

Partner South East Asia

Malaysia now: Arts and culture mosaic

Report: March 2022

Highlights

- Ten years ago, the British Council commissioned The Light Surgeons to produce [*SuperEverything**](#). The live audio-visual performance explored Malaysia's complex relationship between identity, ritual and place.
- Preceding the *SuperEverything** anniversary album which will be launched in 2022, collaborators of the 2012 project gathered to review what has changed and what has not. They also discussed the strengths and challenges of Malaysia's arts and culture sectors.
- Seventy-six per cent of organisations in the creative industry belong to the arts and culture sector.
- Non-craft makers are concentrated in economically developed states while craft makers are mostly found in less developed states.
- Folk traditions are open to collaboration and innovation, with improvisation being a core aspect.
- When collaborating with Malaysia's arts sectors, it is important to co-design the project and pursue a mutual learning and benefit. Being informed before starting a project in another country can be done by engaging cultural custodians and practitioners and reading its literature.
- The *Malaysia Cultural Insights Report* explored the complexity, diversity, depth and history of Malaysia's arts and culture.
- *Malaysia Cultural Cities Profile* gave the audience a whistle-stop tour of eight cities.

Overview

This session offered a glimpse into the complexities and richness of Malaysia's cultural mosaic. It also highlighted opportunities and strategies for future collaborations.

Jo Kukathas, Artistic Director of [The Instant Café Theatre Company](#), hosted the session.

Izan Satrina of the Creative Economy Development Agency (CENDANA), set the cultural landscape of Malaysia.

A panel discussion between three collaborators of *SuperEverything** reflected on their experiences and hindsight.

The session concluded with a presentation of two reports commissioned by the British Council to identify opportunities and collaborations between the UK and Malaysia.

Opening remarks: Jazreel Goh



Jazreel was working for the British Council in mainland China before returning to Malaysia in 2020 to become Country Director, Malaysia.

The British Council has been in Malaysia for over 70 years. It works across art forms and disciplines like film, music and visual arts. It encourages debate and access to safe spaces for dialogue among artists, creative professionals and audiences.

Keynote address: Izan Satrina Mohd Sallehuddin



Izan is Founding Chief Executive of [CENDANA](#), Malaysia's cultural economic development agency.

CENDANA builds a vibrant, sustainable and ambitious cultural economy through three strategic pillars:

- Energising the arts
- Empowering communities
- Reorganising policies

In the past five years, creative industries contributed 1.9% to Malaysia's GDP. Seventy-six per cent of organisations registered in the creative industry belong to the arts and culture sector.

Another important sector is crafts. Malaysia's hotspots for crafts makers are Kedah, Perak, Melaka, Johor, Terengganu, Kelantan, Sabah and Sarawak.

The demographic for non-craft makers is slightly different, with hotspots in Penang, Perak, Kuala Lumpur, Johor, Sabah and Sarawak.



Image source: [ResearchGate](#)

Malaysia 10 years on

Ten years ago, the British Council invited leading UK audio-visual artists, [The Light Surgeons](#), to produce a live cinema. [SuperEverything*](#) explored and showcased Malaysia's diversity in all its forms.

Three collaborators who worked on the project joined the conversation to review past relationships and discuss the evolution of Malaysia's arts and culture sectors. They are:

- **Chris Allen**, Founder and Creative Director of [The Light Surgeons](#). He works with moving images that can be viewed as film, installations and live performances. Christopher also helped to pioneer live cinema.
- **Pauline Fan**, Creative Director of [George Town Literary Festival](#). She joined the discussion in her capacity as Creative Director of [PUSAKA](#)¹, which collaborated with The Light Surgeons on [SuperEverything*](#).
- **Ng Chor Guan**, Composer, Sound Designer, and Co-founder of [Toccata Studio](#). He collaborated on [SuperEverything*](#) as a thereminist². His body of work is rooted in contemporary explorations of technology.

Pauline drew parallels and connections between live cinema and older concepts like the *wayang kulit*, a folk tradition from Kelantan. Folk traditions are incredibly open to collaborations and innovation. The *wayang kulit Tok Dalang* (puppeteer) improvises the performance based on the audience and the people he works with. [SuperEverything*](#), which featured the *wayang kulit*, was an opportunity to deconstruct the notions of traditional and contemporary.

¹ PUSAKA is a cultural organisation dedicated to creating a comprehensive documentary archive of traditional performing arts in Malaysia. It collaborates with leading custodians of ritual and traditional performing arts in the country and region.

² A thereminist plays the theremin, an electronic musical instrument that requires no physical contact. The thereminist plays it by manipulating electromagnetic fields.

A recording of the shadow play was used as a visual sample on stage. Woven with music and other components, this tapestry produced a live cinema performance.

Working with Chris and Tim Cowie (an audio-visual artist) gave Guan a perspective of how outsiders looked at Malaysia, as Malaysian artists may develop blind spots from living here for so long.

Chris stressed the importance of doing research and being informed before starting a project. He met prominent Malaysians from the arts sector, like [Eddin Khoo](#), a former arts and culture journalist, and [Bernice Chauhy](#), a writer, poet and educator. He also read Farish Noor's book *What Your Teacher Didn't Tell You*³.

Eddin left Chris with a lasting lesson that reminds artists to engage, listen and learn: 'There's a difference between information and knowledge. People these days have access to a lot of information, but they don't spend a lot of time contemplating things.'



Clockwise: Lee Jia-Ping, Tom Fleming, Jo Kukathas, Christopher Allen, Dr Ann Lee, Pauline Fan, Ng Chor Guan

³ This book was based on public lectures that the author delivered at in 2008 and 2009. Farish Noor is a political scientist and historian.

Malaysia sector insights and cultural cities reports

Tom Fleming was the Principal Researcher and Co-ordinator of these reports. He's the director of [Tom Fleming Creative Consultancy](#), which develops cultural and creative strategies for nations, regions and cities.

The British Council commissioned the reports to develop cultural city profiles and identify strategic opportunities for cultural collaborations in the creative industries.

Dr Ann Lee is the key contributor to the [Malaysia Cultural Sector Insights Report](#). She's a playwright and researcher, and has a PhD in South East Asian Studies.

Lee Jia-Peng is a key researcher of the [Malaysia Cultural Cities Profile](#) and Founder of [Pollin8](#). She incorporates her experience in theatre, arts, branding and play strategies to rejuvenate urban and corporate spaces as well as hospitals.

Malaysia cultural sector insights report: 'Mosaic'

[Ghulam-Sawar Yousof](#), a scholar and a specialist of traditional South East Asian theatre, coined 'mosaic' – a more appropriate academic term than 'melting pot' or 'parallel streams' – as it recalls the smaller, minute details that make up the larger picture.



The insights report covered six sectors across Malaysia's arts, cultural and creative industries.

The national language is Bahasa Melayu, also known as Bahasa Malaysia or Malay. Academic Rachel Leow introduced the term ‘iconic plurilingualism’ as Malaysia’s distinguishing characteristic. Literature is often expressed in the languages of the three main ethnic groups (Malay, Chinese and Indian), although Malaysia’s small population of 32 million speak around 140 languages.

Despite this rich diversity, public funding is focused on writing in the national language. National laureate authors who write in Bahasa Melayu are mostly cisgender males.

Pauline Fan pointed to the three-fold translation as an opportunity for meaningful cultural exchange and even commercialisation:

- inter translation into our own languages
- translation of world literature into Malay and other Malaysian languages
- translation of Malaysian literature into English and other world languages

Visual arts like the *tikar* (placemat) in Sabahan artist Yee I-Lann’s collaborations with weaver Roziah Jalalid, demonstrate that visual arts and crafts can connect to social and environmental concerns.



Image source: Yee I-Lann’s Facebook showing her collaborative works with weaver Roziah Jalalid

The performing arts sector showed great resilience and innovation during the pandemic. Dancer and Choreographer, Ikram Azhar amassed 470,000 followers with 6.3 million likes on TikTok and now earns income from advertisers.



The music industry generates up to MYR6.1 billion (£107 million pounds) a year in value-added impact⁴, but Malaysian music exports are under-leveraged.

While institutions like the [Malaysian Philharmonic Orchestra](#) has closed, artists like Taiwan-based rapper Namewee are using digital music platforms to build new revenue opportunities. He earned MYR4 million (£715,000) by releasing [Fragile](#)⁵ as non-fungible tokens (NFT).

Image source: Malaysia Cultural Insight Report (British Council 2021)

Film and animation make up the largest part of Malaysia's creative industries. Children's adventure film [Upin & Ipin: Keris Siamang Tunggal](#) surpassed Disney's Incredibles 2 as the highest grossing animation film from a South East Asian country.



Image source: lescopaque.com

⁴ Source: Price Waterhouse Coopers

⁵ *Fragile* is a music collaboration with Australian singer Kimberley Chen.

In the report, filmmaker [Tan Chui Mui](#) shared that too many people want to be directors, but not many choose to go into producing and scriptwriting – skills the industry is short of.

State censorship and social media bring unpredictably to industry members, who face legal prosecution and harassment if they fall out of line. Associations such as the [Freedom Film Network](#) champion less government control.

Moving forward, all sectors need to build and exchange technical and entrepreneurial capacity. Many artists have moved online but lack the marketing skills and digital platforms to reach audiences.

Read the full report [here](#).

Malaysia cities: A whistle-stop tour

This report focuses on eight cities and gives insights into their cultural dynamism and distinctiveness.



Image source: from Jia-Ping's presentation

Jia-Ping emphasised authenticity in keeping our original craft as well as heritage and cultural elements alive. ‘Same-same but different’ is a convenient way to package culture for tourism, but culture is quite different in terms of practice and worldview.

Secondary cities present authentic collaboration opportunities and have large aspirations to catch up on a global or big city scale.

Melaka and George Town are grouped together because they’re tied in the UNESCO World Heritage Site listing. Despite this bond, they have different approaches to UNESCO management. Melaka is more ‘federal’. Penang’s George Town takes a more activist approach driven by heritage pride. George Town offers different and exciting avenues of collaboration, while Melaka is focused on heritage tourism.

KL, Selangor and the Greater Klang Valley is where the money is. They attract migration but the pie for sharing is small.

Johor Bahru, being next to Singapore, has huge global aspirations as it wants to become the ‘second Singapore.’ The Sultan of Johor is heavily involved in state matters and has greenlighted a few heritage conservation projects.

Ipoh’s strength is also its weakness. It’s close distance to the capital city KL means it is bypassed by investors who go to Penang and Kuala Lumpur. Ipoh has started its own bottom-up regenerative efforts, with communities and individuals taking control of the old heritage core and rejuvenating it with their own money.

Kota Bharu, Kuching and Kota Kinabalu being previously ignored for investments when Malaysia was formed, were left relatively untouched. Hence, their heritage and cultural elements can be considered authentic.

Read the full report [here](#).

Reflections

Language barriers and opportunities

Jo asked Chris what he would do differently if he had known about Malaysia's language complexity before coming here.

Chris acknowledged the barriers to exploration and would have liked to collaborate with communities like the *orang asli* (indigenous group). He added that it's important to work with producers who can make connections with others and manage budgets and timeframes.

Jo asked Ann for her insights on giving voice to those who are not the cisgender male writing in Malay.

Ann shared initiatives like [Inisiatif Buku Darul Ehsan](#), which translates world literature into Malay, and translates Malay short stories into Chinese and vice-versa. She also said that streaming channels like Viu and Netflix are creating a demand for producers and translators.

Jo asked Guan about the trap of collaborating with only a small sector of Malaysian arts, and how he negotiates language in international collaborations?

Guan sees language as a tool that brings people together. Although he doesn't have the flair for the written and spoken language, he understands and feels body language.

Inclusive collaboration

Jo asked Tom for his thoughts on co-creation, and inclusion in collaborations. Tom pointed out that we must be sensitive to the power regime of languages and boundaries. In Malaysia as in many countries, cultural policies lack diversity of the people they represent.

Conclusion

Jo wrapped up the session with the local saying, 'Don't be a frog under the coconut shell.' Artistic work must be inclusive, especially in the climate of growing right wing sentiments.

We need to be aware of what is happening in other countries. Finally, don't forget the secondary cities. Engage with local governments, pay attention to bottom-up regenerative efforts and practise careful listening.

Watch the video recording of the session [here](#).