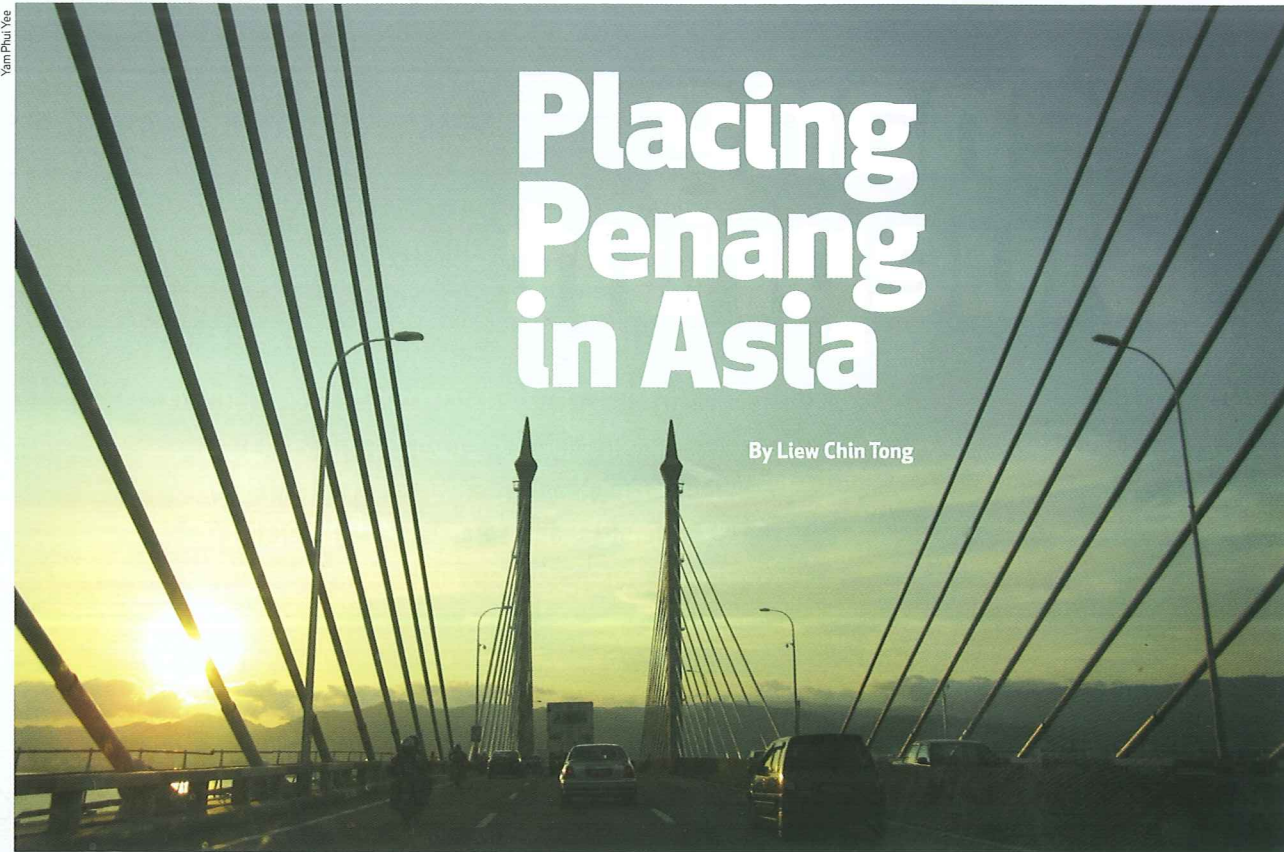




Yam Phui Yee



# Placing Penang in Asia

By Liew Chin Tong

AS A CITY, Penang has gone from being one of Asia's most important metropolises to being an increasingly insignificant part of Malaysia. In that, it painfully reflects the fate of the country's politics.

Both Penang and Malaysia must therefore give serious thought to what their international roles should be in the immediate future.

For at least two-thirds of its 200-year existence, Penang held a prominent position in the region. The very first Chinese, English and Malay schools in the country were all established there; the earliest newspapers were printed there; the island boasted the first local authority in the country (1857), and the first elected local government came into being there (1951).

The importance of Penang in Asia's history cannot be overestimated. She was a major port and commercial centre, a place to which dreamers flocked from all over the world, and from which the

adventurous would set out on their quests. She housed new thinking and bred new social dynamics, much like England did for Europe and Hong Kong, for China. Had it not been for the British Museum, Karl Marx might have ended up on the guillotine block; had it not been for Hong Kong, Dr Sun Yat-Sen might have met an early end. As we know, Dr Sun stayed for a time in Penang to raise funds, to spread his ideas and plot revolution.

Anyone who has noticed the wall inscription by Kang Youwei at the Kek Lok Si Temple will realise that he also visited Penang. What most do not know is that after the failure of the Hundred Days' Reform Movement in 1898, Kang stayed at what is now the Penang governor's residence and at Bel Retiro (governor's retreat) on Penang Hill for a year-and-a-half.

Also, had it not been for Penang acting as a political refuge, the Muslim



Dr Sun Yat Sen (from *Sun Yat Sen in Penang* by Khoo Salma Nasution)

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reformist movement of Kaum Muda would most probably not have had the success that it did.

Penang's history tells us clearly that it was a place where dreamers congregated, and where new ideas were allowed space, and new cultural impulses were born. In his *Origins of Malay Nationalism*, William Roff mentions that Penang once had more printing presses than the rest of the Malay Peninsula put together.

In fact, about half a century ago, the economic stature of Penang, Hong Kong and Singapore were comparable to each other's. The leaps and bounds made by Hong Kong have a lot to do with the discontinuing in 1949 of Shanghai's role as the New York of Asia. As for Singapore, had it not been for the constant supply of Malaysian – and Penang – talents, her progress would not have been as impressive.

Noel Barber's *The War of the Running Dogs* also has an interesting story regarding

Penang. The Special Branch was investigating the communications network of the Malayan Communist Party under Li Ming. They discovered that a bookshop on Batu Road in Kuala Lumpur (now Jalan Tuanku Abdul Rahman) functioned as an intelligence centre. In order to keep their surveillance secret and to safely penetrate this set-up, the Special Branch bought a registered logistics company that delivered pineapples for export.

They arranged for a lorry to have a puncture in front of the bookstore, and using this cover, they managed to gather the information they needed. The pineapples on the lorry from Johor were then exported to England from Penang.

The significance of this story to what I am saying is that if you wished to export pineapples from Johor to England in 1952, the normal and, therefore, least suspicious route was through Penang, and not through the more proximate

Singapore. As late as the 1950s, Penang was still the major port in the region while Port Klang was almost non-existent.

To recognise Penang's history, however, is not to revel in the memory of its past, but to plan its future, and that of Malaysia in the 21st century. Penang must strive to be an international city of the future.

Being essentially cosmopolitan and rich in heritage, Penang has the potential to carve out a new role for itself regionally and internationally. ☉

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