

## **PENANG MUSEUMS, CULTURE AND HISTORY**

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*The essay studies museums in Penang, their culture displays and cultural contestation in a variety of museums. Penang is selected as case study due to the fine balance in population numbers between the Malays and the Chinese which is reflected in their cultural foregrounding in the Penang State Museum. This ethnic balance is also reflected by the multiethnic composition of the state museum board. Yet behind this façade one could detect the existence of culture contests. Such contests are also found within the different ethnic groups like the Peranakan and non-Peranakan Chinese or the Malays and the Indian-Muslims. This essay also examines visitor numbers and the attractiveness of the Penang Story. The essay is based on the scrutiny of museum exhibits, museum annual reports and conversations with former and present members of the State Museum Board.*

Keywords: Penang museums, State Museum Board, Penang Story, museum visitors, culture and history competition

### **INTRODUCTION**

The phrase culture wars might have started in mid-19th century Germany but it came into wider usage since the 1960s in reference to the ideological polarisations among Americans into the liberal and conservative camps (Hunter, 1991; Luke, 2002). Although not as severe, such wars in Malaysia are manifested by the intense culture competition within and among museums due to the pervasive influence of ethnicity in various facets of the national life. As a result, museum foregrounding of culture and history have become contested (Matheson-Hooker, 2003: 1–11; Teo, 2010: 73–113; Abu Talib, 2008: 45–70; 2012; 2015). This essay looks at museums in Penang, their culture displays, visitor turnouts to the Penang State Museum, the Penang Story and the culture and history competitions in Penang museums. The discussion is based on the scrutiny of museum exhibits, museum annual reports, writings on museums in Malaysia and interviews with members of the museum board.

## MUSEUMS IN PENANG

Penang started with a single museum in 1965. By 2013 the state has more than 18 museums, mini museums and galleries that cover ethnography, history, the Second World War, the arts, owl, cats, Islam, toys, flora and fauna, Sun Yat Sen and a consummate entertainer from the state. The latest is the Made in Penang Interactive Museum that offers 30 giant 3D art pieces that tell stories about Penang's lifestyle. Most of these museums and galleries are located within the city of George Town. A number of private museums are located within the city's heritage enclave, straddling the heritage trail which is popular with local and foreign tourists. Table 1 highlights 10 of these museums, their locations and the main features of their permanent exhibits.

Table 1: Selected Penang museums

Name of museum	Location	Main features of permanent exhibits
Penang State Museum and Art Gallery (1965) (state)	Farquhar Street, George Town	Social history and culture of the various races including the Chinese Peranakan, the transformation of Penang into an international port with a cosmopolitan population. Portraits of early 19th century Penang and the Japanese Occupation.
Museum & Gallery Tuanku Fauziah (1982) (university)	Minden Campus, Universiti Sains Malaysia	Ethnography, science and technology, astronomy and archaeology notably the Perak Man unearthed in the Lenggong valley in the 1990s.
Penang Forestry Museum (1983) (Forestry Department)	Telok Bahang	Flora and fauna of Penang, information on jungles and the types of wood found in mangrove swamp forest, mangrove forest, coastal hills and highland forest besides the wood industry and uses of wood in the everyday life of Malaysians.
P. Ramlee Gallery (2002) (National Archives)	Perak Road, George Town	The life of P. Ramlee with his mates in Penang; his musical and film career, leading ladies that appear in his movies and cartoons on Ramlee that had appeared in local magazines.
Penang Islamic Museum (1995) (private organisation)	Acheen Street, George Town	Islam, Islamic culture, Islamic leaders in Penang, Islamic architecture and the <i>pondok</i> education in Seberang Perai. Islam in Penang and the Malay peninsula; its spread through trade.

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Table 1: (continued)

Name of museum	Location	Main features of permanent exhibits
Penang War Museum (2002) (private ownership)	Batu Maung	Outdoor museum sited on a former British military base constructed in the 1930s. Complete with gun emplacements, spent cartridges, military motorcycle, military intelligence room, Japanese torture room torture weapons, pictures of Japanese torture victims, war memorial, the trial of Japanese war criminals and punishment meted to them, replica of a hanging gallows and British re-entry into Penang in September 1945.
Penang Peranakan Museum (2010) (private ownership)	Church Street, George Town	Antiques, kitchen utensils, colourful ceramics, Peranakan dress ( <i>kebaya</i> and <i>sarong</i> ), bridal costumes and porcelain wares used by the Penang Peranakan. Family ancestral temple and prayer altar.
One East Museum (2011) (private ownership)	Dunlop Road, George Town	Culture of the Chinese and Peranakan Chinese, art pieces from well known artists in Southeast Asia, famille rose figurines, ceramic, antique furniture used by Peranakan Chinese in late 19th century until 1911.
Malay Museum (2010) (federal department)	Hutton Lane, George Town	Way and life of the Malay-Muslims notably the Jawi-Peranakan including household utensils, cultural life and musical instruments.
Ben's Vintage Toy Museum (2011) (private ownership)	Acheen Street, George Town	10,000 toys including wind-up toys, battery powered and celluloid which include toys of the pre-war die-cast era, dinky toys, German doll of 1920 and Victorian toys of 1860.

## PENANG STATE MUSEUM

The 2004 official report on museums in Malaysia describes the Penang State Museum as follows: "the ground floor showcases the social cultural history of the major ethnic races in Penang while the upper floor informs visitors of the influence of each race on the other's culture. The upper floor also displays 19th century paintings of Old Penang notably the Captain Robert Smith Collection of 1819 [sic]" (Ministry of Culture, Arts and Tourism, 2004: 40).

The state museum started with ethnography, archaeology and natural history. Its annual reports, which did not always appear on time, provide fascinating details on its expansion. For the more recent ones, there is much less details on museum collections, the problems it faced or visitor feedbacks. Before 2006 these reports appeared in Malay and English under various titles but after 2006 it is published in Malay only. For unknown reasons only a few issues came complete with page numbers.

Efforts to start a museum began in 1941 through private initiatives (Penang State Museum and Art Gallery, 1965a: 12) but these ended with the Japanese Occupation. Another attempt was made in 1956 through the British Resident Councilor R. P. Bingham but it came to an end when the building that housed the exhibits was demolished. In the early 1960s the museum project was revived through the Penang Historical Society, then under the leadership of Captain Mohd Noor Mohamed and the Penang Art Society. The museum was closely associated with Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman who had selected a two-storey building which was part of the Penang Free School (1907–1927) and Hutchings School (1928–1960). The state government had duly acquired this building in 1962. Tunku had studied here when he was a student of the Penang Free School (Penang State Museum and Art Gallery, 1965a: 9). In July 1964 a visitors' day for "Friends of the Museum" was held and during the occasion pledges of donations of exhibits and expert assistance were made. Chan Kit Ying, a former inspector of Chinese schools, offered his service and advice on exhibits of Chinese culture. Haji Fathil Basheer, a highly respected member of the Malay community, donated 60 objects including a hand written al-Quran that was more than 100 years old. The museum designed a special case for this collection which was placed in the History of Penang room.

With less than 300 exhibits, the Penang Museum and Art Gallery was officially opened by the state governor on 14 April 1965. It aimed "to preserve and attractively display, the past and present life of its inhabitants, to interest residents and visitors and to encourage our children to acquire, and value, knowledge of their environment" (Penang State Museum and Art Gallery, 1965a: 11). A. Nichol-Smith was appointed honorary curator until her demise in February 1967. At the time this former curator of the Zanzibar Museum of East Africa was teaching English at the Malayan Teachers College in Gelugor. The museum was located on the ground floor of the building occupying space measuring 132 feet by 52 feet while the smaller first floor – 96 feet by 28 feet – was taken up by the Art Gallery. In 1994 the entire building was occupied by the museum after the Art Gallery moved to the nearby Dewan Sri Pinang.

The museum was divided into seven rooms namely History of Penang in Room 1, Development of Education and Commerce in Room 2, Arts and Customs in Room 3, Ethnographical Exhibits in Room 4, Temporary Exhibits on Loan from the National Museum in Room 5, Natural History in Room 6 and the Curator's Office and Workshop in Room 7 (Penang State Museum and Art

Gallery, 1965b). The arrangement was not much different from the original plan that focused on history, Chinese culture and customs, the island room, natural history and embroideries and costumes (Penang State Museum and Art Gallery, 1965a: 18–21). The front gallery provides general information on Penang and relief map of the island showing places of historical interest while the rear gallery was reserved for further displays. The major attractions during the opening were the Haji Fathil collection and Merdeka Bay, East India Company and Francis Light, the (Peranakan) Bridal Chamber, the Lion Dance diorama, Paddy Cultivation, Malay fishing village, kingfishers from Penang and Marine Life.

Despite initial hiccups officials were optimistic of the museum's future. According to the first annual report "there is still plenty to be done in research and authentication of specimens and documents. There is need for more funds so that glass cases can be made to house delicate and irreplaceable costumes, more material may be included in the museum, and education and cultural projects of a visual nature be carried out, as is proper to an active modern museum. Displays can be considered if more space becomes available" (Penang State Museum and Art Gallery, 1965b). All these had to be undertaken within an annual budget of \$30,000.<sup>1</sup> By 1970 the management committee expressed concern that this allocation was insufficient to maintain existing services and to embark on future improvements. In 1971 the state government increased the allocation to \$40,000 and by the end of 1980 to \$110,000, \$250,000 in 1989 and \$350,000 in 1990 although the bulk of the allocations were used for salary and utility expenses (Penang State Museum Board, 1991: 9). By the 1990s part of the allocation was also used for sending museum staff to various courses and seminars so as to equip them with better knowledge that would enable them to provide better services to the public. These courses include the workshop on the "Care Conservation of Museum Objects" in Mysore, India, the "Identification and Preservation of Photographs Workshop" in Kuala Lumpur, the "Conservation Workshop" in Sabah and the "Workshop on Malay Costumes and Textiles" in Terengganu (Penang State Museum Board, 1993).

In 1966 many more exhibits had made their way into the museum. These include Malay, Chinese and Indian musical instruments, Indian *kavadis* and Malay jewelry which were donated by Tunku Ahmad Tajuddin Tunku Ibrahim. The last items were displayed in new showcases located in the north corridor. The History Room received Neolithic stone artifacts<sup>2</sup> from Penang tycoon Loh Boon Siew, a copy of the Report of the Commission of Enquiry into the Penang Riots of 1867 and photograph of volunteers to quell the riot which were donated by the Penang Historical Society. A python presented by Tunku Abdul Rahman was added to the display in one of the temporary dioramas in the Natural History Room. The construction of two dioramas which show night and day mammals at a cost of \$4,830.41 was started in 1968. It was completed in early 1969 (Penang State Museum Board, 1975: 15). With such varied exhibits the Natural History Room proved to be one of the museum's draw cards until the early 1990s.

In 1967 a Transport Section was added which was subsequently filled by a pony cart that was in use in the 1920s (Penang State Museum and Art Gallery, 1967), sedan chair, photographs and a comprehensive report on the history of transport in Penang. In 1972 a room on the first floor was renovated into the Tunku Room. It was fitted with seven showcases to display 145 pieces of rare kris, miscellaneous weapons, a 141 year old handmade silver teapot and 35 personal awards that were on loan from the Tunku. Following his demise in December 1990, the Tunku's personal awards were taken out for use in the state funeral that was held in Alor Setar. By October 1993 all remaining items were transferred to the National Archives (Penang State Museum Board, 1993) and subsequently to the Tunku Abdul Rahman Memorial which was opened in 1994. The room is still there but is filled up by exhibits of Old Penang.

The Chinese Culture Room was created in 1967 to accommodate the Chinese Opera costumes and Lion Dance costumes. Two large showcases were constructed to house these items and to protect them against deterioration while the lighting system was re-arranged to provide better lighting. A model of the Air Itam Dam which was donated by the George Town City Council and a musical cabinet donated by Cheah Eow Hooi were put on display in the front corridor. In 1975 Light's statue was moved from the back of the museum and placed in the front lawn on top a special concrete pedestal (Penang State Museum Board, 1975: 44). An old garden lamp was installed to brighten the statue and its surrounding areas at night besides keeping away undesirable elements. It was presented by the Executors and Trustees of the late Khoo Sian Ee.

Since its opening various improvements were made to the museum. In 1966 the Costume and Embroidery Room was fitted with air-conditioning while the bridal chamber was enclosed within a large showcase. In the northern corridor the showcases were recessed within the walls adjoining the main rooms to allow for more space (Penang State Museum and Art Gallery, 1966). In 1969 a museum garden was created to house large historical objects like canons, Japanese bombs and mines and the anchor of a French warship the *Les Mousquet* which was sunk by the German light cruiser *Emden* on 29 October 1914 approximately 11 nautical miles of the Muka Head coast in the north west of the island. The *Emden* had terrorised British merchantmen in the Bay of Bengal and the Straits of Melaka in 1914 after the outbreak of the First World War. Earlier in the day it had brazenly shelled Penang harbour inflicting considerable damage including the sinking of the Russian cruiser *Zhemshug* off the E & O Hotel with the loss of 89 lives including scores of Japanese prostitutes who were on board at the time (Shennan, 2000: 82–87). Besides serving as car park, the garden also housed a Hill Railway coach and a Rolls Royce that was previously used by the first Penang governor and before that Sir Henry Gurney, the British High Commissioner who was assassinated in October 1951 by armed communists while on his way to Frazer's Hill. In 1971–1972 the existing displays were re-sited to make room for new acquisitions (Penang State Museum and Art Gallery,

1972). The History Room was re-arranged to accommodate more photographs of Penang. The Embroidery Room had more Chinese embroidered costumes added besides two new showcases to display Malay costumes. The Natural History section had two new showcases to display Malaysian birds which were donated by the National Museum. Twenty seven pieces of old Kelantan silverware were put on display in a wall showcase along the front corridor. These were presented by Mrs. K. G. Exham whose father was the first chief of the Penang Fire Brigade.

In 1977 the museum again carried out minor improvements to the existing showcases and electrical fittings to ensure irreplaceable embroideries and costumes were kept within minimum conservational standard. The museum's fluorescent tubes were replaced with tungsten lamp and aluminum eye-ball fittings as the former were not conducive to the conservation of exhibits especially embroideries. These affected the Chinese Hall, Bridal Chamber, Lion Dance, Embroidery and the Tunku Room. The showcases in these rooms were modified with a false ceiling of opaque plexiglass to conceal the tungsten lamps (Penang State Museum Board, 1977: 14). Three dozens "Morden" ultra violet absorbing tube-jackets were placed in the museum to filter the remaining fluorescent tubes that emit high proportion of ultra violet radiation. In 1992 the Museum and the Art Gallery was given a new coat of paint while the roof of the Hill Railway coach was replaced with aluminum. These were undertaken to coincide with the Conference of Rulers which was held in Penang that year. Rewiring was extended to the Art Gallery in preparation for the air-conditioning of the entire building which was completed in 1991. To control humidity two units of dehumidifiers were installed in the History and Embroidery Rooms.

The museum continued to expand its collections through public donations or purchases that were funded either by the museum, the state or individuals/institution quite often with inflated prices<sup>3</sup>. In the early years regular appeals were made to the Penang public who generously contributed a diversity of exhibits which quickly filled up museum space. In the 1965 commemorative booklet a list of 25 donors was highlighted which include individuals and institutions. The notable ones were Haji Fathil Basheer, Captain Mohd Noor Mohamed, the Penang Historical Society, J. S. H. Cunynham-Brown, Loo Kam Fat and Ong Eng Khuan. Other donors in that year were the trustees of the estate of Kapitan Chung Keng Kwee, Low Hooi Seah and Soon Tuck Wooi (Penang State Museum and Art Gallery, 1965b). In 1975 the Fong Seong Cup was presented by the Penang Badminton Association (Penang State Museum Board, 1975: 50). The silver cup was manufactured in London in 1936 and meant for the inter-state Men Badminton Championship which Penang won 21 times out of the 29 it was contested. In 1992 some of the documents in the Haji Fathil's collection and Francis Light's will were subjected to conservation measures undertaken by the National Archives (Penang State Museum Board, 1992: 13). The Haji Fathil collections formed part of the fascinating history of the Penang Malays in the

second half of the 19th century. One MA student was able to make use of them in her study of Malay involvement in secret societies (Mahani, 2003).

Museum collections continued to increase until the early 1990s. In 1982 the museum purchased the collection of nyonya and Kwantung porcelain wares through a special loan from the state government and donors like the Penang Turf Club, the Lee Foundation and the Datuk Keramat Tin Smelting Company. In 1986 the museum received two Siamese swords belonging to the late Khaw Sim Kong, former "rajah" or governor of Ranong (Cushman, 1986: 64), Thailand which were presented by his grandson, Khaw Bian Huat (Penang State Museum Board, 1986: 27–28). In November the same year a dragon boat head and tail was presented by Tommy Khoo Sian Kheng, chairman of the Penang Boat Festival while Mrs Tang Yoke Lin presented a piano which was used by Jimmy Boyle, the well-known music composer from Penang, when he was a boy. In June 1988 a set of 93 pieces of *wayang kulit* puppets and 30 *gamelan* brass gongs were donated by Haji Razkin Omar from Bukit Mertajam. These belonged to his late grandfather who was a *wayang Tok Dalang* or puppeteer (Penang State Museum Board, 1988: 25). Other items secured were Malay traditional kitchen utensils from Seberang Perai which include a set of tools for making the traditional utensils as well as *buyong kecil* (small pot) for storing water, *belanga* (earthen pot) for cooking curry, *periok kukusan* (double boiler) and *perasapan* (incense boiler). These items were bought from the family of the late Zainab Mat Saman. In 1989 a set of 33 old coins of Penang (1786–1828) was purchased from the 75 year old Phoon Kee Khuan (Penang State Museum Board, 1989). These coins were the first coins issued for use in Penang and were an important part of the early numismatic heritage of Penang. The cost of \$9,650 for the purchase was defrayed from public donations and the state government. In 1991 the museum acquired the collection of silver antiques belonging to the late Robert Corbertt, founder member and first president of the Perak Orchid Society. The collection consisted of fine Malay and Peranakan silver jewelry like brooches, bracelet, modesty disc, pillow and bolster ends, belt buckles and other decorations of antique silver (Penang State Museum Board, 1991: 13). In 1992 a porcelain *nyonya* ladle was received from antique dealer Saw Joo Ann.

Space was a major problem. The 1967 annual report had remarked "as there is no more space for the museum's expansion, it is hoped that the state government will find ways and means to implement their decision to rebuild the bombed half of the original building." The need for space was pressing as "there is a great deal more material of educational and cultural interest that should be added to the museum" necessitating the museum to use the corridor and stairways. A decade later another report had voiced similar concern. "The most pressing problem facing the museum at this moment is the shortage of space. The museum's present collection has grown to such an enormous size that it is not an exaggeration to say that visitors to the museum today are hardly left with any space to walk. New materials and information are encountered every now and

then, but there is no more available space to display them" (Penang State Museum Board, 1979: 11). By the end of the 1980s when I first set foot in the museum the exhibits were scattered all over the entire floor. It was mildly chaotic. In the early 1990s visitors have voiced out the sorry state of the museum and display congestion besides the need to bring the museum more up to date (Penang State Museum Board, 1991: 9). Bulky items donated to the museum – like the Cadillac which served as state official car and an old fire engine – were either stored at the state garage or in the case of the fire engine, returned to the Perak Road Fire Department for safekeeping (Penang State Museum Board, 1993).

In the early 1970s there was much discussion, planning and public drive to collect funds to rebuild the bombed half of the original building but the entire project was abandoned due to safety reasons. In 1990 a panel of architects under Lawrence Loh, a member of the museum board, was entrusted to redesign the museum interior so that all the exhibits can be displayed properly while preserving the building's architecture (Penang State Museum Board, 1990). Subsequently, the museum was closed for six months to enable renovation works to be undertaken. However, it was only in 1994 after the Art Gallery had shifted to Dewan Sri Pinang, following the move of the George Town city administration to the new office complex at Komtar, that the museum has more space. Currently, it has additional space at No. 57 Macalister Road in the form of a renovated former maternity hospital. However, the museum's base remains at Farquhar Street.

As with the National Museum, a few individuals could be regarded as icons in the museum's development. The Tunku's interest in the museum was well known. The museum reciprocated with the Tunku Room. The other was Captain Mohd Noor Mohamed who was chairman of the State Museum Board from 1973 until his demise in June 1990. From 1964 to 1972 he was a member of the Museum Management Committee and headed the museum sub-committee (Penang State Museum Board, 1990). As head of the Penang Historical Society, he had played an instrumental role in getting the museum project alive "through research, lectures and exhibitions held when and where they could and to which the museum is deeply indebted." His untiring energy enabled the museum to enjoy continued public support. He was especially successful in persuading elderly Malays to sell or donate invaluable cultural items to the museum. The other was Khoo Boo Chia who was curator from 1976 until his retirement in the early 2000s. He joined the museum in 1971 and as curator had chartered the museum's remarkable growth and presided over its transformation that focused on culture and history popularly labelled the Penang Story. The museum had also benefited from the technical and professional support provided by the National Museum on layout and scientific display techniques through taxidermist A. S. Dryberg and Wee Ho Cheng, display officer Lim Tong Juan, artist Rahmat Ahmad, museum assistants Abdullah Hassan, Halim Nasir and Khoo Swee Hoe

and marine curators A. T. Johnson and J. Fisher (Penang State Museum and Art Gallery, 1965a: 12, 26). In the mid-1970s the National Museum provided training on conservation and display techniques for two of its staff (Penang State Museum Board, 1977: 15). Such crucial support continued for many years which the museum acknowledged in its annual reports. However, the museum's emphasis on natural history which was modelled on the National Museum was discarded in the mid-1990s in favour of the Penang Story whereas the latter followed similar path in 2007 when the National Museum was changed into a national history museum.

## **THE PENANG STORY AND STATE MUSEUMS**

The Penang Story was scripted in the early 1990s following a major reorganisation based on Yvonne Teh Shuang Lyn's recommendation that the museum focuses on "culture as the thread which links together the past and the present. Penang's cultural pluralism provides a cosmopolitanism somewhat unusual in so small an area ... and yet amidst this diversity, unity exists through their common Penangite identity" (Penang State Museum Board, 1991: 10). Yvonne Teh was then a doctoral candidate in anthropology at the University of Pennsylvania specialising in material culture, identity and museum studies. She had worked at the Logan Museum of Anthropology in Wisconsin which was a college museum besides being given an internship at a museum in London. Following her recommendation the museum was divided into themes based on the culture of the various ethnic groups, their living craft and history. The circulation of the entire building was re-organised to enable visitors to have a better understanding of the museum as a cultural history centre. Each room was given a theme to reflect a particular culture history focus while the exhibits, materials and lighting for each room were selected to fit the chosen theme. The up-grading which included the landscaping of the car park and lawn and the addition of storage space was made possible by a RM500,000 grant from the Ministry of Arts and Tourism (Penang State Museum Board, 1992: 9). Following this reorganisation both ethnography and history became an intrinsic part of the Penang Story – the story of cultural mingling as George Town evolved into an international port with its multi-cultural society while natural history had disappeared completely.

The official museum booklet neatly summarised the Penang Story as follows. Originally a part of the Kedah sultanate, the island received people from Kedah long before an English outpost was established in 1786. Booming trade within the region and Penang had attracted all kinds of other people to the island among them the first Chinese settlers who were merchants and traders mainly from South China. Many had adapted to the local Malay culture and became known as *baba nyonya* (Peranakan Chinese). The early Indians, coming from

different parts of the sub-continent were dominated by the Tamils of South India. They too were mostly merchants and traders and money lenders while others were plantation labourers or civil clerks. Penang's colorful multi-ethnic society today is dominated by the three communities of Malays, Chinese and Indians which have co-existed in harmony for generations.

Historically, Penang is noted for its ethnic diversities which include Arabs, Achehnese, Armenian, Burmese, Japanese, Javanese, Minangkabaus, Siamese, Sinhalese and Eurasians (offsprings of mixed marriages between Europeans and Asians) – all contributing to the island's cultural potpourri. Unique mixed-marriages between locals or others and the early foreign settlers from other parts of Asia had also given rise to hybrid groups like the Chinese Peranakans, Jawi Peranakans (Jawi Pekan) and the Arab Peranakans. They have their own unique culture and language. The diverse cultural activities, cuisines, dances, music, daily pursuits and pastimes of the people are put on display notably the *boria* and the *nasi kandar* which are closely associated with the Jawi Peranakan.

In line with the Penang Story, the ground floor of the state museum focuses on the peoples of Penang with each of the major races accorded a room – the Malay Room, the Chinese Room, the Indian Room besides the Wedding Chamber and the Nyonya Costumes. The first floor covers Francis Light and the colonial period including the Japanese Occupation and the post-1945 period. The Captain Robert Smith paintings are kept in a room located on this floor: eight of the ten paintings shown here were completed before Smith, a military engineer, left Penang in 1818. The other important exhibits are the jinrikisha which was an important mode of transportation in George Town especially during the interwar years. Visitors are informed that in 1927 there were 3,441 of them but by 1941 their number had dwindled to 2,121. By 1961 there were only 12 left as trishaws were more practical. Other exhibits located here are spices – star anise, black pepper, sliced areca nut, dried turmeric, nutmeg seeds, cloves, dried chilly and cinnamon sticks – highlighting Penang as an important hub of the spice trade during British colonial rule – besides the *kopitiam* or Chinese coffee shop which was intrinsic part of the urban landscape in Penang and elsewhere.

To reinforce the Penang Story adequate information and exhibits are placed in the various rooms. Penang island was already inhabited prior to Light's arrival in 1786. It was then known among the Malays as Pulau Ka Satu and Tanjung Penaga. Connected to the various races are the many cultural exhibits like *tepak sireh* in the shape of lacquer boxes for the Peranakan Chinese. There are plenty of exhibits related to the Malays such as *kitab kuning*, printing of religious treatises, *ulamas* and *pondoks* in Seberang Perai, Malay traditional dresses, Islamic calligraphy, daily utensils used by the Malays, well known Penang mosques (Batu Uban mosque, Acheen Street mosques, the Benggali mosque and the Kapitan Keling mosque), traditional Malay carpentry tools, the front of a traditional Penang Malay house, silver and brass wares used in Malay

weddings, Malay marriage, traditional Malay jewelry, the *songket*, male and female headgear, bridal bed, the *boria* and Malay weaponry.

In the Chinese room are shown crafted traditional chairs, opium bed, opium pipe (opium smoking was publicly allowed before 1940), information on the Straits Chinese, Chinese wedding and Chinese Peranakan wedding with wedding bed, cupboard, dowry chest, wash basin and marriage costumes. A more elaborate Peranakan corner displays various exhibits including a black mourning dress, nyonya embroidery, nyonya long dress, pekalongan *sarong* from Java in muted tones and distinct prints, beaded slippers, *batek* and *sarong* from India.

Historical sketches, drawings and photographs of Old Penang form an important part of the museum collection and the Penang Story. These paintings were executed by English artists including military officers like Captain Robert Smith, Marthelemy Lauvergne, William Daniell, Catherine Trevor, Thomas Prinsep, Admiral Theodore Auguste Fisquet, Lt. Walford Thomas Bellairs and Anna Scwabe. The collection started in 1965 when the Penang Historical Society contributed paintings of Old Penang. Three years later the museum received seven reproduction of lithographs of Old Penang from the Singapore Museum. In 1969 the Robert Smith collection was donated by the estate of the late Heah Joo Seang (Penang State Museum and Art Gallery, 1965b; 1970). The collection was a set of paintings including the "View of the Cascades", "View of the Great Tree", "Ship Lord Lowther", "Panoramic Sketch of the Prince of Wales Island", "View from Halliburton's Hill", "View of Suffolk House" (2 copies), "View of Suffolk House" (black and white), "View of North Beach from the Council House" (without colour), "View of Mt Erskine and Pulo Tikus Bay", "View of Gelugor House and Spice Plantations", "View of Chinese Mills", "View of Strawberry Hill" and "View of North Beach from Council House" (Penang State Museum and Art Gallery, 1970). In 1975, three more Robert Smith originals were presented by J. C. Henderson of the Penang Chartered Bank. In the same year a few of these paintings were sent to London for restoration works at the Parker Gallery (Penang State Museum Board, 1976: 18). On their return these were mounted in teak-wood frames with non-reflective glass and displayed in the History Room.

In 1978 the unique and rare photographs of Old Penang from the Donald Davies collection that were kept at the National Museum were reproduced for the Penang Museum. These covered local celebrations, historical buildings, prominent figures and old transportation of Penang (Penang State Museum Board, 1979: 12). In 1979 an original oil painting dated 1817 by William Havel was purchased. In the same year photographs of Old Penang were put on display which showcased Penang way back to 1883. These were highly appreciated by the Penang folks. In the same year the museum printed 10 coloured greetings cards from the Robert Smith collection. Costing 80 cents per card these were popular among the public. Through these cards the museum hoped "keener interest in the history of early Penang and the cultural heritage of the state would

be further stimulated" (Penang State Museum Board, 1979: 13). By the end of the 1970s the museum could boast as the repository of much that is symbolic of Penang through old documents, artefacts, pictorial representations and models. In 1986 the Art Gallery section held an exhibition titled "Early Views of Penang" with 165 paintings of Penang which was a collection of originals and reproductions acquired from various museums throughout the world (Penang State Museum Board, 1986: 30). Displayed for the first time these paintings provided invaluable information on the history of Penang from 1770–1860 before the age of photography. The exhibition was opened by Captain Haji Mohd Noor, chairman of the State Museum Board while another board member, Lim Chong Keat gave a talk on "Early views of Penang" which touched on the topography, heritage and historical perspectives of Penang that were depicted in the paintings.

What happened to the many exhibits that were collected since 1965 is an interesting question. Reference had already been made of the natural history exhibits which were returned to the National Museum while the Gelugor Hoard was consigned to the store room. As for the Haji Fathil Basheer, the Quran is still on display in the Malay room located on the ground floor while documents relating to the 1867 secret society riots are kept elsewhere. So are the Report of the Commission of Enquiry on the Penang Riots of 1867, picture of volunteers to quell the riots, model of the Air Itam dam, the pony cart, musical cabinet, the Jimmy Boyle piano, *wayang kulit* puppets, gamelan brass gongs and the Siamese swords. The Japanese ceremonial sword which was donated by Captain Mohd Noor in 1965 is still on display on the second floor. It served as grim reminder of the turbulent Japanese Occupation of the island although the museum's description of the period is very much toned down compared to the Penang War Museum. The few bulky displays outside the museum are still there notably Light's imposing statue, the Rolls Royce, anchor of the *Les Mousquet* and the Hill Railway coach.

This brings us to the inadequacy of the Penang Story as represented by the Penang State Museum. One ethnic group that had made considerable presence in Penang from the late 19th century to the mid-1930s was the Japanese. It was estimated they were about 3,500 Japanese in Penang in the early 20th century. They were a diversified group ranging from entrepreneurs notably in the rubber and the fishing industry to commercial agents, spies and prostitutes. The Penang State Museum never highlighted the underside of the Japanese presence so as not to offend the sensitivities of the Japanese who made up the biggest number of foreign tourists to the island for much of the second half of the 20th century and Japanese contributions to the state's economy during the same period notably investment. Similarly, glossed over is the island's previous connection with the Kedah sultanate and how it came into the hands of the East India Company in 1786. The EIC's unwillingness to provide any form of military assistance as requested by Kedah against imagined or real enemies was a bitter disappointment to the Kedah ruler. This led to the failed attempts to retake the island in the 1790s

and the cession of further Kedah territory which came to be known as Province Wellesley.

## **VISITORS AND THE STATE MUSEUM**

From 1965 to 1976 the museum annual reports had included comments from visitors' notably foreign tourists. One such comment came from the British High Commissioner Sir Michael Walker who had visited the museum soon after its opening in 1965: "The museum gives a fascinating history of Penang. I am very glad to see these chapters of history being depicted so vividly and I give all my good wishes to the future of the museum" (Penang State Museum and Art Gallery, 1965b). In 1966 the samples of visitor comments include: "A most interesting collection and very well presented" (New York), "It is very interesting to see it" (Germany), and "A remarkable feat of organization" (Virginia, USA) (Penang State Museum and Art Gallery, 1966).

Similar comments appeared in the 1967 annual report such as: "Very interesting beginning. Hope the Museum will prosper" (England), "Lends a third dimension to the sights of Penang" (Japan) and "One of the finest small Museums" (USA) (Penang State Museum and Art Gallery, 1967). In 1972 the museum continued to receive favourable comments from foreign visitors which appeared in the annual reports: "For a small museum so interesting and wide range of exhibits. Well displayed" (Auckland, New Zealand), "Sheer delight for those not well acquainted with the arts and history of Penang" (Hong Kong), and "Excellent museum and well maintained" (USA) (Penang State Museum and Art Gallery, 1972). In 1974, favourable visitor comments include the following: "The contents of the Museum are most impressive" (England), "Delighted to see old history of Penang so well preserved" (India) and "An interesting Museum with well-presented objects" (Germany) (Penang State Museum Board, 1975: 43). In the 1976 annual report the comments were "A unique exhibition, breathtaking" (New York), "Too much richness, from such a little place" (France), "A living picture of Penang" (Melbourne) and "A really worthwhile institution for Penang" (Bangkok) (Penang State Museum Board, 1976: 12). After 1976 the annual reports no longer printed these comments. These tourists were probably attracted to the History of Penang, Chinese culture and customs, embroidery and costumes, natural history and social, education and economic exhibits, the Tunku Room (Penang State Museum Board, 1975: 45) besides the Art Gallery on the first floor.

Museum visitors were a varied group. The museum was popular among the locals "since a good number of the exhibits come from them" (Penang State Museum Board, 1978: 13). By the early 1990s the Museum and Art Gallery was included by local tourist agencies as one of their city tour itineraries (Penang State Museum Board, 1991: 11). Other visitors include students, trainees of

teacher training colleges, university students and those from outside the state and foreign tourists. The Museum and Art Gallery had also become the focus of enquiries on local history by secondary school students who were required to complete a short essay based on archival research or research at museums (Penang State Museum Board, 1991: 11–13). Among the more common topics were the history of Francis Light, Fort Cornwallis, Suffolk House, Hill Railway and old transportation of George Town. In the 1990s the museum provided practical training for final year Art and Design students from the MARA Institute of Technology. In 1992 four of them had benefited from the program.

Interestingly visitor data does not appear in all the annual reports while the available ones do not indicate the number of foreign visitors except for 1991 and 1993. The 1991 and 1993 figures revealed foreigners made up between 30%–35% of museum visitors. In fact they made up the majority of visitors for March, April, May and July while November, December and January were popular with domestic visitors (Penang State Museum Board, 1991: 11; 1993). However, Table 2 indicates a marked decrease of visitors for the first decade of the 21st century; even with the addition of the corresponding figures for the Art Gallery the totals were never anywhere near those of the first 25 years.<sup>4</sup> A number of reasons could explain for this decrease including unexciting exhibits compared to the earlier years when the Natural History section was a major attraction while the RM1.00 entry could be a mild deterrence to locals. The separation of the museum and the art gallery had also affected visitor number. A vibrant Art Gallery could pull the crowd to both the museum and gallery as in 1978 when museum visitors reached 106,693 compared to 77,866 in the previous year (Penang State Museum Board, 1978: 13).

Table 2: Visitors to Penang State Museum, 1965–2010<sup>5</sup>

Year	Total Visitors	Foreigners
1965 (April–December)	70,294	–
1967	80,727	–
1969	113,451	–
1971	121,871	–
1973	95,085	–
1975	105,371	–
1977	77,866	–
1980	96,958	–
1991	125,290	68,659
1993	81,707	52,810
2006	31,141	–
2008	48,521	–
2010	56,799	–

## CULTURE COMPETITION WITHIN AND AMONG MUSEUMS

In a study on museums in Malaysia (Abu Talib, 2015: 232–241) I have highlighted the Malay-Chinese cultural competition in the Penang State Museum that resulted in a stalemate which initially left out the Indians. When this situation was finally rectified through a small Indian section (the Indian Room) located on the ground floor the attention is more on the Tamils than other Indian ethnic groups. I have also touched on the inter-ethnic competition between the Peranakan and non-Peranakan Chinese in both the Penang State Museum and the One East Museum while the Pinang Peranakan Mansion is devoted entirely to the Peranakan culture and its glorious past. I have also touched on the intra-ethnic competition between Malays and Indian-Muslims in both the Penang Islamic Museum, the Penang State Museum and the Malay Museum in which I argued the marginalisation of Indian-Muslim elements while the absence of their leading personalities among museum exhibits is most obvious. In the old maps of the city the area around Acheen Street was known as Malay Town which was dominated by Malays and Indian-Muslims. Malay Town is long gone but the area has become the centre of a thriving jewelry business helmed by Indian-Muslims like Habib jewels which started in 1958 in Pitt Street (Loh et al., 2013: 79–80). The Peranakans also dominated the Malay printing industry since the end of the 19th century until before the Japanese Occupation making Penang an important centre of knowledge dissemination in colonial Malaya and within the Nusantara region (Jelani and Azmi, 2008: 1–28).

This kind of competition is very much related to the ethnic balance of Penang population. Since the mid-19th century the Chinese had dominated the Penang population and this had not changed for the 20th century. In 1970, the Chinese accounted for 56.1% of the state population while Malays made up 30.9%, Indians 11.5% and other racial groups at 1% (Pejabat Kemajuan Negeri Pulau Pinang, 1986: 20) but the percentage of the Chinese population was steadily declining while the Malays had increased. Thus, by 2005, out of the 1.39 million, 45.53% of the population were Chinese, 43.38% Malays, Indians at 11% while the others including Eurasians and Siamese were less than 1% (Statistics Department of Malaysia, 2005). In 2011, the ethnic composition experienced a very small shift with Malays/*bumiputeras* outnumbering the Chinese.

This competition of cultural displays at the Penang State Museum is closely connected with the nature of the State Museum Board. The Penang State Museum is supervised by a multicultural board that in the early years also included Europeans while the Chinese dominance of individual membership was balanced by Malay dominance in official members. From 1964 to 1972 the Penang Museum and Art Gallery was run by a Joint Management Committee appointed by the state government, and a sub-committee responsible for each of the museum and art gallery. The Joint Management Committee was made up of seven official members, six unofficial members and eight selected members. It

was chaired by the State Secretary. The six member museum sub-committee were J. C. Cairns, Captain Mohd Noor, A. Nichol-Smith (chairperson), Soon Cheng Sun, J. H. S. Cunyngham-Brown and Low Hun Leong. When Nichol-Smith passed away, Captain Mohd Noor assumed the chairmanship.

In 1973 the Penang State Museum Board was made up of 22 members who were appointed for a one year term except for 1974–1976 when appointment was for three years (Penang State Museum Board, 1980: 9). In 1979 the board had 23 members. The Chinese dominated the individual membership with 11 while the others were two Malays, two Indians (one Sikh and one Tamil) and two Europeans/Eurasians besides the seven Malay official members. In 1978 one academic from Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) was appointed to the board. Since then USM was always represented in the board and by the first decade of the 21st century their number had increased to three at any one time. For the year 1986–1987 board membership stood at 26 with Chinese dominating the individual membership (10 out of 19) while Malays formed the overwhelming majority of official members (Penang State Museum Board, 1987: 2). For the period 2010–2012 the board membership numerically favours the Malays who made up 9 out of the 15 members while the rest were 4 Chinese, 1 Indian and 1 Eurasian (Lembaga Muzium & Balai Seni Lukis Negeri Pulau Pinang, 2010: 17–18). Museum curators do have an important say in these appointments: in the late 1980s and early 1990s there was an overwhelming presence of former students of the St. Xavier Institution as the curator himself was a Xavierian.

Equally significant is the contestation within each ethnic group. Historically, the Straits Chinese or Chinese Peranakan had dominated Penang since 1786 but by the early 20th century they were eclipsed by new arrivals from China. As a result, a process of Sinicisation began to take place within the Straits Chinese and through marriage and education the differences between these groups had diminished. However, the Penang State Museum still differentiated them – the *lao keh* (old guest) and the *sinkeh* (new arrivals). The *lao keh* are associated with the baba and nyonya which have assimilated elements of Malay culture in their daily life. They also dominated Penang economy after 1850. The Penang *towkay* class came from this group and they were well known for their beautiful and spacious mansions besides sending their children to England and China for further education. The *sinkehs* who arrived in the second half of the 19th century were absorbed as labourers, coolies and skill artisans while many of them were sent to other Malay states notably Kedah and Perak. The *kongsis* houses provided shelter and protection to these new arrivals that came from the same clan. The Penang State Museum foregrounds a number of these opulent mansions and *kongsis* houses notably the Khoo Kongsis which is a popular tourist attraction.

The Penang State Museum accords much attention to the Chinese Peranakans although the lion dance is actually associated with the Chinese rather than just the Straits Chinese. So is the Penang Peranakan Museum which was

opened in 2010 although its cultural presentation is made without any reference to the kind of multiculturalism presently displayed in the Penang State Museum. The museum building is the manifestation of Peranakan opulence and grandeur at its best. The exhibits include finely crafted tables, chairs, lacquered tiffin sets, *kebayas*, *kain batik lepas* (both are associated with *nyonyas*), opium smoking utensils, colorful ceramics (tea set, dishes and *kamcheng*), English glass, slippers, beads and embroideries of the Peranakans. These are dispersed in various rooms located on two floors. The exciting displays take visitors to a bygone era of Peranakan culture before the tumultuous Japanese Occupation (1942–1945). The annex houses a kitchen filled with an assortment of quaint implements, kitchenware and sweet moulds. The building was originally built at the end of the 19th century and served as residence of the Kapitan Cina Chung Keng Kwee who was not a Peranakan himself but incorporated the Peranakan element into the building. There is an ancestral temple that adjoins the mansion. It was built in 1899 and recently restored by skill craftsmen from China.

Owned by Ch'ng Huck Teng the One East Museum and Art, on the other hand, seeks to balance museum coverage on all Chinese including the Straits Chinese. It displays the cultures of both the Chinese and Straits Chinese, paintings and artworks by renowned Chinese artists in Southeast Asia and rare Chinese famille rose figurines, Chinese porcelain, furniture and *nyonya* wares from the late 19th century to the pre-Chinese Cultural Revolution era.

Owing to the Malay-Chinese competition very little space is accorded to the Indians. The Penang State Museum solved the issue by creating a small Indian corner (the Indian Room) on the ground floor by giving attention to the diverse Indian groups through the showcasing of religious festivals, house of worships, marriage and household utensils found in Indian homes. Also thrown in are Indian musical instruments like the flute and *tabla*. Within this little space the Tamils predominate over the Sikhs, Sinhalese and Malayalees.

Equally significant is the culture competition within the Malay communities. Malays in present day Penang is made up of a variegated lot including the Jawi Peranakans who regard themselves as Malays. This acceptance is influenced by possible economic benefits but at the risk of neglecting the colourful history of the Jawi Peranakan (Omar and Jamaluddin, 2010; Halimah and Zainab, 2004). Although the Jawi Peranakans and the Arab Peranakans form a big group of the Penang Malays museum displays do not provide adequate coverage for them. The Malay Museum which opened in 2010 at Hutton Lane foregrounds the Malay heritage of Penang but there are voices which wanted the museum to focus more on the Jawi Peranakan heritage especially when Hutton Lane was historically connected with the Jawi Peranakans who fondly called it Hatim Road. The museum was formerly the residence of a prominent Malay, Wan Chik Ariffin Mohd Ariff who was a successful rice merchant and wholesaler in the early 20th century (Loh et al., 2013: 27–28).

The Penang Islamic Museum accords much space to cultural aspects including the profile of Malay leaders like Haji Abdullah Fahim, Haji Ahmad Badawi, Sheikh Omar Basheer, Syed Sheikh Al-Hadi, Ahmad Rashid Talu and Sheikh Muhammad Tahir Jalaluddin. These names are either Malays or Arab Peranakan. It is difficult to identify Jawi Peranakan names although many of them were founders of the many mosques in the 19th century in George Town or successful business leaders who have cut their niche in the business world of Penang in the late 19th and 20th century (Mahani and Badriyah, 2013).

The Penang State Museum displays many types of Malay musical instruments like the *gambus*, *rebab*, drums and flute. Some of these figures in *boria* performances which were an important form of entertainment in the urban or sub-urban enclave of George Town notably among the Jawi Peranakans. *Boria* troupes were known for their colorful costumes while they compete with one another to the detriment of their socio-economic position vis-à-vis the non-Malays (Mohd Yusof, 2007). The Penang State Museum foregrounds colourful *boria* costumes and musical instruments like violin, tambourine, harmonica, maracas, flute and baton used by the troupe leader during performances. The Muzium & Gallery Tuanku Fauziah foregrounds Malay culture – traditional musical instruments like gong and *rebana*, *wayang kulit* puppets and stage, *kuda kepang*, *barong*, keris, Chinese musical instruments and agricultural tools related to traditional agriculture (Malays) without any reference to the Penang Story but more in line with museums in Kedah, Kelantan or Terengganu.

## CONCLUSION

Like other museums the Penang State Museum was affected by the national culture policy that came into existence in 1971 which favours Malay culture. However, the museum seeks a balance in its cultural representation although this does not hide the contest for cultural supremacy among the various ethnic groups and within each group. The proliferations of private museums underscore the cultural (and history) challenge to the state museum. Penang is one of the few states in Malaysia that witnessed the emergence of a large number of private museums especially within the George Town heritage enclave. The state museum was also affected by the change in 2007 of the National Museum, from a general museum to a museum of national history. Penang followed suit with its natural history exhibits subsequently replaced by multiculturalism or the Penang Story. Other museums especially the private ones seek to tell different stories or pose a challenge to the official cultural trajectory or the Penang Story.

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## NOTES

1. Prior to 1992 when the Ringgit Malaysia (RM) was used the Malaysian currency was known as dollar (*ringgit*) denoted by the symbol \$.
2. Known as the Gelugor Hoard these were flanged axes, beaked adzes, amulet or pendant and damaged perforated stone disc which were unearthed during house construction in Bukit Gambir in December 1965.
3. Tan Kim Hong, 2014. Email correspondence dated 23 and 25 January.
4. These figures are 4,059 for 2006; 4,395 for 2007; 5,709 for 2008; 6,691 for 2006 and 11,428 for 2010 (Lembaga Muzium & Balai Seni Lukis Negeri Pulau Pinang, 2010: 45)
5. The figures are taken from Penang State Museum and Art Gallery, 1972; Penang State Museum Board, 1975; 1978; Laporan Tahunan 1980; Penang State Museum Board, 1991; 1993; Lembaga Muzium & Balai Seni Lukis Negeri Pulau Pinang, 2010: 44–45.

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