickly leading us to the edge of the Batu Ferringhi Beach. To our amazement, the waters had receded just as Tide Charts had predicted, revealing a land bridge right before us—a natural passage connecting Penang Island to the Batu Ferringhi Isle. I could hardly believe my eyes—the isle was completely above water, and appeared much larger than it did during high tide, with the adjacent large rocks, usually submerged, now fully exposed.

Scattered along the edges of the land bridge were many large rocks encrusted

with cone-shaped shells. Upon closer inspection, we realised these were barnacles—marine invertebrates commonly found in intertidal zones. Though they looked “dead” when out of water, they come alive when the tides rise again. They can extend their thoracic limbs, called cirri, to sift for food.

As we ventured to the middle of the land bridge, land became muddier. With one step, “bloop”—my shoes sank into the mud. So much for the “dry” passage I had anticipated.

It took us barely two minutes to reach Batu Ferringhi Isle, where the climb began almost immediately. There was an underlying sense of urgency as low tide wouldn’t last long; in about an hour, the tide would start to rise again and cut off the isle from Penang. Interestingly, this natural phenomenon ties into the islet’s common name, Lover’s Isle. Local lore has it that lovers would cross over on foot during low tide, spend time together and, before realising, the tide would rise. They would then either be stranded on the isle until the tides recede again or have to brave the shallow waters of the submerged land bridge to get back to the main island. In fact, there are so many other stories of young lovers having escapades on the isle that, at one point, there was even a proposal to change “Lover’s Isle” to something more mundane like “Fisherman’s Isle”. Happily, this never happened.

As we searched for a way up the large, exposed rocks, we spotted what appeared to be a small passage slightly to the left, where smaller rocks formed a natural stairway. Even so, we had to use all fours to pull ourselves up! Unlike my other hikes through hills with well-signposted trails, there were none here. Instead, we had to

rely on instinct and a bit of trial and error to determine which parts of the rocks were passable. After a few minutes of navigating, we reached the northern part of the islet, which offered a stunning panoramic view of Kedah’s Gunung Jerai as its backdrop.

We carefully retraced our steps back, navigating the slippery rocks while avoiding the deep holes between them. We spotted a small passage under a boulder we were passing by, leading to what appeared to be a cave-like entrance. We went through it, and it led us to a shaded area in the middle of the isle, likely the innermost point we could explore. As a few bats darted past us, we noticed how the surrounding rocks were adorned with ferns, climbing Hoyas and



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*Epipremnum* vines. The few large trees on the isle were also concentrated around this spot, including the Sea Fig (*Ficus superba*), a fast-growing species known for its ability to withstand highly saline conditions.

Aware that the tides would soon rise, we began to search for an exit. We had two options: retrace our steps to the path we had come from or squeeze through a narrow gap between the boulders, which offered a shortcut. Opting for the latter, we got down on all fours to pass through the gap. As the passage narrowed, we had to lie down and crawl. For someone like me, who has a fear of claustrophobic spaces, it took several attempts and plenty of encouragement



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from my two hiking companions to summon the courage to pass through.

Emerging on the other side, we were greeted by a view of Penang Island, with the crumbling and rapidly decaying gazebo—a former viewpoint toward the isle—in the foreground. By then, a section of the land bridge in the middle had already been submerged in shallow water, signalling that it was time to head back. After snapping a few final photos, we bid farewell to Batu Ferringhi Isle. Although the walk was short and fraught with rocky obstacles, it was undeniably a memorable experience—especially since we got to walk across a land bridge during low tide, something which is a rather rare occurrence!



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#### CAPTIONS

1. (Cover spread) Batu Ferringhi Isle. Gunung Jerai can be seen to the right, in the background.
2. Looking from Batu Ferringhi Isle back to Penang Island and the low-tide land bridge.
3. Standing right in the heart of Batu Ferringhi Isle.
4. The middle section of the low-tide land bridge is muddy.
5. Cone-shaped barnacles encrusted onto rocks.
6. Navigating the rocks on the isle.
7. Hoya, a climbing vine, clambering over the roots of a tree on the isle.
8. Section of the land bridge in the middle of the isle submerged by the rising tide.
9. Crawling under large rocks in Batu Ferringhi Isle.

#### REFERENCE

- [1] LOVER'S ISLE BY ANY OTHER NAME, The Straits Times, 18 May 1968, Page 10. Retrieved from <https://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/> on 21 March 2025



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# US-IMPOSED TARIFFS



**SLAPPED WITH TARIFFS** by the US, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), with all its 11 members affected, is now more important than ever. As the world comes to terms with the US import taxation, ASEAN countries have to digest that they are among those facing the highest quantum of tariffs—Cambodia being the world's highest with a 49% levy on exports into the globe's biggest economy. Malaysia is among those affected by the tariffs; since 5 April, every Malaysian product shipped to the US is stamped with at least a 10% duty; and from 9 April, a 24% rate, with some exemptions.

For now, the country will embark on a range of diplomatic missions by first cajoling ASEAN to, in unison, urge the US to reconsider the quantum of tariffs imposed. As a single market entity, ASEAN is a significant economic force, with a combined GDP of USD3.8tril and a population breaching 700 million—the world's third most populous region. The country then would also seek its partners in Free Trade Agreements and other regional blocs such as the European Union (EU), to offer alternative options to the US, in the hope that such tariffs can reduce or reverse its trade deficits with the world.

However, Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim has lamented that the US tariffs are discriminatory and contrary to the World

Trade Organisation's (WTO) principles. He warned of long-term challenges for key Malaysian industries including textiles, rubber and plastics. The semiconductor industries, wherein Malaysia (and Penang) is a key global player, may, at this juncture, appear spared from the new tariffs at the moment. He added that Malaysia's macroeconomic fundamentals were well supported by its robust household spending, strong domestic investment, healthy tourism receipts and the continued implementation of national masterplans.

Anwar disputes the US 47% tariff on imports from Malaysia, and will engage constructively with the US to protect market access and investor confidence, pointing out that the basis for calculating this tariff by the US was fundamentally flawed. The Investment, Trade and Industries Minister, Tengku Zafrul Tengku Abdul Aziz clarified that the actual average tariff stands at about 5.6%, based on the simple average most favoured nation (MFN) applied rate.

He highlighted that the US' latest tariff policy is expected to have a direct impact on the GDP, presenting challenges to economic growth for this year and more years to come. As one of the largest trading partners of the US in ASEAN, as well as a major destination for foreign investments from the US, Malaysia is likely to feel the impact of these tariffs in the medium to long term, he added.

## ASEAN-BAC IN THE LIMELIGHT

Following this, the private sector may have to take the lead by placing importance on economic power rather than the decades-old wrangle of sovereignty, security and bureaucracy. The ASEAN Economic Community (AEC), formed in 2015, is the final objective, but it is often railroaded due to the topsy-turvy nature of global trade, and now—the tariffs.

If realised, AEC may be somewhat a replica of the EU free movement of capital and people, meant to attract foreign direct investments (FDI).

As a roadway toward AEC, ASEAN has formed a Business Advisory Council (BAC)—now chaired by banker, Nazir Razak in view of the fact that Malaysia is the regional chair for this year and by BAC's executive director, Penang-born Jukhee Hong.

Both have advocated that ASEAN's integration can be driven by a rejuvenated private sector, hence their renewed call for an ASEAN Business Entity (ABE) to propel faster exchanges of labour, capital and immigration requirements. He said that since the failure to realise the AEC concept in 2015, the private sector in the region has now come up with a realistic alternative, which is the ASEAN-ABE. ASEAN-ABE will enable each company to be recognised and certified by their respective nations as an ASEAN-level corporate, business or



# MAY ADVANCE ASEAN ECONOMIC INTEGRATION



**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.

# BY IAN MCINTYRE

commercial entity. Through ASEAN-ABE, companies can move staff easily throughout the region without working visas, and outsourcing of work can be coordinated among companies.

“We also have initiatives to further digital trade within ASEAN, improve sustainability and inclusion, as well as collaborate in artificial intelligence.”

ASEAN-BAC wants to catalyse mergers, investments and partnerships in the future. These priorities would define Malaysia’s chairmanship agenda.

“I am eager to see where this takes us, but I am under no illusion about the difficulties of getting ASEAN stakeholders to agree, especially when major changes require unanimous agreement by all governments. But as the saying goes, ‘If you don’t take a shot, you won’t score a goal,’” said Nazri.

## DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION

Malaysia, Thailand, Indonesia, Singapore and especially the Philippines, have a pool of skilled computer programmers, and it does not come as a surprise that ASEAN is the fastest-growing Internet market in the world. With 125,000 new users reportedly using the Internet every day, the ASEAN digital economy is projected to grow significantly, adding an estimated USD1tril to regional GDP over the next 10 years.

Another seamless drive is the digitalisation market, which is easy as it mostly involves moving data, not people. Nazir spoke of growing the digital economy within the region—what with data centres mushrooming—including those peddling in cryptocurrency.

ASEAN has laid out important policy measures and frameworks, including the AEC Blueprint 2025, Masterplan on ASEAN Connectivity 2025 and the e-ASEAN Framework Agreement, to address these roadblocks. The framework can potentially transform the region—and with the US-bound tariffs weighing down every trading nation in the world, there is great urgency for this to happen.

## WORKING TOGETHER

“Our trade is built on a diversified network of regional and global partnerships consolidated over many years—including through ASEAN, the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP), the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), and ongoing negotiations with the European Union (EU) and deepening ties across the Global South,” Anwar said.

The National Water Services Commission (SPAN) chairperson and economist by training, Charles Santiago described the move as weaponising trade

and a step away from decades of free trade liberalisation and globalisation, which was initially championed by the US themselves. “It is part of a broader trend where tariffs are no longer mere trade tools but geopolitical weapons. By unilaterally escalating tariffs, powerful economies like the US force trading partners into a defensive stance, compelling them to negotiate for exemptions under terms that often extend beyond commerce,” adding that this strategy does not just recalibrate trade balances; it reshapes alliances, supply chains, and even domestic policies in weaker economies.

Former senator Yusmadi Yusoff said that if regional blocs such as Africa Union, the EU and the Community of Latin American and Caribbean nations spoke with one voice, perhaps the US would come up with an alternative formula.

Another avenue is for ASEAN nations to drive up intra-trade and cross border activities together with more direct investment flows among the 11-member nations. But this is easier said than done. Hence, ASEAN is often accompanied by a formula of either ASEAN plus one, two, three or four; other than Singapore and soon Indonesia, the other eight members are relatively still in the bracket of developing nations. Cambodia and East Timor rank among the globe’s poorest nations.



# FINDING MY WAY BACK TO

# LADAKH

BY  
**LIM  
JIN YOUNG**



**LIM JIN YOUNG** from Penang, is the author of *The Dao of Flow: A Journey to Discover the Ancient Wisdom of Water*, a book that integrates stories and experiences in Daoism, Zen, tea culture, agriculture, conservation, art, history, geography, international politics and social economics.

**THE SUN WAS** scorching hot, yet the breeze felt cool and comforting. The land below lay parched and yellow. One step at a time, one breath at a time, we followed the trails of Grandpa Norbu, a Ladakhi elder, who led us toward a hidden high pastureland in the Ladakh range. “Breathe in long and full,” I reminded myself. My heart drummed, and my lungs gasped for more oxygen. I paused, took a mouthful of water, and gazed into the horizon. The vast landscape quietly opened my heart, calming me inside. *I’m doing okay*, I thought. It was day three of my acclimation.

—AND  
TO  
MYSELF









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## CAPTIONS

1. (Cover spread) Nomads shepherding pashmina goats in the Changthang region of Ladakh.
2. Author with Sonam Wangchuk at the Himalayan Institute of Alternative Learning (HIAL).
3. Stanzin Gurmet on the far left. Author second from the right. With Gurmet's family in Durbok, discussing about a future retreat centre project.

4. Grandpa Norbu collecting Alfalfa hay in his farm.
5. Following the trails of Grandpa toward a highland. Taken by author.
6. A campfire storytelling session that brings foreign students and locals together.
7. Author with Grandma Yangchan and Gurmet's mother.

Over the past 10 years, I have made at least six trips to the Himalayas and led eight expeditions for participants ranging from high school students to senior citizens. At 4,000m above sea level, I felt at ease, at peace and at home.

"What drew you to Ladakh? Why Ladakh?" friends have asked me countless times.

For someone who grew up in George Town, I couldn't have been surrounded by more different terrain, climate and culture. Penang is tropical, green and humid; Ladakh is mountainous, dry and often barren. In Penang, you have cinemas, beaches, huge shopping complexes, clubs and bars—in Ladakh, you find few of these (perhaps only in Leh). Instead, you encounter monastery after monastery, patches of golden wheat-barley fields, stone mud houses in the middle of nowhere and towering mountains all around.

Both Penang and Ladakh thrive on tourism, but they couldn't be more distinct in character. Penang boasts island beauty, a cosmopolitan pace, a diverse food culture and the harmonious integration of Chinese, Malay and Indian communities. Ladakh, on the other hand, juxtaposes an overcrowded, capitalistic Leh—its main capital—against a slower, more reflective countryside rooted in agriculture, nomadic herding and Tibetan Buddhism.

"Ladakh is dying. We are in a race against time," I told a group of students last year. "The glaciers are melting. The indigenous culture is eroding. But here, through the lives of elders like Grandpa Norbu, I've found precious relics of ancient wisdom that have been lost in other parts of the world. I felt compelled to return and learn to do something to preserve these relics."



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“

The glaciers are melting. The indigenous culture is eroding. But here, through the lives of elders like Grandpa Norbu, I've found precious relics of ancient wisdom that have been lost in other parts of the world.”

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Grandpa Norbu is my friend Gurmet's grandfather. In 2010, one of the worst flash floods in Ladakh's history—killing over 255 people—decimated Grandpa Norbu's farm. Ladakhis stand at the forefront of the climate crisis, and he was no exception. The flood wiped out hundreds of poplar and willow trees, crops, and animals he had spent a lifetime raising. The residual mud left a hard, thick crust on his fields, making it nearly impossible to regrow anything. Most farmers would have given up and moved to Leh, where a new economy was booming. But Grandpa Norbu told himself, "I am a farmer and will always be a farmer. Whatever karma happens to me, it is my *dharma*—my life purpose—to deal with it courageously and with integrity." He cleaned up the mess, tilled the soil and spent ten years re-vegetating his ancestral land.

Today, when you step into Grandpa Norbu's farm, you're greeted by lush trees, flowers and buzzing bees. He'll offer you his best apples and apricots. If you want mint tea, he'll walk out to the garden to pluck some fresh leaves. He has nothing to hide, and everything to share.

"If I had a group of gangsters and a plane, I would kidnap you and take you [to Ladakh] myself... Through Ladakh, I have

come to see everything differently. If you have felt anything in these hours we have been together—any intensity, any truth—think that it was not just from me or from us, but from Ladakh too," wrote the mystical writer Andrew Harvey, describing a friend's passionate invitation to visit this special land. Before they parted, his friend repeated: "You must go to Ladakh. It will change your life as it has changed mine."

My life changed in 2014 when my mentor, Victor Wee, brought me to Ladakh right after I finished high school. In my debut book, *The Dao of Flow: A Journey to Discover the Ancient Wisdom of Water*, I dedicated an entire chapter to Ladakh. On that first visit, I was introduced to Venerable Sanghasena, a visionary social monk who transformed a 250-acre piece of barren desert atop the Himalayas into a green oasis that includes schools and hostels for children from remote villages, monasteries and nunneries for spiritual seekers, and hospitals, hospices and a nursing home for the old and destitute. I was touched by Ven. Sanghasena's warmth and noble work. He proved how much good one can achieve in 30 years with minimal resources. Perhaps it was destiny. I befriended one of Ven. Sanghasena's close disciples, Stanzin Gurmet, who moved to Japan around the same time

I studied at Waseda University. In Tokyo, we bonded over our love for the Himalayas and decided to start a nonprofit focused on sustainability, education, health and cultural preservation in Ladakh.

Still, I might never have fully grasped Andrew Harvey's words had I not returned to Ladakh repeatedly. Each time, I came across a new story, a new friend or a new inspiration. Grandpa Norbu, for instance, would take us on different treks, explaining the significance of a sacred mountain or sharing childhood memories of these landscapes.

"I used to be a herdsman when I was young," he recalled. "I would bring sheep here and stay overnight in one of those stone houses. Sometimes, we exchanged our livestock for money, food or butchered them for meat."

Last year, he lost a finger while chain-sawing wood on his farm. Immediately, he rushed to his altar and bowed before the Buddha, atoning for past misdeeds. He often thinks about the animals he once killed and prays for them. That's why he decided to give up animal herding and hunting to focus on farming instead. He still keeps a cow for milk and feeds her alfalfa hay with love.

For the past thousand years, Ladakh has been a critical hub for trade and cul-



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tural exchange between Central Asia, South Asia and China, sitting along the ancient Silk Road. They have produced the world's finest cashmere wool and sold them to the Kashmiris, who were adept marketers and businessmen.

Ladakhis are content with a simple life. They have witnessed the rise and fall of nearby dynasties, and have learned to adapt to countless outside influences while remaining deeply rooted in their own culture. Despite the tides of globalisation and modernisation, Ladakh is fortunate to have many wise elders who are still preserving their traditional values and way of living, and a few visionary elders who speak out against the pitfalls of unbridled capitalism and offer alternative ways of thinking and thriving.

When we bring students to Ladakh, our goal isn't mere sightseeing. Each year, around 300,000 tourists visit Ladakh—most stay in Leh's crowded hotels. Many click,

snap, shop, trek, litter and leave. Touch and go. That's what millions of tourists do worldwide.

We aspire to seek transformative learning instead. In our expedition, students read *Ancient Futures* by Helena Norberg-Hodge, which depicts how a once idyllic, non-industrial Ladakh was gradually affected by over-tourism, Western goods and economic pressures—leading to internal conflict, inflation, environmental damage and threats to traditional values. We ask students to compare what they read with what they see; and what they see in their lives back home. We visit monasteries, local nonprofits, farms and remote nomadic villages in the Far East, where students witness ancient rituals and converse with monks, farmers, nomads and local students. We practice “contemplative traveling,” holding regular debriefs, meditations and group discussions. We want them to experience deep, immersive encounters with Ladakhi people and landscapes.

“To be in communities with different ways of life, different languages have been very cool... but there's still so much common ground... so much connecting we can do beneath the surface... All of the little moments of this trip, the little rays of the sun as they peak over the Himalayas, laughing with friends, picking apricots from trees, learning new things about each other... all those little moments really come together,” shared Sarah Leidecker, one of our American high school students from Flourish Foundation last summer.

Before leaving Ladakh, I spent my last day with Grandpa Norbu and Grandma Yangchan. We cooked *chuutagi*—a Ladakhi pasta shaped like donkey's ears—and I later jumped into a glacier-water pond on the farm with Gurmet and a few neighboring kids. We swam, then sat by the window, basking in the sun to warm up. Grandma brought out some butter tea and almonds, sitting next to me and rubbing my hands when she saw me shiver.

“You two are always so busy hosting guests and running projects,” she said. “Next time, we should have more moments like this—just sitting together, doing nothing and enjoying each other's company.”

I took out a piece of turquoise stone jewelry and placed it around her neck. She shook her head, telling me I should keep it. I shook my head, insisting she have it. She smiled like a child. “You, Gurmet, are my grandchildren. Come back next year.” As I prepared to leave, she tucked two bags of apricots into my arms to take home. I looked out at her from the window of the car as we left the farm. She did not take off the necklace.

It's both simple and difficult to explain why I've grown so attached to this faraway land. Maybe it's family. Maybe it's the people, the stories or some kind of karmic connection. Maybe it's a sense of purpose. Maybe it was something that's been lost whence I came. Whatever it is, Ladakh tugs at my heartstrings—and keeps drawing me back.



7



# SUSTAINABLE WATER SERVICES INDUSTRY

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# TOWARDS A SUSTAINABLE WATER SERVICES INDUSTRY

**SINCE ITS ESTABLISHMENT** on 5 May 2006, Pengurusan Aset Air Berhad (PAAB) has played a pivotal role in Malaysia's national agenda to re-structure and revitalise the water services sector. As a wholly owned entity under the Minister of Finance Incorporated (MoF Inc), PAAB was conceived to spearhead change through two core mandates: firstly, to settle the state government's federal loan debts for water infrastructure through the acquisition of their water assets of equivalent value. Secondly, to build, upgrade and rehabilitate the water supply infrastructure by offering competitive financing resources to ensure the sustainable development of water services nationwide.

"Our mission is to empower the water sector through long-term financial solutions and infrastructure development, so that Malaysians continue to enjoy access to clean and reliable water," says Zulkiflee Omar, the CEO of PAAB.

Through these mandates, PAAB has become a catalyst in strengthening the operational and financial resilience of the nation's water industry. In particular, it has supported state water operators in transitioning towards financial independence, while focusing on delivering high-quality services to consumers.

## A STRUCTURED APPROACH: THE FOUR PHASES OF INDUSTRY EVOLUTION

The transformation of Malaysia's water sector is underpinned by four distinctive phases:



### 1. MIGRATION PHASE 2008–2020

- Migration started
- Asset-light operation
- Less financial sustainability
- Moratorium period granted



### 2. STABILISATION PHASE 2021–2030

- Heavy CAPEX implementation
- Increase reserve capacity margin, reduce non-revenue water (NRW)
- Increase in service quality
- Review water tariff and lease rental



### 3. CONSOLIDATION PHASE 2031–2040

- Cost-efficient operation
- Optimise resources
- Increase in profit margin and reserve
- CAPEX funded using internal fund



### 4. FCR (FULL COST RECOVERY) PHASE 2041–2050

- Appropriate tariff level
- CAPEX entirely funded using internal fund
- Bankable entity
- Guaranteed services and quality

Each phase represents a progressive shift toward financial autonomy, operational excellence and sustainability.

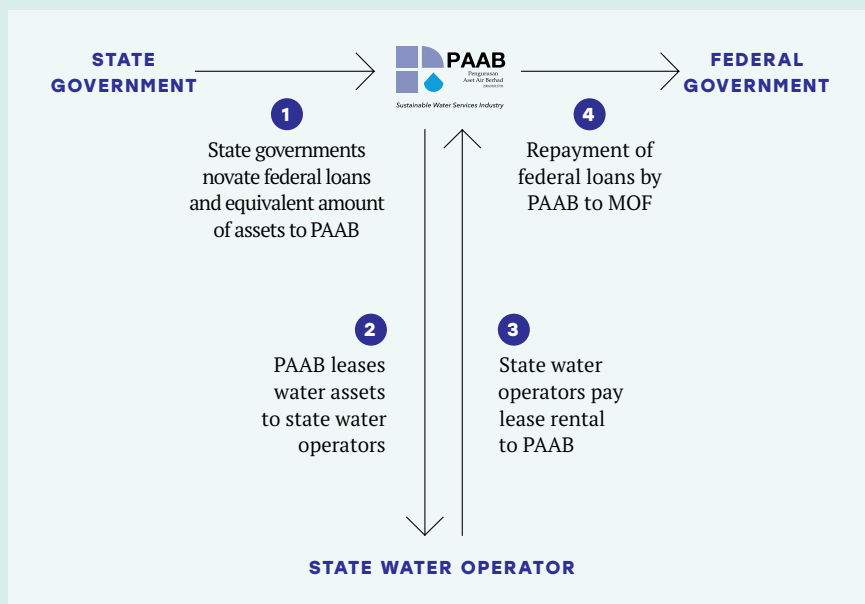


Figure 1: Migration scheme

### BUSINESS MODEL BUILT FOR IMPACT

PAAB's innovative business model comprises three core business functions:

1. Migration
2. Development of Water Assets
3. NRW Financing

#### 1. MIGRATION:

##### RESTRUCTURING WITH PURPOSE

The migration phase marked a watershed moment in Malaysia's water industry. During this phase, state water operators formally entered the federal restructuring regime. As part of this transformation, over RM9bil in legacy debts—originally federal loans to states for water infrastructure—were novated to PAAB.

In return, states transferred equivalent-value water infrastructure assets to PAAB. PAAB introduced a 45-year lease rental repayment plan, significantly easing the financial burden on state water operators, while enabling them to focus on consumer service delivery.

PAAB assumed the responsibility of repaying old debts to the federal government, thus facilitating a more streamlined and centralised debt management system.

This structure exemplifies an Asset-Light Model, enabling state water operators to function more efficiently without being weighed down by capital expenditure responsibilities.

### 2. DEVELOPING WATER ASSETS: FLEXIBLE AND FUTURE-PROOFED

PAAB provides competitive financing to state water operators for the development of essential water infrastructure. This process is carried out under four flexible implementation methods:

- a. Major: Full implementation by PAAB from consultancy to project completion.
- b. Minor: PAAB manages tender and procurement, while state operators handle execution.
- c. Mini: Full implementation by state operators for smaller-scale projects, capped at 10% of their approved business plan or RM20mil per project.
- d. Main: Only provides funding for the development of water infrastructure.

This tiered approach ensures maximum flexibility and collaboration, tailored to the unique operational capabilities of each state operator.

### 3. NRW FINANCING: PLUGGING THE LEAKS

To address the critical issue of NRW, PAAB introduced a short-term seven-year loan facility. This financing covers a portion of operational expenditures (OPEX) tied to NRW initiatives such as:

- a. Geographic Information System (GIS) development
- b. Establishment of District Metering Zones (DMZ)
- c. Leakage detection and rectification
- d. SCADA and telemetry systems
- e. Pressure management areas
- f. Meter installation and replacement
- g. Hydraulic modelling development

This initiative directly contributes to improving operational efficiency and preserving valuable water resources for the future.

### NATIONWIDE IMPACT THROUGH INFRASTRUCTURE DEVELOPMENT

Since its inception, PAAB has invested in numerous projects across Peninsular Malaysia. As of December 2024, the organisation has successfully completed or invested in projects worth more than RM7.47bil. These efforts have increased national water supply capacity by 2,081 million litres per day (MLD) as well as replaced and connected 2,946km of water pipelines (7% of the total 39,752km of asbestos cement (AC) pipelines in Malaysia).

These improvements not only enhance water security, but also contribute an estimated 11% to Malaysia's overall water reserve margin.

As for Penang, PAAB plans to invest nearly RM1bil to finance the construction of two water treatment plants in Seberang Perai this year. This initiative, carried out in collaboration with the Penang state government, involves the development of the Sungai Perai Water Treatment Plant (WTP) in the Seberang Perai Tengah district, and the Sungai Muda WTP in the Seberang Perai Utara district. Upon completion, the project is expected to establish and maintain a 15% treated water reserve margin by 2030 for the state of Penang, enabling it to effectively meet increasing consumer demand due to future development in Seberang Perai Tengah and Seberang Perai Utara.

In recognition of its outstanding contribution to the Malaysian water industry, PAAB was awarded the prestigious "IEM Award for Contribution to Engineering Industry in Malaysia 2024" by The Institute of Engineers, Malaysia (IEM).

### A VISION ANCHORED IN SUSTAINABILITY

With a clear mandate, a robust business model and a long-term vision, PAAB continues to redefine Malaysia's water landscape. From strategic migration to infrastructure development and NRW reduction, PAAB stands as a cornerstone of sustainable water management. It enables state water operators to focus on service delivery, while PAAB handles the financing and development of new water assets. Currently, PAAB is focused on sustaining treated water reserve margins and reducing NRW losses. Moving forward, PAAB is also looking to support water operators in managing treatment plant residue and recycling industrial water.

"Our focus will always be to support state water operators and enhance Malaysia's water industry," Zulkiflee affirms.

As the nation advances through phases of its water industry transformation, PAAB remains firmly committed to providing competitive financing for the development of water infrastructure in Malaysia. This commitment aims to support the increase of the national water reserve margin and to contribute to the reduction of non-revenue water, both now and in the future.

# DO YOUR HOMEWORK BEFORE TAKING A SEAT IN THE BOARDROOM

BY ESTELLE MN



**ESTELLE MN** (a pseudonym) is an avid reader and writer who enjoys a matcha oatmilk latte any time of the day, and is constantly on the lookout for matters which are challenging and which piques her interests.

## CAPTIONS

1. (Cover page) JJ Chan.
2. The Directors & Officers Liability Insurance book.



**WHEN N**, a female engineer in her late 20s was offered a directorship in a company she had barely heard of, she was told that she “practically did not have to do anything”. She only had to sit back and receive a handsome monthly stipend.

What was unbeknownst to her were the potential exposure and liabilities that came along with the position—from civil claims involving alleged wrongful dismissal by the board or senior executives of the company to allegations of workplace sexual harassment or misconduct, enforcement actions by relevant authorities or regulatory bodies, criminal prosecutions, and so on and so forth. Section 17A of the MACC Act, 2009 provides that a director or officer (e.g. senior management or personnel with significant control over the company) may be found liable and penalised for bribery or corruption conducted by a “person associated with the commercial organisation”. This person is broadly defined under the Act to not only cover direct members of a “commercial organisation” such as directors, partners or employees, but also include a person who “performs services for or on behalf of the commercial organisation”.

In other words, a “commercial organisation”, and consequently its director, controller, officer or partner or a person who is “concerned in the management of its affairs”, can be presumed to have committed an offence under Section 17A—unless they can establish that the offence had been committed without their consent and that they had exercised “due diligence” to prevent the commission of the same.

While there is a difference in the roles and responsibilities between an executive director and a non-executive director, both are treated the same in the eyes of the law, especially in scenarios where a duty is imposed upon the director and/or officer of a company.

As directors and officers become increasingly aware of the accompanying risks and liabilities, and consequentially, the importance of indemnity arrangements in respect thereof, Directors and Officers (D&O) Liability Insurance is an emerging trend, especially in Asia. For example, a recent study shows that 75% of directors and officers in Asia cited regulatory breaches as a main area of concern, thereby outlining the importance of due consideration to adequacy of indemnity undertaken to adequately protect themselves, especially in risk-prone matters. On that note, though crucial, especially since insurance coverage would be contingent on the wordings of each policy, D&O Liability Insurance, which commonly involves unfamiliar jargon and structures, can be challenging to decipher.

#### WRITING THE BOOK YOU CANNOT FIND ON THE SHELVES

JJ Chan was engaged to handle his first D&O case about 10 years ago. A Barrister-at-law of Gray’s Inn, London, JJ, who has significant experience in niche litigation, particularly in corporate and financial lines, realised in the course of his research that there is a dearth of books on the matter not just Malaysia, but also the Commonwealth countries (with most publications coming from the US).

“I remember scouring everywhere for materials on D&O, even in established bookshops in London (including the famed legal booksellers, Wildy & Sons of Carey Street, a go-to for students

and barristers alike). I noticed that there weren’t many books on D&O from Commonwealth countries, and that most of them were from the US as the American jurisprudence is replete with case authorities on D&O matters—including other types of insurance as well—and that a large corpus of case law had been built up there for over more than 30 years,” JJ says.

JJ decided to take matters into his own hands by co-authoring a book entitled *Directors & Officers Liability Insurance: Selected Articles, Cases and Materials* with Kevin LaCroix, a well renowned D&O guru and author of *The D&O Diary*.

“I called Kevin out of the blue one day after reading one of his articles on a complex D&O issue in one of my cases, and our friendship grew over the years. I came to realise that we were quite like-minded in that we both have an interest in sharing our knowledge and experience with the industry and community at large, and soon, we began working on this book in hopes that it would facilitate a better understanding of this niche area of law,” JJ shares.

Annually, the Department of Statistics Malaysia reports an average of 600,000 to 700,000 enterprises in existence. Based on a report published late last year, Penang, commonly dubbed the “Silicon Valley of the East”, is home to over 350 multinational corporations (MNCs), 4,000 SMEs and more than 200 Malaysian digital status companies. It is invariable that Penang would also be home to an increasing number of directors and officers as it continues to flourish economically.

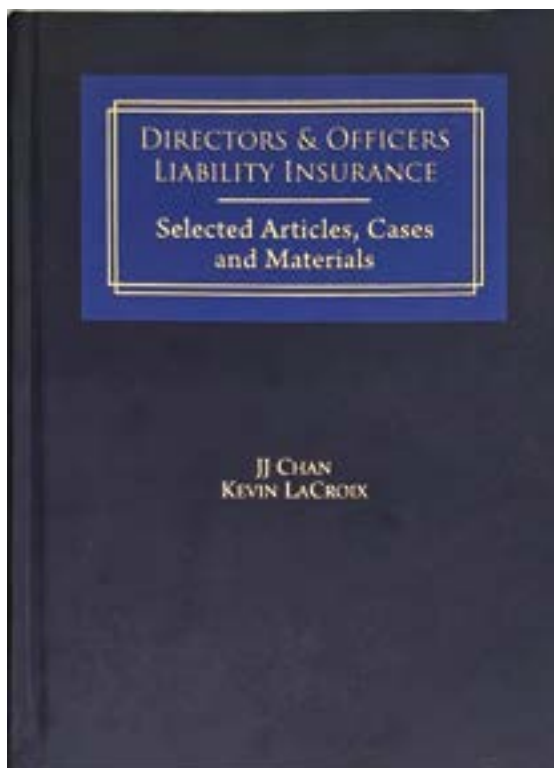
“As our state and country’s economy continues to grow, and consequentially also the number of directors and officers, we hope that there would also be an increase in awareness amongst them on their inherent exposures and responsibilities so that they can make better and more informed decisions, including indemnity arrangements to better protect themselves and their businesses,” JJ remarks.

In this regard, he is actively engaging with reputable and internationally renowned legal, educational and financial/professional institutions, including Lloyd’s of

London, his alma mater Gray’s Inn, London, the Malaysian Ministry of Higher Education, Asian Institute of Insurance, Institute of Corporate Directors Malaysia, etc. on collaborations including briefings and trainings.

JJ’s efforts did not go unnoticed within his industry. At the ALB Malaysia Law Awards in April 2025, he ranked within the top three Managing Partners of the Year. JJ is also one of the finalists for Managing Partner of the Year at the Regional ALB South East Asia Awards—the first and only Penang lawyer to ever achieve this feat.

The completed book is a compilation of selected articles on emerging trends and recurring issues in D&O matters and corporate governance, liabilities of directors and officers and the permissibility of indemnification under the Malaysian Companies Act, 2016, among others. The first publication of its kind in Malaysia (and Asia Pacific, for that matter), it is prepared and shared primarily for academic purposes, as part of JJ’s pro-bono endeavours. The book encourages a better understanding of this area of law, so that before taking a seat at the boardroom table, directors realise the weight of the role they are taking on.



# ALWAYS ON CALL: A DAY IN THE LIFE OF HONORARY CONSULS IN PENANG

BY CAROLYN KHOR



**FOR ABDUL RAFIQUE KARIM**, duty begins with faith. He starts his day by fulfilling his obligations as a Muslim before turning to the work that has defined his career—bridging communities, strengthening international ties and driving social change. With deep roots in both corporate and diplomatic spheres, his impact is felt far beyond boardrooms and embassies. In between his daily activities, he attends high-level meetings, meets with the community and provides assistance to those who need it.

An Honorary Consul-General of Pakistan in Penang since 2007, Rafique attends to the needs of the Pakistani community who reside in Penang. He himself is a fourth-generation naturalised Malaysian of Pakistani descent from Punjab.

“There are two groups: one is made up of naturalised Malaysian Pakistanis and the other, expatriates and workers from Pakistan,” he explains. There are between 80 to 100 of the former and 4,000 of the latter in the state.

When Rafique was offered the position of the Honorary Consul-General by then High Commissioner of Pakistan Talat Munir, he was not too keen to take up the position.

“I was already involved in many community activities. I head many NGOs—trade and others. But I thought, okay, I have to help the Pakistani community here. At the same time, I could help build up the relationship between Pakistan and Malaysia, particularly Penang.”

## STRENGTHENING MALAYSIA-PAKISTAN TIES

As an Honorary Consul-General, Rafique’s foremost duty is to enhance trade.

“Then, to promote culture. After that, fostering people-to-people exchange or tourism. Essentially, these are the areas we focus on.”

Pakistan is one of the largest importers of Malaysia’s crude palm oil. Palm oil companies also set up refineries in Pakistan so that crude palm oil can be processed in the country to save cost. Other than that, Pakistan also imports coconut oil from Malaysia.

Beyond trade, there is also consular work. “This means that if someone wants to travel to Pakistan and requires a visa, we assist them with the application,” he explains.

Although Rafique’s office does not issue visas, he helps travellers by issuing them recommendation letters. He also gives travellers information on what to do and whom to contact in Pakistan.

There are currently at least five flights a week between KL and Lahore, Karachi and Islamabad. Back when there were no direct flights between Pakistan and Malaysia by local airlines, Rafique approached Batik Air—formerly Malindo Air—to propose the air route.

“I spoke to Chandran Rama Muthy from Malindo. And then, I went to speak with the Deputy Minister of Transport, who’s also a good friend of mine, Aziz Kaprawi.”

At the time, Pakistan International Airlines (PIA) was the only airline flying from KL to Islamabad and Karachi three times a week, and the flights were always full.

“We pushed very hard for flights by local airlines. Finally, when the route was created after the necessary approvals, I was on the first flight from KL to Lahore,” he beams.

“In May 2025, AirAsia will have flights to Karachi.”

## SHOWCASING A DIFFERENT SIDE OF PAKISTAN

Apart from promoting Islam as a shared cultural and religious touchpoint between Malaysia and Pakistan, Rafique is also creating more interest and awareness on places of interest in Pakistan for visitors of other faiths, such as Buddhists and Sikhs.

“Taxila has been an intellectual hub since the 6th century BCE. Students once flocked there to study the Vedas, Sanskrit grammar, mathematics, astronomy, Ayurvedic medicine, politics, military science and philosophy.

“Buddha’s teachings arrived there between 1,000 BCE and 500 CE. The Taxila Museum houses a comprehensive collection of Gandharan art excavated from the ruins of ancient Taxila.”

## CAPTION

1. Abdul Rafique Karim, Honorary Consul-General of Pakistan in Penang.

Rafique previously arranged for Universiti Sains Malaysia's archaeological team to visit Taxila and Peshawar, where relics can still be found near the border with Afghanistan.

"The Pakistani community is particularly involved in trade, textiles and the food industry here. I advise them on the regulatory procedures, licences and so on. I also help them with suggestions for premises. If they need contacts in Pakistan, I will connect them with Pakistani exporters," he says.

Touching on a recent viral video of a Pakistani man sharing his experience of living in Malaysia after being accused of taking away job opportunities from locals, Rafique emphasised that many Pakistani men are either married to Malaysian women or have local business partners and are legally eligible to conduct business in the country.

"As long as they are not operating illegally or exploiting loopholes, they should be allowed to earn a living," he asserts.

#### SHAIK ISMAIL ALLAUDIN: CARRYING THE TORCH OF DIPLOMATIC SERVICE

Like Rafique, Shaik Ismail Allaudin's main responsibility as the Honorary Consul of Bangladesh to Penang is to establish friendly diplomatic relations between the two, and to extend collaboration in the areas of trade and commerce, maritime matters, immigration, etc. "In addition, I look after the welfare of the Bangladeshi citizens, advising and helping those in trouble and so on."

For over two decades, Shaik has served as the Honorary Consul of Bangladesh in Penang, continuing a family legacy of diplomatic service and acting as a crucial bridge between Malaysia and the Bangladeshi community.

"Since I was young, I have been interested in the role of a diplomat, especially after being exposed to my late father's work."

Shaik's father was the Honorary Consul General for Bangladesh for almost 16 years until he passed away in September 2002. Shaik assumed his father's position in November 2004, making him one of the longest-serving honorary consuls in Malaysia today.

"I was appointed because the High Commissioner believed I share the same qualities as my father; and I am also my father's successor in his business."

Interestingly, unlike many diplomatic appointments, the tenure of an honorary consul for Bangladesh is indefinite. One can hold the position for life, as was the case with Shaik's father.

#### SERVING THE BANGLADESHI COMMUNITY

Penang is home to over 40,000 legal Bangladeshi nationals, with an estimated 15% more residing undocumented. This makes Shaik's consulate—which deals with diverse and complex issues ranging from immigration, consular, legal disputes and welfare matters—among the busiest in the country.

With his role extending to mediating disputes, acting as the first point of contact and advocating for workers' rights, Shaik's routine often involves advising workers seeking assistance with issues such as unpaid wages, poor living conditions and exploitation by unscrupulous agents. If necessary, Shaik reaches out to relevant local authorities to assist in addressing these.

While discussing the living conditions of Bangladeshi workers, Shaik commends the Penang state government for its efforts in addressing their housing concerns. However, many Bangladeshi workers are still unaware of their rights, and more needs to be done, he says.

#### DEATHS AND CRISIS MANAGEMENT: A GRIM REALITY

One of the most difficult and sensitive responsibilities of his office is handling the death of Bangladeshi nationals. Due to the nature of their work in the country, Bangladeshis are at a disproportionately higher risk for death and other serious injuries compared to other foreign nationals. Shaik counts that on average, there are about five to six cases of deaths reported every month.

"If the worker is legally employed, the employer bears the cost. If found illegal, the community will collect funds."

In cases involving employer malpractice or negligence, legal action is taken after reviewing each case individually.

"After which, we will help the victims' families obtain compensation, which is generally between RM25,000 to RM30,000. A few of these cases reach the court, and in others, employers settle out of court."

Shaik's office also works closely with the High Commission of Bangladesh in KL and relevant Malaysian authorities in such cases.

"It is very challenging... We cannot repatriate the body immediately if next of kin cannot be contacted quickly."

#### SENSING FUTURE OPPORTUNITIES

With Bangladesh's growing economy and population, Shaik sees massive potential where trade is concerned. "The market is so huge that the potential is tremendous." As it is, Malaysia exports palm oil, ball clay and minerals to Bangladesh, while the latter exports garments and frozen seafood to Malaysia.

While there are currently no direct flights from Bangladesh to Penang, there are frequent flights between Bangladesh and KL.

"All flights are via KL, Bangkok or Singapore. We don't have any direct flights to Penang, but this is something that we want to pursue," he says. He added that he sees strong potential in promoting Penang's medical tourism and educational institutions as attractive options for Bangladeshis seeking quality healthcare and higher education abroad.

Meanwhile, talks have been ongoing since before Covid-19 to realise a sister-port relationship between Chittagong Port and Penang Port.

Despite the pressures and challenges of being an Honorary Consul, Shaik finds deep meaning in his role.

"What I personally find fulfilling is that I get the chance to learn about diplomacy and its functions, meeting people from different backgrounds," he articulates. "This opens up my mind and develops a sense of fulfilment when I am able to assist people in their time of need."

With five children and a full calendar of diplomatic and social engagements, his days are always full. From hosting VIPs to breaking fast during Ramadan with the community, Shaik remains the ever-approachable and dedicated face of the Bangladeshi consulate in Penang.



#### CAROLYN KHOR

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



# THE EVOLVING IDENTITIES OF CRAFT ARTISTS IN TAIWAN AND GEORGE TOWN

BY YUWEN TSAI

**2024 MARKS THE** 10-year milestone for new and mid-generation cultural workers in Penang. The new generation are the pioneering creative businesses, while the mid-generation have come to terms with the reality that traditional arts face low recognition and support. However, what they have managed to accomplish is a unique confidence in Penang's Chinese community; they have carefully and firmly rooted themselves here, writing chapters in its art history.

Though Taiwan and Penang are important centres of Chinese culture, their developmental trajectories show significant differences. Taiwan, a predominantly Han Chinese society, has a relatively homogeneous cultural inheritance. Penang, however, is a multicultural society with the Chinese making up approximately 50% of the population, coexisting with the Malays, Indians and other ethnic groups. This socio-environmental difference has led to distinct characteristics in craft inheritance between the two locations.

A specialist from George Town World Heritage Incorporated (GTWHI) Cultural Heritage Research and Development, Ng Xin Yi commented that Taiwan is more homogeneous with many religious buildings, ancestral halls, family temples and Minnan-style (Southern Fujianese) architecture. In Malaysia, "Chinese architecture" is not as numerous. "As the Chinese ethnic group in Malaysia is a minority, so both resources and demand are different from Taiwan, making it difficult to form an industry, and even harder to expect the government to promote connections between academia and industry."

That said, Penang's Chinese community has preserved a large number of traditional buildings, providing a unique physical medium for local craft inheritance. Penang architect Ooi Bok Kim points out that "Penang's streets themselves are living museums; every old building requires the participation of traditional craft artists to maintain its vitality." In contrast, Taiwan's urbanisation process has been more rapid, but these artists have created spaces for survival through diverse channels.

## EVOLUTION OF THE IDENTITY OF CRAFT ARTISANS

Traditionally, craft artists were often viewed as "skilled workers" with low social status—their individual reputations typically subsumed within collective craftsmanship. When we stare in admiration at old church spires and the ornate fresco paintings; when we stand in awe at intricate rooftop designs and symmetry in Chinese temples, we are aware that they were created by craftspeople, but most of the time, we do not know their names. Fortunately, the identity of contemporary craft artists is undergoing a complex transformation,

“**Penang possesses excellent geographical conditions and a rich cultural context. Achieving a balance between “tourism economy” and “cultural preservation” is indeed something worth our constant attention. When balanced well, we can effectively utilise tourism to achieve cultural preservation.**”



1

they are now regarded as “artists”—this time around, we learn their names and the title of their works.

With “artistization”, many craft artists are moving towards individual creativity, positioning themselves as artists rather than mere technical inheritors. Kenny Loh's story is particularly remarkable—of Penang Baba Nyonya descent, he transitioned from nutrition to fashion design, mastering Nyonya embroidery through self-learning. He is now a fashion designer dedicated to preserving Baba Nyonya culture. When it comes to tradition and innovation, he states that those who inherit these intangible heirlooms “must change with the times”. He explains that since Zheng He arrived on the shores of Penang during the Ming Dynasty, initiating the Baba Nyonya generation, until now, “we have been progressing with the times”.

Then there is a strengthening of the “cultural guardian” role—more of these artisans are recognising their role in cultural inheritance. Tong Wing Cheong, a wood carver at Keng Hwa Carving Studio says, “If we all wait for government support, culture and craft skills would already have disappeared. So, it is better to take initiative and see if we can make a living from it.” The phrase “If we don't do it, no one will” was verbalised independently by craft artists in both Taiwan and Penang on several occasions during my interviews with them, revealing a core transformation in craft artists' identity—from anonymous technical practitioners to cultural guardians with a clear mission.

Third is the emergence of the “educator” identity, where artists assume educational roles for knowledge transmission. Teochew Puppet and Opera House director Goh Ling believes that “traditional opera will never disappear, whether it is Teochew opera, Hokkien opera, Cantonese opera, or any other type. I guide young people to experience Teochew opera through interest classes and school extracurricular activities, actively cultivating the next generation of inheritors.”



2

### POLICY DIFFERENCES IN CRAFT INHERITANCE

Unlike Penang, the Taiwanese government invests substantial resources in cultural heritage protection—the Ministry of Culture is responsible for arts and cultural development, and operates the Bureau of Cultural Heritage. Systems have been established for preserving important skills, including the designation of “Important Traditional Arts Preservers” (or “Living National Treasures”). This has made the inheritance of traditional crafts relatively stable in Taiwan, with craft artists receiving more institutional recognition.

In contrast, the Penang state government’s cultural policy places greater emphasis on tourism and creative economy. GTWHI’s Ng candidly states that, “In developing countries like Malaysia, ‘culture’ often needs to be combined with economically beneficial themes such as tourism in order to have a chance of entering the centre of the government agenda.” She further explains that in the State’s administrative structure, departmental names reveal that tourism economics and creative economics have taken precedence over arts and cultural heritage.



3

Chong Lee Choo, editor-in-chief of *Penang City Eye*, after analysing the ecology of Penang’s arts and cultural industry, points out: “Taiwan’s government provides numerous subsidies for culture. Basically, Malaysian Chinese, especially Penang Chinese in the Chinese-language sphere, are greatly influenced by exchanges with Taiwan.” However, in Malaysia, “It is not that government subsidies don’t exist, but they are very limited and difficult to obtain, so everyone survives in their own way.”

Heritage conservation specialist, Tan Chin Ling offers a different perspective, pointing out that the Malaysian Chinese rarely connect Chinese and Malay cultural circles—limited by language and cultural barriers, making the lack of cross-cultural exchange a significant issue in cultural heritage preservation, and despite his experience in bilateral communication, dialogue between Chinese communities and government agencies remains limited.

The general public (including some officials) also has a superficial understanding of the State’s cultural heritage preservation laws. These laws include multiple frameworks, such as the National Heritage Act, State of Penang Heritage Enactment 2011, Town and Country Planning Act, Special Area Plan, and George Town local-level regulations.

### INHERITANCE CHALLENGES AND DEVELOPMENT RECOMMENDATIONS

In Penang, several specific architectural decorative skills are now mastered by fewer than five elderly craft artists. Although Taiwan has a more comprehensive protection system, it similarly faces the risk of a broken chain of inheritance. Also, younger generations generally show low interest in traditional crafts; craft acquisition requires long-term commitment with uncertain economic returns, making it difficult to attract young people to fully engage.

Tan, who strives to improve this situation, organises training courses for contractors, architects and government officials, emphasising that education is crucial to overcoming misconceptions about cultural heritage preservation and bridging the gap between traditional experience-based knowledge and modern scientific methods. He also acknowledges the challenges of cultivating new local craftspeople, as economic instability makes it difficult to attract young people into the industry. Therefore, he suggests establishing a mentorship programme that allows experienced restorers to bring in apprentices, and for them to receive certification (similar to Taiwan’s “Skill Preservation” system), requiring contractors to employ certified traditional craft artists for heritage restoration projects.

Taiwan’s government has established laws and regulations defining what items should be preserved, as well as the methods for preservation. After these regulations are established, industries and academia are encouraged to implement them together.

There are two methods: First, industry masters guide students in academia; second, industry masters offer classes. In all these, the government provides financial subsidies. However, the effectiveness of short-term workshops and community courses is limited. Long-term implementation is necessary to retain young people and allow them to deeply learn these skills, in order to achieve the purpose of preserving traditional crafts.

### HOPE IN PENANG

Penang possesses excellent geographical conditions and a rich cultural context. Achieving a balance between “tourism economy” and “cultural preservation” is indeed something worth our constant attention. When balanced well, we can effectively utilise tourism to achieve cultural preservation.

- Develop diverse inheritance models: Traditional apprenticeship systems can be combined with modern school education to form more inclusive knowledge transmission systems. In Penang, short-term workshops and community courses can lower participation thresholds and expand craft influence.
- Expand traditional craft markets: This is key to ensuring sustainable development. Both Penang and Taiwan need cross-disciplinary collaboration to create economic value, stabilise craftspeople’s income and cultivate more young talent.
- Establish youth training mechanisms: Provide scholarships, set up dedicated studios and create exhibition platforms for young people entering the field to nurture a new generation of craft inheritors.

Penang has not lost its essence; culture flows with time. However, the question on how to preserve and pass down knowledge is something we need to reflect upon so the intangible heritage of Penang will not wither, leaving Penang a tourist trap and an “empty shell”.

### CAPTIONS

1. Kenny Loh Couture’s reimagined Baba Nyonya attire skillfully blends traditional elements with modern design, transforming classical cultural heritage into contemporary fashion with stylish elegance. Copyright © Kenny Loh, Yuwen Tsai
2. Teochew Puppet and Opera House director, Ling Goh established “Iron Gang Puppet Theatre”, inspired by Southeast Asian folklore “Si Tanggang” by integrating Teochew iron-rod puppetry with Malay language and folk songs. This performance infuses contemporary artistic aesthetics with cross-cultural and multilingual elements. Copyright © Yuwen Tsai.
3. The “Ornamental Wooden Screen” (Hua Zhao) and “encompassing” (Ge Shan) from traditional Chinese architecture displayed in The Museum Hotel’s lobby. The Screen bears the carving workshop’s name but not the artisan’s signature—a common practice in early traditional woodcarving where craftsmen rarely signed their works with personal names. Copyright © Yuwen Tsai.



**YUWEN TSAI** is a doctoral candidate in Art History at National Taiwan Normal University researching on East Asian art history, connecting traditional craft history with art historical research. Through this interdisciplinary integration, she aims to pioneer new academic perspectives and believes that combining theory and practice brings a more comprehensive approach to cultural preservation and art historical studies.







**ALL ART IS** aesthetic and, more often than not, supposed to look good. But art can also serve others and contribute to the advancement of the community. That is the philosophy behind award-winning Penang artist Sumay Cheah's installations, often constructed as immersive portals of art and ambience.

# ART AS AN INCLUSIVE FORCE

BY LIM WAN PHING

Since 2017, this commercial artist has worked with museums, galleries, airports and hotels throughout Malaysia, Singapore and Brunei. Under her brand, Other-Half Studio, her first two creations were launched at the Rainforest Music Festival and George Town Festival 2017. Not a bad start for any aspiring artist.

Eight years and 24 installations later, Cheah has bagged the Singapore Good Design (SG Mark) Award and Taiwan's Golden Pin Design Award 2024 in the Experience Design and Spatial Design categories. The winning artwork was *OH!Tenang*, an immersive space held at Gurney Plaza last year that combined sight, scent and sound to create a play sanctuary.

## CALM, CULTURE AND NATURE

Over the years, Cheah's style has moved away from frenzied, maximalist patterns to calmer zen-inspired compositions. Even her materials have changed; from hard surfaces like mirror panels to soft drapes and weavable bamboo.

This year, she worked on the second iteration of *OH!Tenang*, dubbed *Cerita Bayang-Bayang*, a ten-feet high lantern that played with light and shadow concepts. Located inside Mano Plus on Beach Street, Penang, the octagonal-shaped lantern was built entirely from bamboo

sourced from the Temiar, Perak's Orang Asli community, then draped with hand-dyed indigo fabric and decorated with 3D-printed wind chimes made from biodegradable filament.

"I challenged myself to make the lantern out of 100% natural materials," says Cheah, who used only bamboo dowels and natural joinery. "I made the base structure modular so it could be repurposed. I also worked with psychologists to study non-triggering colours to create a sense of calm."

But though her colours and materials may have changed, the DNA of her art has not. Cheah has never forgotten her Peranakan roots (her grandparents are Thai and Chinese-Peranakan), her love for light and shadow (she took a black and white film photography elective in university), and championing child-friendly exhibits (after becoming a mum of two).

## NO ONE LEFT BEHIND

"My artistic career only began after I had children," says the Convent Green Lane alumna. "Going to museums, I always found them to be artefact-heavy and not child-friendly. If we're trying to connect the past, present and future, we have to cater to kids. Adults are the now-generation who are already appreciating art, so why not incorporate good user experience for all?"

Apart from children, Cheah's artworks are now intentionally inclusive for the elderly, wheelchair-bound, visually-impaired and multiracial communities. This means high-contrast large-print guides, including descriptions in Braille, English, Bahasa Malaysia, Mandarin and Tamil on all her captions.

"Art is for everyone and no one should be left behind," Cheah says, recalling a recent collaboration with St. Nicholas' Home Penang. She recycled Braille paper by turning them into origamis of pygmy elephants and green turtles—these species are endangered in Malaysia—then sprayed them with an Aesop scent, and hung them from the ceiling with organic cotton strings.

"I've always believed in universal design, and it doesn't take a lot of effort to include others," says Cheah, explaining that inclusive design involves talking to the right people and inviting them to test your proof of concept. "There's a lot of green talk out there, but if you don't involve communities in the process, the design won't work."

With *OH!Braille Origami*, Cheah chose two animals with strikingly different shapes so it would be easier for the visually-impaired to feel the difference. "I love creating spaces that embrace everyone," she says about her effort to break down barriers in the industry. "I hope that through my art, no one stands on the outside looking in. Everyone belongs."



2

### A FORCE FOR GOOD

Cheah is currently working on her 25th installation for a festival in Kuala Lumpur. In Penang, her permanent artwork can be seen at the lobby of the Penang Marriott Hotel. *OH!Campur* features a series of Peranakan ceramic sculptures suspended on a wall on both sides of the waiting area, and at the entrance of the Italian restaurant, Cucina.

Aside from her recent awards, Cheah's Convertible Desk Box project was also selected for Singapore's Design for Good Initiative 2020, winning a mentorship to invent a cardboard desk for underprivileged children stuck in housing flats throughout Covid-19.

"I've always been a big fan of origami, so I came up with the idea of a folding desk that children could assemble and take down in three easy steps," explains Cheah, who is a member of Design Business Chamber Singapore.

"It was space-saving, eco-friendly and served as a portable container for their homework. They can decorate the brown box if they want to—I also put a waterproof layer on the surface, combining creativity and practicality."



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### A WAY OF LIFE

Cheah's next project will take her to Seoul, and there seems to be no stopping her artistic momentum. "All artists grow and change," Cheah admits. "I cannot guarantee you that my art will look the same in the future, but I can say that I'm always on a learning curve and wanting to make the world a better place."

She continues to derive inspiration from nature and Japanese ethos, looking to architects like Shigeru Ban, Kengo Kuma and MUJI design advisor Naoto Fukasawa. "From them, I learnt to understand the materials I'm working with, how to accentuate them, use them for the right purposes and create intuitive designs."

"I've grown so much in understanding myself, and my works reflect the life lessons and experiences I've been through," she says, believing that art is a way of life and that artists do not have to limit themselves geographically to find inspiration or to succeed. "We don't forget our roots, but we don't have to label ourselves either. Art is universal and we are all humans, all global citizens."



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### CAPTIONS

1. (Cover spread) *OH! Corak-corak*, offers a glimpse into the intricate life of the Little Nyonya with dizzying array of Peranakan patterns and colours, inspired by The Peranakan Museum's collection.
2. A hanging refraction and shadow installation at Chinahouse that captures intertwining colours and patterns.
3. Audiences at the Peranakan Museum Singapore were immersed into the fascinating world of Peranakan culture.
4. *OH!Campur* at the Marriott Hotel Collection.
5. Behind the scenes of the *Seek and You Shall Find* solo exhibition at O Sculpture, Hin Bus Depot.

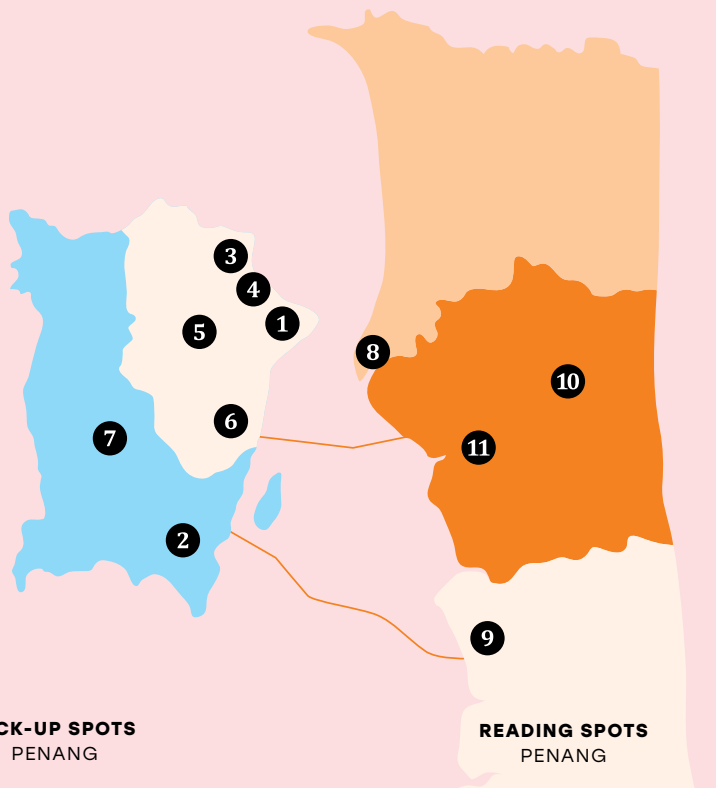
6. *OH!Tenang in the Jungle*, held in conjunction with the Eye of the Tiger exhibition at Hin Bus Depot, a photographic exhibition presented by The Habitat Foundation and Save the Tigers.

7. *OH!Tenang Cerita Bayang-Bayang* installation made with biodegradable 3D-printed motifs.



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

# HERE'S WHERE YOU CAN FIND PENANG MONTHLY



## PICK-UP SPOTS KL/SELANGOR

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

## PICK-UP SPOTS PENANG

<b>1</b>	<b>George Town</b>
Areca Books Book Island @ COEX Infinity 8 Black Kettle BookXcess Gurney Paragon ChinaHouse Cheong Fatt Tze Mansion (Blue Mansion) Gerakbudaya Bookshop @ Hikayat Gurney Plaza (Information Counter) Hin Bus Depot Art Centre Huey & Wah Café Le Petit Four Patisserie More by Arang Coffee Penang Institute Penang Island City Council (Komtar Level 3) Pusat Harmoni (Harmonico)—Reception Ren I Tang Heritage Inn Sin Seh Kai Artisan Bakery Tourist Information Centre 32 Mansion	
<b>2</b>	<b>Bayan Lepas</b>
Arang Coffee InvestPenang Penang Development Corporation (PDC) Penang Skills Development Centre (PSDC) Spices by Yin's Urban Republic	

<b>3</b>	<b>Tanjung Bungah</b>
Gusto Café Straits Mini Mart Tenby International School Yin's WholeFood Manufactory (Lembah Permai)	
<b>4</b>	<b>Tanjung Tokong</b>
Blue Reef Straits Quay	
<b>5</b>	<b>Air Itam</b>
Coffee Elements Penang Hill—Lower Station	
<b>6</b>	<b>Gelugor</b>
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)	
<b>9</b>	<b>Batu Kawan</b>
IKEA Batu Kawan	
<b>10</b>	<b>Bukit Mertajam</b>
Seberang Perai City Council	
<b>11</b>	<b>Juru</b>
AUTO CITY Shop-In D'Park	

## READING SPOTS PENANG

<b>1</b>	<b>George Town</b>
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	
<b>4</b>	<b>Tanjung Tokong</b>
Leo Books	
<b>7</b>	<b>Balik Pulau</b>
Botanica Mansion Nada Natural Farming	
<b>8</b>	<b>Butterworth</b>
Artichoke Café	
<b>9</b>	<b>Batu Kawan</b>
Peninsula College	



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