



SPEAKER 3: DR KHOO SALMA NASUTION

THE PENANG STORY

A PLATFORM FOR INTERGENERATIONAL COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION IN HERITAGE

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**WORKSHOP ON
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ABSTRACT

The Penang Story was first staged by the Penang Heritage Trust in 2001 as a series of history talks by professional, amateur and community historians. Billed as ‘a celebration of cultural diversity’, the objective was to validate the historical significance of Penang and its capital city George Town. The peripheral position of Penang in the national historical narrative made it necessary to generate new narratives that would recast its significance as an outward-looking port shaped by waves of migrants. After the inscription of George Town and Melaka to World Heritage in 2008, the economic value of its heritage has been widely recognised – ironically triggering rapid change which results in both conservation gains and losses. In 2010 The Penang Story was revived as a vehicle to explore Penang’s links to regional and global history. Meanwhile, the heritage movement began to orientate its work around maintaining the Outstanding Universal Value of George Town as articulated in the Operational Guidelines for the implementation of the World Heritage Convention. Within this context, The Penang Story has proven itself a worthwhile strategy for identifying community stakeholders and building local audiences, as well as exploring lost regional connections and recovering historical diversity. This is a preliminary paper documenting some of the many spin-offs and small successes of The Penang Story in stimulating intergenerational community stakeholders and historical minorities to claim ‘ownership’ of their heritage and to develop the tangible and intangible values of identity, history and traditional occupations. Is The Penang Story replicable in other places and can such initiatives inspire new translocal narratives vital to an ASEAN future?

BIODATA

Khoo Salma Nasution, nee Khoo Su Nin (B.A. Duke University), is a writer, publisher and heritage advocate. She has been involved in heritage since 1989, first as Honorary Secretary (1989-2003) then as President of the Penang Heritage Trust (2008-2015), and through her stewardship of the Sun Yat Sen Museum Penang. In 2005, she and her husband co-founded Areca Books. Under her maiden name, Khoo Su Nin, she was editor of *Pulau Pinang Magazine* (1989-1992) and wrote *The Streets of George Town, Penang* (1993), a book which pioneered the cultural interpretation of the city's heritage sites. As an Asian Public Intellectual Fellow (2004-2005), she carried out research on links between Malaysia and Thailand, focusing on Penang and Phuket. Khoo Salma has authored or co-authored about a dozen books, such as *Penang Postcard Collection* (2003), *Raja Bilah and the Mandailings in Perak, 1875-1911* (2003), *Kinta Valley: Pioneering Malaysia's Modern Development* (2005), *More Than Merchants: A History of the German-Speaking Community in Penang, 1800s-1940s* (2006), *Sun Yat Sen in Penang* (2008), *Heritage Houses of Penang* (2009), *Perak Postcards 1890s-1940s* (2010) and *Redoubtable Reformer: The Life and Times of Cheah Cheang Lim* (2015). Her recent book, *The Chulia in Penang: Patronage and Place-Making around the Kapitan Kling Mosque 1786-1957* (2014), won the ICAS Book Prize Colleagues' Choice Award in 2015.

CONFERENCE PAPER
THE PENANG STORY – A PLATFORM FOR COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION IN HISTORY AND
HERITAGE

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ABSTRACT/ INTRODUCTION

The Penang Story was first staged by the Penang Heritage Trust in 2001 as a series of history talks by professional, amateur and community historians. Billed as ‘a celebration of cultural diversity’, the objective was to validate the historical significance of Penang and its capital city George Town. The peripheral position of Penang in the national historical narrative made it necessary to generate new narratives that would recast its significance as an outward-looking port shaped by waves of migrants. After the inscription of George Town and Melaka to World Heritage in 2008, the economic value of its heritage has been widely recognized – ironically triggering rapid change which results in both conservation gains and losses. In 2010 The Penang Story was revived as a vehicle to explore Penang’s links to regional and global history. Meanwhile, the heritage movement began to orientate its work around maintaining the Outstanding Universal Value of George Town as articulated in the Operational Guidelines for the implementation of the World Heritage Convention. Within this context, The Penang Story has proven itself a worthwhile strategy for identifying community stakeholders and building local audiences, as well as exploring lost regional connections and recovering historical diversity. This is a preliminary paper documenting some of the many spin-offs and small successes of The Penang Story in stimulating intergenerational community stakeholders and historical minorities to claim ‘ownership’ of their heritage and to develop the tangible and intangible values of identity, history and traditional occupations. Is The Penang Story replicable in other places and can such initiatives inspire new translocal narratives vital to an ASEAN future?

THE PENANG HERITAGE TRUST

The organisation which spearheaded the Penang Story is the Penang Heritage Trust, a non-profit, non-government organisation. It was founded in 1986 by some of Penang’s leading citizens with the aim of saving Penang’s grand old houses. In the 1990s the Trust started to focus its attention on heritage protection of some five thousand buildings in the historic city centre, which had been largely preserved under rent control and was now under threat due to the imminent repeal of rent control. At the same time, the Trust also began to promote cultural tourism, hoping to prove that built heritage could be an economic asset.

As time went on, PHT members learnt about the scope and complexity of heritage issues, which ranged from intangible heritage and social memory to zoning and urban management to biocultural heritage and industrial heritage. Having a voice in democratic society, insisting on transparency of government planning and development approvals, pushing for improvements in government processes, were also important dimensions of heritage activism. In order to engage in the complexity of heritage and its multi-faceted heritage issues the Trust had to develop cultural collaborations, which are inter-disciplinary, tapping on a range of experience, and across cultural and linguistic groups.

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CIVIC EDUCATION

Awareness of cultural heritage and cultural diversity are important components of civic education, which in turn produces a democratic society based on mutual familiarity, inter-ethnic trust and shared values, as well as a sense of individual and collective responsibility towards a common heritage.

Malaysian society is a plural one, characterised by occupational specialization and ecological interdependence of its ethnic groups. After independence from the British, a stable government has been maintained over a long period of almost unbroken peace through an system of consociational democracy. Malaysians grow up with a certain comfort of living in a plural society – different cultural groups living side by side, ‘yet without mingling’, as Furnivall qualifies. It is commonly felt that the full positive potentialities of a multicultural society has not been realised. This article obviously does not deal with the country’s political and economic issues but addresses the question of cultural diversity.

Malaysia has not fully weaned itself from the racial ideology of British imperialism, which perpetrated White supremacy and profiling myths about natives and immigrants. To a great degree, the colonial was propped up by administrative race construction, which simplified racial categories in order to optimise political-economic functionalism. This ideology and its attendant myths have been carried forward into post-independence age, where they are sustained by divisive politic discourse even today. History is easily politicised with biased narratives being offered as contending versions of the same events, or protagonists being favoured or excluded on the basis of ethnicity.

Formal education has scarcely promoted critical inquiry into the past. History is taught in primary and secondary schools as sets of facts rather than as stories about the making of a nation. The Malaysian school system accommodates multiple school types and media of education which encourages social segmentation. In ‘national type’ schools, official textbook history tends to project a narrow and non-inclusive national narrative, excluding or under-representing diverse peoples from the national narrative. The lack of local history teaching means that the school fails to play a role in inculcating a child’s knowledge about his or her own locality which is so crucial to developing a stronger sense of belonging, identity and local pride.

Penang’s history has long been peripheral to the national narrative – the latter is constructed with Melaka being identified with the beginnings of the Malay nation, while Penang’s history is linked to the beginnings of British colonialism. During the British colonial period, Penang interests were subservient to those of Singapore in the Straits Settlements, and then Penang found itself being often on the wrong side of national politics in the post-independence period when Kuala Lumpur took its place as the federal capital. As the post-independence narrative mainly looked at the making of modern Malaya, scant attention was paid to the history of Penang as a port city, by character outward-looking and linked to events and entities beyond the present nation-state.

Much of Malaysia’s heritage was ignored because it was seen to be ‘colonial’ and not ‘national’, or unimportant because it was ‘ethnic’, ‘local’ or ‘vernacular’. The dominance of Malaysia’s nationalist narrative, the lack of government investment in Malaysia’s public cultural institutions, and the debilitating effect of often contradictory cultural policies contribute to three inter-related problems:

- Cultural dissonance – what one learns through transmission by the parents or family is not affirmed, or even negated, by official or publicly acknowledged versions of history.
- Cultural cringe and cultural alienation at various levels – a sense that the history or culture of one’s own country is inferior to that of other countries.

- Cultural distance or apathy towards ‘others’ – the unfamiliarity of one group with the religion, culture and history of the ‘others’ within the same society – which contributes to political divisiveness.

These issues have an unfortunate impact on sense of belonging, and are factors which contribute to the brain drain of some of Malaysia’s best and brightest. It could be said that the older generation was not conscious of the idea ‘heritage’ and were riding on the modern expectations that old buildings should be replaced by new ones. At the same time, the world was changing for the younger generation, who might not want to continue with seemingly burdensome traditions.

All this impacted greatly on the stewardship of heritage. Just as history is in many cases ‘a truth agreed upon’, cultural heritage is equally a ‘legacy agreed upon’. Apart from institutional deficiencies, it is clear that heritage cannot be safeguarded in the long-term without champions from the ranks of its stakeholders and a strong climate of support among the public in general.

Not only does heritage need to be identified, but objectives and priorities need to be agreed upon by various stakeholders. The relationship of stakeholders in particular and citizens in general to their heritage is something that has to be constantly examined and discussed at different levels in order to work out the greater consensus about ‘heritage in common’. Contestation in heritage can present obstacles but at the same time can also act as a catalyst for mobilizing supporters and unexpected resources.

Once the problem has been thus framed, it appears that the challenge would be to find new ways to communicate the meaning of heritage in such a way that people would identify with their own heritage, whether a sense of belonging through their own group such as a dialect group, religious affiliation or subaltern group, or through a larger identification with their hometown and nation. From the beginning we understood that Malaysia’s three major racial groups are actually artificially constructed from a greater diversity of many ethnic groups, some who do not fit neatly into the major three, and who thus would predictably feel the greatest degree of cultural dissonance due to mainstream narratives. The Penang Story would give people like these a voice on an equal footing with everyone else. Only by finding their own reasons for belonging would they start to care and feel a sense of ‘ownership’ for their own heritage.

Einstein is often quoted as saying, “If you want your children to be intelligent, read them fairy tales. If you want them to be more intelligent, read them more fairy tales.’ This saying has been modified in several ways, for example ‘if you want your children to prosper, tell them stories’. The idea is that stories help people to envision different characters, worlds, situations, strategies and outcomes.

The Penang Story is based on the idea that the diversity of our historical narratives should reflect the cultural diversity of our society. One size cannot fit all. Therefore history should be multi-vocal, plural, and not only from above but also from the middle and from below. The official tagline of The Penang Story is “A Celebration of Cultural Diversity”. Stories are important for people to visualize the city or historic landscape and by so doing, visualize their own place in it.

PENANG STORY PHASE 1

In the early 1990s I was editing a cultural magazine called Pulau Pinang Magazine with a tagline ‘Penang’s culture and way of life’. In 1993, I wrote my first book called the *Streets of George Town, Penang*, which did not initially get the hoped-for reception, but gradually became a local best-seller. Marriage and parenthood intervened. From 1997 to 1999, I took a job as coordinator of The Sustainable Penang Initiative. Through this work I became involved in events and fora which were

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more participatory in nature, and was exposed to mental mapping and team building methods. From this I started to conceive of the idea of community participation in constructing diverse historical narratives which would lead to wider public acknowledgement and sharing.

In 1999, a major conference was convened in George Town and Melaka to push for their joint nomination to UNESCO World Heritage. The theme 'Economics of Heritage' was crafted to get the buy-in of the property owners, business community and other stakeholders. This spurred the Penang government and community to think of new ways to push the nomination process forward.

The Penang Story initiative to celebrate the diversity and history of the local communities of Penang started in 2001 as a project by the Penang Heritage Trust. Its aim was to revisit, re-evaluate and consolidate the various historical and significant events that had changed the cultural, temporal and societal landscape of Penang. I wrote up the initial proposal and the 50-page application to the Japan Foundation, and since its inception, I have played the role of the main convenor for the Penang Story.

Once the Japan Foundation grant was secured, Neil Khor, a journalist and researcher with The Star, was instrumental in convincing Malaysia's leading newspaper to become involved. With a strong media partner guaranteeing the necessary publicity, we were able to get the support of several corporate sponsors. During the course of the Penang Story project, Neil Khor and the University Malaya historian Dr Loh Wei Leng co-edited a weekly newspaper column, with some articles contributed by the conference speakers.

Penang Heritage Trust successfully organized an oral history workshop and four colloquia. These were Pengkisahan Pulau Pinang, the Indian colloquium, the Chinese colloquium, and a colloquium on the Minorities. Each event featured 6-10 speakers and ran for one day each except for the Chinese colloquium which ran for two days and featured double the number of speakers. Each Penang Story Lecture was held according to a regular format – introduction, talk, question and answer, tea – and attracts about 100 people. As the imperative is to showcase cultural diversity, speakers are chosen based on their ability to speak on some aspect of community history. Events are fee-charging or free depending on the target group and anticipated participation.

The Malay colloquium was held in Malay and English, and explored pre-British as well as post-British histories of the indigenous peoples of Penang, co-organised with the Social Science Academy (AKASS). The Indian colloquium, held in English and Tamil, was co-organised with the Indian Chamber of Commerce, chaired by the president of the Indian Chamber of Commerce and co-chaired by myself – the only female and non-Indian member of this organising committee. The Chinese colloquium, held in English and Chinese (including dialects), was coorganised with the Clanhouse Youth. Finally the Penang Eurasian Association was our partner for the colloquium on minorities which featured the Eurasians, the Thais, the Burmese, the Filipinos and the Sri Lankans.

While I served as Honorary Secretary since 1989, the Penang Heritage Trust had been promoting heritage causes in the local newspapers, increasing our exposure over the years. However, through the efforts of the co-convenor, Lim Gaik Siang, the Chinese colloquium in 2001 became the catalyst that triggered increasing local Chinese press coverage of heritage matters. The Minorities colloquium motivated the founding of The Penang Burmese Society, whose prime mover Dato' Mary Ritche 'hoped to use the colloquium as a springboard to bring together Burmese descendants.' As he told me many years later, the Indian colloquium motivated Dato' Ramanathan, then chairman of the Indian Chamber of Commerce, to become interested in heritage; he founded the Chettiar Heritage Society in 2015.

The international conference in 2002 brought together almost 60 scholars, about half from outside Malaysia. This event attracted some 300 people and held over several days. It was launched by the Penang Governor and closed by the Penang Chief Minister. The participation of several international speakers was made possible by embassy sponsors. The talks were divided into two parallel sessions. A tour session was organised featuring ten different tours, which delegates could choose from, including several new ones which I had designed. Several of the academics invited to this event later wrote articles and books in which Penang history featured prominently. Wong Yee Tuan, who was impressed by the 'staggeringly beautiful' kongsis of Penang, eventually wrote a book featuring the commercial history of the Big Five Clans.

The Penang Story was held with the purported objective of documenting local histories as part of the requirement for Malaysia's bid to subscribe Melaka and George Town as a World Heritage Site. It did fulfil that purpose as the papers and proceedings were reportedly submitted as the appendix to a thick dossier. Although UNESCO did not specify the method of history collection, it was expedient to formulate the Penang Story project with a larger goal in mind so that the broadest support could be obtained. The Penang Story conference was closed by the Chief Minister of Penang who together with the vice-chancellor of the local university promised that a Penang Studies unit would be started in the university.

In 2003, the Penang Heritage Trust again organized a conference entitled 'Shared Histories' conference, with separate funding, although it was really a continuation of the same strategy as The Penang Story series. Shared Histories was a pioneering effort to explore the transboundary history and shared heritage between Penang and her neighbouring port cities such as Medan, Phuket, Rangoon. This conference indeed opened up new possibilities, which I was unable to pursue as I took a hiatus from the Penang Heritage Trust for five years.

Meanwhile, some of the articles written for The Penang Story column in The Star were compiled by Neil Khor into a book called *Glimpses of Penang*. Several of the conference papers were solicited by a Malaysian geography journal without consultation with the conference organisers. Other conference papers were compiled into a volume called *Penang and Its Region* edited by four editors and published by Singapore University Press. Frustrated with the lack of follow-up by the state and university to institutionalize Penang Studies, I started a publishing company called Areca Books, with my husband as a partner in the venture.

WORLD HERITAGE LISTING

In the mid-2000s, the Malaysian federal government being the 'state party' nominated Melaka and George Town to the World Heritage tentative list. The Penang Heritage Trust through its regular heritage activities, heritage alerts and occasional media protests regularly kept heritage in the public eye, and the Chinese newspapers often gave heritage stories full page coverage. Around this time Arts Ed, formed in 1999, started to foster arts education through heritage by organising youth activities and theatre in the historic city.

On 7 July 2008, Melaka and George Town were recognized as the Historic Cities of the Straits of Malacca. This recognition of the Outstanding Universal Value of Melaka and George Town cited three criteria: the history of interchange of values/influences, the testimony of tangible/intangible heritage, and the typology of the townscape site and its shophouses – cultural diversity qualifying the uniqueness of all three. In particular, criterion (ii): 'to exhibit an important interchange of human values, over a span of time or within a cultural area of the world, on developments in architecture or technology, monumental arts, town-planning or landscape design' was fulfilled by articulating how

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George Town was an ‘exceptional’ example of a multi-cultural trading town forged from ‘mercantile exchanges’.

These values were upheld by the old and new organisations concerned with heritage. It was assumed that the threat of UNESCO sanctions would be sufficient to keep the government honest in heritage matters. The local authority MPPP worked with GTWHI to put in place the minimum guidelines and controls over new development and renovation works affecting heritage.

The World Heritage inscription indeed elicited a quick ‘buy-in’ from the state, business and tourism industry. This coincided with an advent of budget flights, the opening of the new cruise terminal and renovated airport, and new trends in café and boutique hotels, triggering a sharp rise in heritage tourism to George Town. A newly-elected state government also embraced the idea of heritage and spurred the participation of the artists and the creative community.

In 2008, I returned to the Penang Heritage Trust as president. Since the first Penang Story in 2001, Penang had changed drastically. In 2010, an agency, Think City, had been established with funding from the federal government to support urban revitalization. In the meantime, The state also invested in some institutional capacity in mediating and promoting George Town’s heritage. The George Town World Heritage Incorporated (GTWHI) was established as a state agency for managing the World Heritage Site. The GTWHI also started to organize heritage talks and workshops, engaged the Penang Heritage Trust to compile inventories on intangible cultural heritage and later supported an oral history project carried out by young people formerly working for Arts-Ed. George Town Festival, a public-private partnership, quickly grew into a successful annual arts festival, drawing upon the participation of many organisations in the social landscape.

PENANG STORY PHASE 2

In 2010, the Penang Story was revived with Think City as a strategic partner. By now Dato’ Anwar Fazal and Neil Khor who had previously been involved in the Penang Story, were now playing strategic roles in Think City. They proposed the resuscitation of the Penang Story. With some broader thinking behind it, the Penang Story Lectures set out to explore Penang’s historical relevance in a regional or global context, or featuring famous historical personalities and events. This series aimed to link Penang to renowned historical subjects as well as contemporary speakers – that meant, preferably, that either the speaker or the topic (or sometimes both) would have a wider appeal. Each talk would be documented with a programme booklet and video recording. Think City saw the Penang Story programme as being complementary to its urban rejuvenation and place-making efforts. Taking part of the weight of organisation for the first two years, Think City helped to spearhead

‘an institutional initiative to provide an integrated framework to harness the development potential of three core areas: academic, heritage & culture, and business – leveraging on Penang’s qualities as Malaysia’s secondary city and transforming Penang into the choice location of a variety of enterprise and range of talents.’

The celebration of the centenary of Dr Sun Yat Sen’s Penang Conference, in which Dr Sun and his supporters met to plan the Guangzhou Uprising in 1910. This was held in conjunction with the Joint Conference of the Sun Yat Sen and Soong Ching Ling Museums and Memorials with 30 organisations from China, Japan, Singapore and Taiwan as well as a Sun family reunion with almost 30 descendants. This large meeting was co-organised by the Sun Yat Sen Museum Penang (at the time called the Sun Yat Sen Penang Base) and Penang Heritage Trust together with another 11 organisations including the Penang Chinese Town Hall. A highlight of this event was Professor Wang Gungwu’s Penang Story

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Lecture comparing the cultural legacy of two historical contemporaries – Dr Sun Yat Sen, China's first Republican and Penang-born Gu Hongming, dubbed the last Confucian'.

Penang Story had also had a series of lectures on the theme of 'Penang and the Indian Ocean' (PIO) which culminated a conference featuring prominent historians, such as the late Sir Christopher Bayly and Dr Om Prakash. The Conference examined

'the various networks, imperial, commercial, cultural, and biographical links between Penang and the littorals east of the Indian Ocean, stretching from Myanmar, Sri Lanka to the Coromandel Coast. It gathered scholars with interests in Penang's role as a gateway to the Indian Ocean to a common platform to share their research, ideas, and opinions and consolidate their facts and findings.'

In the context of a more mature heritage scene, the second phase of Penang Story had several spin-offs. Penang and the Indian Ocean spawned the 'Tagore Lectures' which ran for three years. As a result of a presentation in 2012 on Penang's foremost international medical pioneer who became the 'Manchurian Plague-Fighter', the Dr Wu Lien-Teh Society was formed. In 2013, the conference Penang and the Hajj, which highlighted Penang's lost history as a centre of pilgrimage travel, attracted the participation of the local Muslim community. A major conference on the Khaw / Na Ranong family had the support of the Thai Ambassador to Malaysia, whose family history was connected to the Na Ranong family. With his support, the Finance Minister of Thailand was invited to grace the event and business leaders of the Indonesia-Malaysia-Thailand Growth Triangle convened their business meeting in conjunction with the Penang Story conference; the Ambassador believed that all the businessmen should learn some history.

In 2015, an additional series of six talks called Seberang Perai Story was initiated to map out the neglected history of Province Wellesley on the mainland, which had long been perceived as the hinterland of Penang island but now a part of the booming conurbation. These talks also brought out new voices, one of them a young woman who had attended the early Penang Story events when she was a teenager: 'And now I am giving a Penang Story Lecture myself!' Several archaeology talks have been co-organised with the Centre for University Sains Malaysia's Centre for Global Archaeological Research, including one about the Gua Kepah shell-midden site, which virtually revived the cooperation between the university archaeologists, government and Seberang Perai Municipal Council.

Other initiatives complementary to the 'The Penang Story' idea had also been taken up by other parties. Dato' Seri' Wong Chun Wai, group editor of The Star, ran a newspaper column 'Penang's History My Story' for a year so and this was eventually compiled into a book. The state government supported a street art project, illustrating and signposting the stories of its streets, which proved hugely popular with both locals and visitors. The proliferation of social media reflected a widespread interest in heritage expressed through photo opportunities, facebook and blogs. Press coverage of heritage stories has been generally good and favourable.

Over the years, the Penang Story has built a steady audience among the Penang community, the core group being members of the Penang Heritage Trust. Penang Story events are sometimes scheduled as Continuing Tourism Related Education (CTRE) programmes for which tour guides can get credits and certificates for participation. At times the talks have been elicited interest among the audience and were thus followed with heritage site visits, by popular demand. Heritage trails and walkabouts, laid out with heritage signage, brochures and tourist guide training were developed in

conjunction with several Penang Story events – the Sun Yat Sen Heritage Trail, the Siamese Heritage Trail, and the Wu Lien-Teh Heritage Trail.

In retrospect, much more could have been done to increase the mileage of the Penang Story events, for example, fine tuning each programme, capturing audience information, publicizing the proceedings, follow-up on new material, publication in print and podcasts, and so forth. However, given the limited capacity of a non-profit organization – which constantly has to turn its attention from one programme to another, and from one crisis to the next – what matters is to stay in the game and provide sustained and relevant advocacy across the decades.

CONCLUSION

Today, Penang is growing and changing at a rapid pace. The influx of new urban population means that there is a ‘new Penang’ which does not share the memory of ‘old Penang’. Most Penangites of the X generation would have regularly frequented the ‘main street’ and the ‘downtown’ shopping areas. But it was obvious that many university students and young graduates of the Y generation who applied to work in a George Town survey several years ago were unfamiliar even with the local street names. In the digital age, a sustained effort to tell and retell Penang’s stories has become more relevant than ever. As a leading Penang citizen once asked, ‘What heed will the new Penang pay to the old Penang?’

In conclusion, the Penang Story has served as a platform and vehicle to achieve the following:

- a) Documentation and transmission: Spotlighting local heroes and valourising local communities, capturing family histories and citylore, exposing private histories to an appreciative public, transmitting this knowledge across the generations. ‘People’s stories matter.’
- b) Cultural mapping: Exploration of the themes of local history and matching them to local stakeholders, strengthening trans-local shared history between Penang communities and others (Phuket, Calcutta, Adelaide, Aceh etc). ‘Connecting with Penang locals and diaspora’
- c) Strengthening the link between history and heritage: Allowing local stakeholders to tell their story and take ‘ownership’ of their heritage. At the same time, flagging endangered heritage and potential hotspots. Site visits and heritage trails. ‘Preserving heritage to preserve history’.
- d) Centralising the Penang Story among the nation’s narratives: Encouraging a proliferation of narratives which validate Penang’s historical importance as a port-city. Compared to the previous dearth of literature on Penang, there is now an abundance of new research, writing and publication. ‘Writing Penang into the national and international awareness’.
- e) Profiling Penang Heritage Trust: The Trust has over time proven to be the leading entity organising specialised events focusing on the broad spectrum of cultural groups and building audiences across communities. Furthermore, although there are now other cultural heritage organisations on the scene, the Penang Story helps to maintain PHT’s profile as an organisation that can think across time and geography about Penang’s past and future. PHT’s mission: ‘Preserving our heritage for future generations’.

New players on the heritage scene are often confused by the priorities of ‘protection’ and ‘promotion’. The increase in domestic and foreign tourism and the publicity generated about George Town also attracted private investors, especially from Singapore, due to the difference in currency values. Some of this investment financed conservation gains – restoration, sensitive refurbishment, maintenance. However, much of investment also led to reckless renovations which actually destroyed the cultural significance of the built heritage. Other alarming trends were property speculation, the

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rate of conversions to commercial use, boutique hotels and more boutique hotels. Rapid change and gentrification was directly causing the evictions of tenants who had been there for generations, precipitating the loss of intangible heritage such as traditional trades, and eroding the living memory of George Town.

As the double-edged impacts of tourism became more obvious, PHT articulated the conflicts between heritage protection and the commercial demands of tourism industry, insisting on protection before promotion, and that some benefits of the tourism industry should benefit conservation and community. PHT remains primarily an advocacy group, but in order to play this role well, it also needs to articulate the relevance of heritage to a wider population. The Penang Story continues to massage the social memory of the community, for social memory as much as documentation is required to validate heritage and underpin its values of 'authenticity' and 'integrity'.